

Space, the final frontier...

Three Jem'Hedar warships fired simultaneously at the U.S.S. *Republic*. The *Republic*, an *Ambassador*-class starship, fired phasers and photon torpedoes at the lead vessel, crippling its engines.

On the bridge of the Federation starship, Captain Gardner held onto the armrest of his chair—his knuckles turning white. "Damage report!" he barked.

Commander Robert Stuart, the executive officer, spoke up. "Shields down to fifty-three percent," he replied. "Ventral Phaser array is off-line."

"Come about to heading 043 mark 2," Gardner yelled. "Full impulse!"

As the starship changed course one of the remaining enemy ships dove straight for the wounded Federation vessel's warp nacelles.

On the bridge of the *Republic*, Captain Gardner jumped from his seat, racing to the engineering console. "Increase shield power," he ordered. "Divert emergency power to weap..." The console exploded, throwing Gardner to the floor before he could complete his order.

Aware that his captain lay unconscious, Rob Stuart shifted into full command mode. "Sickbay!" he yelled while heading for the center seat. "Medical emergency on the bridge!" He wanted to rush to the aid of his captain, but Stuart knew that the ship was now under his command and its safety was his primary responsibility. "Hard about," Stuart said. "Blake," he continued, turning toward the man sitting at the CONN station. "We need a miracle."

Lieutenant Blake Adams was one of Starfleet's best flight officers and Stuart knew that his friend's expertise would be pushed to the limit if they were to survive this attack. "He's making another pass," Adams stated matter-of-factly.

Stuart addressed the Andorian at the tactical station. "Divert everything we have to weapons," he said. Stuart turned back to face the view screen. "Lock phasers."

Lieutenant Commander Shrev's hands skillfully played across the weapons console as if he were a concert pianist. "Phasers locked," he replied to Stuart. "Awaiting your command."

Stuart paused, letting Blake Adams have time to fly the *Republic* into the optimum position that would inflict the most damage on the Dominion vessel. Stuart could feel when the time was right. He held his breath, but only for a moment until the perfect alignment had been reached. "Fire!"

Several beams of energy lanced from the crippled but still capable starship. The Jem'Hedar fighter tried to avoid being hit, but one of the *Republic's* phaser beams found its mark, slicing through the fighter's shields. It spun out of control and exploded, leaving nothing but small chunks of its twisted hull floating through the void of space.

Stuart wanted to cheer and congratulate his crew on a job well done; however, he knew that the time for celebration had not yet come.

"There's still one left, Rob," Adams stated.

Stuart focused all his thoughts on the battle, not noticing that the medics had removed the unconscious captain's still form from the command center. "Don't let them get behind us," he said.

Blake Adams worked the controls skillfully, knowing that he was rated one of the best, if not *the* best, pilots in Starfleet. He also knew that being the best might not always be good enough.

The last enemy ship tried to maneuver for a better position against the Federation starship, but Blake anticipated the enemy's move and pointed the bow of the starship straight toward the approaching fighter.

"Ready phasers," Stuart said.

A look of concern crossed Shrev's face. "Phasers do not have enough power left, Sir," he said.

Stuart frowned. "What about torpedoes?" he asked.

"We will destroy ourselves along with the Jem'Hedar if we fire them at this range," the blue-skinned Andorian said. "Our shields are only at twenty-eight percent," he added.

Stuart gripped the armrests of the command chair. "Do we still have warp power?" he asked.

"Aye Skipper," was Adams reply.

Tapping his combadge Stuart spoke. "Bridge to Engineering," he said. "Transfer all warp power to the forward shields."

It was a young engineer's voice that answered in a very nervous tone. "But Sir," the voice protested, "the chief engineer is..."

Stuart did not let the engineering ensign finish his sentence. "Do it now!" he yelled.

Adams glanced back to his friend and superior officer. "They're closing in on us, Rob."

Stuart glared at the viewscreen, watching his nemesis continue toward his battered ship. "Fire!"

A full spread of photon torpedoes left the launch tube of the *Ambassador*-class starship, hitting the mark. The glow from the explosion caused the valiant crew to turn momentarily from the viewscreen. One Federation starship had survived against three dominion fighters—a feat that previously was unheard of since the war began.

Stuart let out a sigh of relief. "Blake," he said, "get damage control teams to the bridge." He paused momentarily, surveying his surroundings. "I want you to transfer control to the emergency bridge."

"Aye Skipper," was Blake Adams reply as he began to work his controls. "Should

I launch the runabouts to back us up in case there are any more bad guys out there?" Blake asked.

"Good idea," Stuart agreed. "Shrev," the XO continued, "Send an encoded distress signal to Starfleet."

"Yes Sir," the Andorian replied while beginning his task.

Again Stuart looked around the heavily damaged bridge, inspecting the burned out consoles and wiring that now hung from the ceiling. Heading for the turbolift, he paused and turned to Adams. "I'll be in sickbay checking on the captain," he stated. As the turbolift doors closed Rob Stuart thanked God for the deliverance that he and his crew had received and wondered how long this accursed war would last.

To Boldly Go: World without End

A U.S.S. Providence story

By Cleve Johnson

Chapter 1

Almost three months had passed since the Dominion battle almost took his life and the lives of his shipmates. The *Republic*, the starship that he served as executive officer, had been towed back to Utopia Planitia shipyards to undergo repairs. The ship had been heavily damaged. In fact, if not for the decimation of dozens of starships that the war had brought about, she probably would have been scrapped. Fortunately, the older *Ambassador*-class starship proved that she still could hold her own in a fight and bring her crew home.

As Commander Robert P. Stuart approached the main building at Starfleet Headquarters he wondered how many more days would pass before being recalled for duty. He had the opportunity to take shore leave until the ship was once again spaceworthy, but he decided to use part of his time off to lecture at Starfleet Academy on his experiences against the Jem'Hedra. Stuart hated being stuck on Earth, relatively safe, when others were fighting for the future of the Federation. He needed to do something useful for the war effort although he was more of an explorer than a warrior.

As he entered the building he almost bumped into his friend and shipmate, Blake Adams. "Pardon me," Adams said with a childlike smile.

"I thought you were on leave," Stuart stated.

"I am," Adams replied.

Stuart noticed the rank insignia on his friend's collar and smiled. "What's this?" he asked reaching for Adams' collar.

Adams face lit up. "I've been promoted," he boasted. Then his eyes darkened as he looked at the ground. "I also have been assigned to another ship," he stated sadly.

Stuart had known Blake Adams for eight years, served with him for the past four. He hated the idea of being separated from the man who had been his best friend, not to

mention the best flight officer that he had ever served with. Stuart did not allow his sense of loss interfere with wishing his friend well. "What ship?" he asked.

Blake looked Stuart in the eye, not revealing the secret that he wanted to tell. "I don't know," he said. "The ship's captain hasn't been informed yet, so they are waiting to tell me the details in case he doesn't give his okay."

"Well Blake," Stuart replied, "I hate to have our bridge crew broken up. We all work well together," he added.

Blake could only smile. "I know that you put in a good word for me, Rob," Blake said.

"Well, Blake," Stuart said, almost choking on his next words, "you deserve it." Rob Stuart allowed a slight grin to show as he stretched out his hand. "Congratulations," he said as Adams gripped his hand in return, shaking it vigorously.

"Thanks," he replied.

"I need to go," Stuart stated.

"Where are you off to?"

"I'm meeting my uncle for lunch," Stuart said, walking down the hall.

Blake's eyes followed his best friend until Stuart entered the turbolift. As the turbolift doors started to close Stuart heard Blake call to him. "Give Admiral Hathaway my regards." Adams turned, walked out of the headquarters building, and began to chuckle. *Rob is going to be really surprised*, he thought as the automatic sliding door swished shut behind him.



A few minutes later, Stuart walked up to an office door. The sign on the door had large bold letters. They indicated that behind this door was the office of the Chief of Starfleet Operations. As he approached the door it parted, inviting him to enter. A junior grade lieutenant rose to attention from behind her desk. "At ease Lieutenant," Stuart said. "I'm just here to meet the admiral for lunch."

The young officer smiled slightly, blushing as she sat down. "Admiral Hathaway is expecting you, Sir," she replied.

"Thank you," Stuart said as he started toward the door to his uncle's office.

"Excuse me, Commander," the young lieutenant stammered, "but..."

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

The junior officer blushed. "I don't mean to be so bold," she continued, "but the admiral did not say how handsome his nephew is."

Stuart chuckled. "That's because I made him promise not to try to fix me up with his secretary," he said.

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you, Sir," she said, turning away and looking down. Stuart felt sorry for the young woman, who was the one most assuredly

embarrassed by the comment that he made. A comment that he regretted. "I'm not embarrassed," he said, trying to console her. "In fact," he continued, "I'm flattered."

"Really?" She looked up to see Stuart smiling at her.

"The problem is that I'm too old for such a lovely young lady as yourself," Stuart said, winking at her. "What's your name?" he asked.

"Wellington," she replied. "Tracy Wellington."

"Good to meet you, Lieutenant Wellington." Stuart turned back toward the admiral's door and walked toward it, Wellington's eyes following him all the way down the corridor.



Admiral Hathaway sat behind his desk, talking with the captain of the U.S.S. *Republic*—Charles Gardner. "Will he go for it?" Gardner asked.

Hathaway leaned back in his chair. Slowly the admiral opened his mouth. "It might take a little persuasion," he said, "but I think he will."

The door opened, revealing Rob Stuart. "Are you hungry, Uncle Bob," he asked. "Come in, Robby," the admiral replied.

As Stuart stepped into the office he noticed his captain, fully recovered from the injuries he had received during the battle with the *Jem' Hedar* warships. "Oh, Captain Gardner," Stuart exclaimed, not expecting to see his CO for a few more days. "I didn't mean to interrupt..."

"Not at all," Gardner interrupted. "It's good to see you again."

"It's good to see you back in shipshape, Sir," Stuart replied.

"Thank you, Rob," Gardner said, looking at the best first officer that he had ever had. Gardner turned to his superior officer. "Admiral," Gardner stated, his countenance growing dour. "I believe that your nephew is out of uniform."

"Sir?" Stuart was incredulous as Admiral Hathaway suppressed a grin.

"I do believe you're right, Chuck," Hathaway replied. "This needs to be corrected right away," Gardner came back.

"It does indeed," the admiral stated with a serious scowl.

Gardner and Hathaway rose from their seats. Gardner frowned at his executive officer, walking around him. "Attention on deck," he shouted. "I will not have a senior officer out of uniform in the presence of an admiral," Gardner snapped.

Rob Stuart had not been dressed down for being out of uniform, or anything else for that matter, since he was a junior officer fresh out of the academy. He suspected that this was all a ruse to catch him off guard. He was right.

Admiral Hathaway rose from his chair. Slowly, he circled his desk, walked up to his nephew, and pinned a fourth rank pip on his collar. Smiling, the admiral said, "I

hereby promote you to the rank of captain with all the duties and privileges that come with it.”

Stuart's mouth dropped open as he stared into his uncle's eyes. "What?" he exclaimed, the shock setting in.

"Congratulations Rob," Gardner said, patting Stuart on the back. "You've been a great first officer," he added. "Now you have a chance at being a great captain.”

"I appreciate the confidence you place in me," Stuart said, "but I'm not ready for this.”

"Nonsense," Gardner scolded. "You've been ready for a long time."

Stuart sat down, shaking his head. "I'm not sure about this," he mumbled.

Hathaway placed his hand on Stuart's shoulder, trying to bring comfort to him. "I know that you don't feel ready," he told his sister's son, "but if you felt ready for the big chair, then that would be proof that you were not.”

Stuart looked up at his uncle, remembering thirty years before when his mother would sit and read a series of books that told of a magical land called Narnia. Aslan, the great lion, had said those same words to the young prince concerning his ability to lead the kingdom of Narnia. "What are my orders," he inquired.

The admiral returned to his seat. "You and your second officer...”

"That would be Lieutenant Commander Adams," Gardner interjected.

"Yes," Hathaway continued. "You and Adams will take a runabout to rendezvous with your ship in sector 047. Once there, you will proceed to Deep Space 9 to receive instructions concerning a top secret mission that could bring a quick end to this war.”

Stuart rose from his chair and straightened his uniform. "When do I leave?”

"Meet Mister Adams at Spacedock level 94 at 1330 hours tomorrow," Hathaway replied. "Are there any questions before we have lunch," Hathaway asked.

Stuart thought momentarily. “Just one,” he stated. "What ship?”

Gardner and Hathaway both smiled simultaneously, knowing that the newly promoted Robert P. Stuart would be pleased with his first command. "She's new," Gardner said. "A prototype variant of the *Intrepid*-class with some of the most advanced technology ever conceived," he added.

Stuart's interest heightened greatly as his uncle handed him a PADD with the specifications of Starfleet's newest creation. Stuart read the information before him, awed by the breakthroughs in defenses and engineering design. He looked up, meeting his uncle's questioning eyes. “Looks impressive,” Stuart stated nonchalantly.

Captain Gardner smiled, his eyes wrinkling ever so slightly. “Well?”

The edges of Stuart's mouth turned slightly upward. He turned to face his now former captain. “I think I'm going to like it.”

And Hathaway's face illuminated the room.

Chapter 2

The people gathered together around the fire. The open furnace radiated just enough heat for the population of the village to keep the cool night air from attaching itself to the populace.

The eldest, if age had any meaning on this world, looked toward the sky. He squinted his eyes as if he could see beyond the light years that kept his world isolated. He did not doubt that his son would return from one of those distant lights. In fact, the wizened elder knew that with his son, the chosen protector would arrive.

“Toshasa,” a young man said as he approached the elder of the village.

The elder pulled his gaze from the sky. “Toshasa benu,” he replied.

The younger man bowed his head and crossed his chest with his arms in a traditional form of greeting. “The time grows near,” he said. “What if the promised one does not come?”

The elder’s eyes bore deeply into the other man’s soul. “You doubt the coming of the promised one?” he asked. “The promised one will be here,” he said. “My son will bring him from beyond the heavens.”

The younger man contemplated what his mentor had said. “Only four more circles of the sun will pass before Kravis’s return,” he stated.

The leader of the village looked back to the stars. “And when the sun has crossed the sky five times,” the elder said, “the danger from Kravis will be no more.”



Rob Stuart tossed in his bunk, sweat running down the side of his face. His subconscious mind sensed danger. He kept seeing the faces of aliens in his dreams. Or was it a nightmare? The aliens looked straight at Stuart, their eyes pleading. “Help us,” they said repeatedly.

A voice called to Stuart from behind. “Please help my people,” the voice said.

As Stuart turned he saw another one of the aliens, but this one wore a Starfleet uniform. “Who are you?” Stuart asked.

The alien appeared peaceful. “Captain,” he said. “Follow your heart.”

The alien began to fade away as another voice began to speak to Stuart. “Rob,” it said. “Are you still back there?”

Stuart stirred, realizing that he had been dreaming. He finally recognized the voice of his friend and crewmate. “I’m still here,” he said as he rose to a sitting position on the bunk. “I was trying to sleep,” he added, trying to adjust his eyes to the light.

“We’re approaching the *Providence*,” Blake Adams stated over the intercom. “I thought that you would want a good look.”

Stuart blinked his tired eyes. “On my way,” he replied as he rose from the bunk and began walking toward the door.

Only a few moments passed before Robert Stuart entered the cockpit of the Federation runabout. He looked out the forward viewport as he sat in the co-pilot's chair.

Blake Adams turned from the controls to smile at his captain. "What do you think?" he inquired.

Stuart gazed joyfully at the new starship, his stare never leaving the sight of his first command. "She's a beautiful ship," he said.

Adams' eye gleamed as he worked the controls of the runabout. "How about a quick tour?" he asked his captain.

"Make it so," Stuart said, his face beaming with delight.

The skillfully piloted runabout dove under the port nacelle and past the underside of the starship. Stuart observed every detail of the *Providence* as his second officer flew the runabout around the larger vessel, keeping the viewport pointed toward it at all times. He wanted to give Rob the most enjoyable tour of the ship's exterior as possible.



Commander Melanie Leeson paced inside the turbolift. She had mixed feelings about meeting Captain Stuart. She knew that he saved his ship and crew from three Jem'Hedra warships, and it was no small task. However, Leeson had also hoped that she would get this command. After all, she had worked diligently to transfer from security to command grade, even tested higher than most on the bridge officer's test.

The turbolift stopped; its doors parted. Leeson exited the lift into the corridor that would lead her to the main shuttle bay. She briskly walked toward the doors that opened at her approach. She walked up to the young ensign on duty at the shuttle bay control panel. "Report," she said abruptly.

"There must be a madman at the controls of that runabout," the young ensign stated without emotion.

Leeson's eyebrow raised slightly. "Why do you say that?" she asked.

"He keeps circling us like a vulture," he replied. "I've never seen fancy flying like that before."

Leeson attempted to suppress a grin, thinking that this ensign would probably see a lot more 'fancy flying' in the months to come aboard the *Providence*. "Have they been cleared to dock?" Leeson asked.

"Yes Sir," the ensign replied, "but the captain wanted to look the ship over."

“That’s his prerogative, ensign.” Leeson, pausing to glance at the monitor, began to pace again. “Hail the runabout and remind them of our deadline to reach Deep Space Nine.”

“Aye Sir,” the ensign said. “Runabout *Euphrates*,” he said. “I hate to spoil the Captain’s tour, but we have a rendezvous with DS9.”

“This is Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams,” a voice announced over the communications system. “We are prepared to dock.”

The ensign entered commands into his keyboard. “Bay doors are opening, Sir,” he said. “The tractor beam will lock onto you in 3 seconds.”

Commander Leeson instantly recognized Adams voice, even over speakers. “Adams,” she thought. “*Why do I have to be stuck with Adams.*” More than eight years had passed since Blake Adams had crossed her path, and now fate or whatever cosmic powers that be was about to place into Melanie Leeson’s life the one person that she despised the most.

“I’m relinquishing control to you,” the faceless voice of Blake Adams announced.

The tractor beam came to life, grabbing the runabout. Like a deep-sea fisherman who had snagged a Marlin, the beam slowly reeled in the small ship. Almost immediately after the *U.S.S. Euphrates* touched down the hatch opened, revealing Rob Stuart. He stepped onto the deck of the shuttle bay, noticing a woman in her mid-thirties approaching from the front of the runabout.

Stuart, noticing the woman’s rank insignia, figured that this must be his first officer. “You must be Commander Leeson,” he said as he stretched out his hand.

“Welcome aboard, Captain Stuart,” Leeson replied as she returned the handshake. “Would you like to settle into your quarters or take a tour of the ship first?” she asked.

“I’m pretty anxious to see the ship,” he said gleefully, “but I should stow my gear first.”

“I will have your belongings beamed directly to your quarters, Sir,” Leeson said. “I think that you’ll like the *Providence*.”

Stuart looked around the bay. “I’m sure I will.”

Leeson started to turn and walk toward the doors that would open to the corridor. “Your quarters are on deck three,” she said. “The change of command ceremony is scheduled for 1800 hours with a reception following.”

”I appreciate your efforts, Commander,” Stuart said half-heartedly. The truth was that he really did appreciate the lengths that his executive officer was going to welcome him, but he did not enjoy formal receptions very much.

Blake ran to catch up with his captain, barely getting into the turbolift before the doors swished shut. He tried to catch his breath as he noticed Melanie Leeson, a look of

recollection. And of terror.

“It took you long enough,” Stuart said to Adams in a teasing way. “I would like to present Commander Melanie Leeson to you,” he continued. “Commander Leeson, this is...”

“...Blake Adams,” she finished.

Puzzlement and curiosity overcame Stuart. “I take it that you know each other.”

After a brief silence, Leeson spoke. “Our paths crossed once.”

Stuart sensed that his first and second officers had met under less than hospitable circumstances, but he decided that it would be best not to pursue the matter until later. “The Commander is going to take me on a brief tour,” he said, trying to change the subject and hoping that Blake would pick up his clue.

“That sounds wonderful,” Adams replied. “I would like to check out my quarters if you don’t mind me running out on you.”

“I don’t mind,” Stuart said. “The change of command is at 1800.”

“I’ll see you then,” Blake replied.

“Deck three,” Leeson said, instructed the computer where to send the turbolift. “We can drop you off, Mister Adams, before the tour begins.”

Was it Rob Stuart’s imagination or had his first officer become very cold toward Blake. He knew that he must talk to his friend at the earliest opportunity about the apparent “bad blood” between Commander Leeson and Blake.

Chapter 3

Blake Adams lay on his bunk, contemplating his feelings about seeing Melanie Leeson again. Serving on the same ship with her was going to be an awkward situation, or at least he thought that it would be. He knew that the situation needed to be resolved, and quickly, if he and Leeson were going to be capable of working as a team. The results could be disastrous to the ship and crew if he did not talk to her.

The door chime chirped, indicating that Blake Adams had a visitor. “Come in,” Adams spoke into the air.

The sliding door parted to reveal Rob Stuart, Blake’s friend and commanding officer. Stuart walked in, grinning slightly. “Care for a visitor?” he asked.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Blake said in his usual cheerful way. “Can I offer you a drink?”

Stuart strode across the room to sit in one the room’s lounge chairs as Adams walked toward the replicator. “Maybe a cup of tea,” Stuart replied as he sat down. “You know how I like it.”

Blake spoke to the replicator unit. “Computer, give me a cup of cinnamon tea. Make it hot and with double sugar.” He waited for only a second as the cup of tea materialized in the replicator’s alcove. Removing the cup, he spoke again. “I’ll take a

Cherry Coke in a large glass with ice.”

The computer paused before replying to Adams. “That beverage has not yet been programmed into the food replication system,” it said.

“Well, give me a large chocolate malt,” Blake said a little tersely.

“What’s the matter, Blake?” Stuart asked as his friend, drinks in hand, approached.

Blake handed Rob Stuart his cup of tea. “Whoever programmed the replicator,” Blake said as he sat in a chair across from his friend, “obviously doesn’t have an appreciation for soft drinks.”

“I’m sure you can remedy the problem,” Stuart said.

“That is affirmative, Skipper.” Blake took a drink of his malt. “My first priority before going to bed is to install all of my favorite foods.” He paused. “So, how was the tour?”

“I took an abbreviated tour,” Stuart said. “But I like what I’ve seen so far.”

Blake looked at his malt. “The replicator could use some improvements.”

Stuart grinned slightly, raising his teacup to his lips. While sipping his tea, he wondered how to approach his friend concerning Commander Leeson. Since he had known Blake for a long time, eight years, he figured that the direct approach would be best. “Blake,” he said. “I would like to know about your previous relationship with Commander Leeson.”

Blake sat back in his chair. Setting the malt down on the coffee table he reluctantly told his story. “I wouldn’t call it a relationship,” he began. “Actually, I’m ashamed of what happened.”

Rob waited a moment before asking his next question, sensing that his friend’s mood was growing pensive. “Was it a bad breakup?”

“We weren’t romantically involved,” Blake stated. “I just met her under less than perfect circumstances.”

“Maybe you should start at the beginning,” Stuart said.

Blake took a deep breath. “Right after I graduated from the Academy, I went to Starbase Eighty-two to await my first assignment,” he said. “I had a couple of days before my ship was to arrive, so I visited all the different places of entertainment and lounges on the station.”

“Seems like a normal thing to do to kill time,” Rob thought aloud. “So, what happened?”

“One night,” Blake continued, “I was in one of the bars and had a little too much to drink. And,” he emphasized, “it wasn’t synthehol.”

Stuart allowed himself a suppressed grin. “The real stuff, eh?”

Blake's face lit up, turning slightly flush. "Most definitely," he stated. "I became a little obnoxious and our first officer, who happened to be a security lieutenant at the time, was on duty." Blake looked down at his feet, clasping his hands.

"So what happened?" Rob asked, his curiosity elevating as he heard the tale unfold.

Blake looked up, embarrassed. "I made a pass and she threw me in the brig," he said. "I slept it off and was released the next morning."

"That's it?" Rob inquired, surprised that this was the cause of Leeson's cold reception toward Blake.

Blake shifted nervously in his seat. "Not exactly," he said. "I was embarrassed and angry about being locked up for such a minor incident," he added. "I wanted revenge."

Stuart had never perceived his friend as vengeful. He could not imagine that Blake Adams would do anything harmful to another person, especially a fellow officer. "What did you do?"

Blake looked into his Captain's eyes before revealing the thing that he had done to Melanie Leeson—the thing that he now regretted. "I programmed her sonic shower to cover her with orange gelatin."

Stuart's mouth dropped open. "You did what?" he exclaimed.

"I activated the program right before I reported to my ship," Blake said. "It was a very bad joke and I have regretted it for a long time." Blake rose from his chair and walked behind Stuart, who remained seated. "And I left a recorded message for her so that she would know that I was the practical joker."

Stuart couldn't believe his friend capable of doing something as treacherous as what he was describing. True, Blake Adams loved to have fun and was known at times as a practical joker on the *Republic*, but this was out of character for him. "What was the message?" Stuart asked, his curiosity piqued.

Blake looked out one of the viewports, searching the stars and his feelings. "I told her that she needed a sweeter disposition."

Rob rose from his chair, approached his friend from behind, and placed his gentle hand on Blake's shoulder. "I know that you feel bad about your *little joke*," Stuart said. "I think you should let Commander Leeson know how much you regret what happened and apologize."

"I think your right," Blake stated. "But I don't know how she'll receive it." Blake paused, grinning. "Her disposition toward me didn't appear to be any sweeter than it was several years ago."

Stuart, who began to envision his first officer covered in orange gelatin, could not help but laugh.



Melanie Leeson strode down the corridor toward the Starbright Lounge. As she approached the doors parted, allowing her entrance to the main social gathering place for the crew. She looked around, checking that everything was in place. The podium was centered near the forward viewports. Leeson's eyes scanned the room to ensure that everything was properly placed. As she stepped up to the bar, she noticed that the ship's Chief Medical Officer was approaching.

The doctor smiled as she approached Leeson. "How are you doing, Mel?" she asked.

Leeson half-heartedly returned the doctor's smile. "I've been better," she stated.

The doctor had served with Melanie Leeson at Starbase Eighty-two and knew her well enough to know that she was deeply troubled, despite Leeson's attempt to hide her feelings. "Want to talk about it?" the doctor asked.

"No," Leeson replied rather curtly. "Maybe later when all the hoopla dies down."

The doctor pondered Leeson's mood. "I'll be available whenever you're ready to talk," she told Leeson.

"Thanks."

The doctor looked past Melanie, noticing that her new captain and another new arrival had entered the lounge. "He's here," she stated.

As Leeson turned, she saw Blake Adams with Stuart. Adams, noticing her cold stare, turned and walked in the direction of a small group of junior officers. *Coward*, she thought to herself. *I'll get even with him.*

Stuart saw his first officer with one of the officers that he would be working with and began moving toward them. By the blue uniform and rank insignia of a lieutenant commander, he deduced that the slightly older woman with Leeson was the ship's doctor.

Leeson rose from her seat at the bar as her captain approached. "Did you get settled, Captain?" she asked.

"Yes, thank you," he replied.

"I would like to introduce Doctor Janice Edwards, our CMO," Leeson said.

The doctor extended her hand, Stuart grasping it in a firm grip. "Welcome aboard, Sir," she cheerfully stated.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Doctor Edwards."

Edwards paused momentarily as she looked at her new CO, sizing him up. She trusted her instincts about people and decided that Robert P. Stuart had what it takes to be a fine captain. And a person with integrity. "Have you met the senior staff yet?" she asked.

"Only Commander Leeson and yourself so far," he said. "But from the personnel records that I looked at I think that..." Stuart stopped in mid-sentence, not believing his eyes. He saw a man, an alien approaching him. It was the same person in a Starfleet

uniform that appeared to him in his earlier dream.

“Captain?” Leeson said. “What’s wrong?”

Stuart was dumbfounded. He did not understand how a person whom he had never seen, from a species that he had never seen, be real. It was only a dream, so he thought. “I’m fine,” he lied. “This person,” he nodded toward the approaching officer, “seems familiar.”

The alien drew near. Crossing his arms in front of his chest, the alien bowed to Stuart. “Welcome Captain Stuart,” he said as he looked back at the captain.

“This is Lieutenant Salesh K’Tok,” Leeson said to Stuart, eyeing him suspiciously. “He’s the chief engineer.”

Stuart did not know whether to offer to shake the alien’s hand or bow with arms crossed in front of his chest as the engineer had done. Not knowing this alien’s culture, Stuart chose the latter. “Good to meet you, Lieutenant.” Stuart looked into the eyes of his chief engineer. This person seemed strangely familiar to Stuart. It was like Deja Vu.

Leeson interrupted her CO. “It’s time, Sir,” she said.

“Of course, Commander,” Stuart replied. “We’ll talk later, Lieutenant,” he said as he turned to follow Leeson toward the dais.

Commander Melanie Leeson stepped up to the front of the room. “Attention on deck,” she said, almost shouting to get the attention of everyone in the crew lounge. “Attention to orders.”

Rob Stuart walked behind the podium as the crew stood at attention. Stuart picked up the PADD that had been waiting for him in the front of the room. He began to read the orders that had been programmed into the PADD’s memory. “To Captain Robert P. Stuart: You are requested and required to assume command of *U.S.S. Providence*, NCC-76037 effective stardate 52866.3. Orders signed by Admiral Robert Hathaway, Chief of Starfleet Operations.”

Stuart replaced the PADD onto the podium and faced Commander Leeson. She snapped to attention, not allowing her personal feelings about relinquishing command be noticed by the crew. “Computer,” she said. “This is Commander Melanie Leeson in temporary command of the starship *Providence*. I now relinquish command to Captain Stuart.”

The computer replied in its usual feminine voice. “Awaiting authorization code to transfer command of *U.S.S. Providence*.”

“Authorization code Leeson beta three nine seven,” the first officer stated more monotone than the computer.

“This is Captain Stuart,” the captain said. “I hereby accept command of the *U.S.S. Providence*. Authorization code Stuart omega seven two alpha.”

“*U.S.S. Providence* is now under the command of Captain Robert P. Stuart,” the computer stated.

Stuart returned to the podium, deciding not to give the prepared speech that he had written earlier. He thought something less formal would be a better start to working with his crew. "I want to thank all of you for welcoming me aboard this fine ship," he said. "I look forward to getting to know each one of you as we travel the stars together." He paused to look around the room. Stuart saw seasoned Starfleet officers and young crewmen, some who had not been out of the Academy very long. He knew that some of these people would probably die doing their duty under his command. He wondered if he was up to the task of being a starship CO with all the responsibilities that came with it. "It is my hope that this war with the Dominion will end quickly," he continued, "so that we can be at the forefront of exploring this galaxy and discovering new life."

As Stuart stepped from behind the podium the crew applauded. Stuart noticed the alien, Salesh K'Tok, staring at him, a look of contentment and peace emanating from his face. The other crew ceased to exist, at least that is how it seemed to Stuart. *Why did I dream about this person?* he thought. *Who is he?*

Stuart's thoughts were interrupted by the approach two more of his officers. He immediately recognized the man. "James!" he exclaimed. "How have you been?"

Stuart put his hands on the man's shoulders. He had met James Goodman through his roommate at the Academy, who happened to be James's older brother.

Counselor James Goodman's face lit up as he warmly shook the hand of his new captain. "I've been well, Sir," he replied. "I want you to meet my wife, Mary."

Lieutenant Mary Goodman shook her CO's hand. "A pleasure to meet you, Sir," she said with a pronounced British accent.

"The pleasure is mine, Lieutenant," Stuart said. "I look forward to serving with you. I understand that you're one of the best OPS managers in Starfleet."

Mary blushed at the compliment. "Thank you, Sir," was all she could say.

Stuart turned his attention back to James. "So, how's Ben?" he inquired.

"He's the captain of a *Defiant*-class," James beamed, proud of his older brother's achievements. "*U.S.S. Avenger*," he added.

Stuart smiled as he thought about his old friend from their days at the Academy. "Say hello next time you send a communiqué," he told the younger Goodman.

"I will, Sir," James said.

Stuart gave Goodman a pat on the shoulder. "We need to catch up on old times," he said. "But I need to meet the rest of the crew."

James nodded. "Maybe dinner for the three of us?" he asked expectantly.

"Sounds great," Stuart stated.

Stuart mingled with those officers and crew, trying to memorize all the names that he was exposed to, over the next three hours; however, his thoughts of the alien chief engineer kept invading his mind.

Chapter 4

Rob Stuart tossed and turned in his bunk, his mind playing tricks on him. The dream kept repeating. All those people were being bombarded with phaser fire or some type of energy weapon similar to phasers. Those who had not been decimated were led away in chains, enslaved by one who had betrayed them once before.

Kravis. Stuart could not get the word out of his head. Was it a place? A name? He did not know. The word imprinted itself into his subconscious mind. Finally, he awoke, sweat beading on his forehead.

The room was dark, only the stars streaking past his windows. “Computer,” Stuart’s voice activating the artificial intelligence to respond to his wishes. “What time is it?”

“The current ship’s time is 0442 hours,” the computer replied unemotionally.

“Lights at half,” Stuart indicated.

The room illuminated partially as Stuart got out of his bunk. He sleepily walked toward the adjoining bathroom. *I get a command, then I start losing my mind*, Stuart thought to himself. But he knew that the answer to his dreams was somehow tied to his chief engineer. And he wanted those answers before he attempted to sleep again.



The monstrous starship traveled toward the peaceful world of Derkhana. Its commander had but one thought—revenge.

Kravis, once an elder of Derkhana, smiled wickedly as he thought about the destruction that he would bring to his homeworld. His people did not defend him before Derkha when he tried to rise to power. His people would pay the price and live as his slaves for eternity. For Kravis, immortality had its rewards, but for Derkhana, it would be a curse. Or so Kravis thought.



Rob Stuart walked the corridors of the ship. *His* ship. Most of Alpha shift was just waking, so very few crewman crossed his path. Stuart, disturbed by his dreams of a peaceful world under attack by a malevolent being, strode toward a turbolift. He entered the lift, allowing the doors to swoosh shut behind him.

After several seconds of silence, the computer prompted the captain. “Please state your destination,” the mechanical voice said.

“Deck one,” Stuart finally replied. “Officer’s lounge.”

In a few seconds, the turbolift doors opened and Rob exited the lift. He strode forward as a set of double doors slid open, inviting him into the lounge located to the rear of the first deck. He walked to the nearest food replicator to order breakfast. “Bagel with cream cheese and hot cinnamon tea, extra sweet,” he told the computer.

Stuart took the freshly replicated breakfast and sat at a table, facing the viewports. He stared out, watching the streaking stars while contemplating his dreams. Stuart, lost in

his thoughts, did not notice the approaching figure.

“Captain?”

Startled, Stuart turned to see who was addressing him. “Lieutenant K’Tok?”

“I did not mean to frighten you, Sir,” the chief engineer stated.

“I didn’t expect anyone else to be up this early,” the captain said.

The engineer cocked his head slightly. “But you are pleased to see that I am awake so that you can talk to me about your dreams.”

Stuart’s mouth dropped open. He could not believe that his engineer knew about the dreams. “You know about my dreams?” he stammered. “That’s incredible!”

The engineer bowed his head in a gesture of acknowledgment. “It is a possible future that you see while you sleep,” Salesh stated calmly. “Derkha communicates in that manner to those who do not hear his voice while awake.”

Stuart felt more puzzled than ever. “I don’t understand, Lieutenant K’Tok.”

“Lieutenant Salesh, Sir,” the engineer stated.

“Pardon?” Stuart asked.

“My name is Lieutenant Salesh,” he replied. “The family name comes before the given name in my culture.”

“I was not aware of that,” Stuart said. “Please forgive me.”

Lieutenant Salesh looked peacefully at his captain. “Ignorance does not need forgiveness,” he said sympathetically. “But I sense that you want to ask me some questions.”

Stuart leaned back in his chair, not knowing how to proceed with this unique conversation. He decided to just *shoot from the hip* as the old saying went. “Does the word *Kravis* mean anything to you?”

For an instant, the look of contentment that Salesh had always displayed began to fall. Deep concern began to show on his face. “Kravis,” Salesh began, “is the betrayer.”

Stuart sensed that the mention of Kravis’ name brought an unimaginable pain to his chief engineer. “I understand that this is difficult for you, Lieutenant,” Stuart said. “But we need to discuss my dreams since you are a part of them.”

“Captain,” Salesh said. “I was sent to the Federation to find the one who would protect my world from Kravis.” He paused, looking intently into Stuart’s eyes. “You are the one that I was sent to find.”

Stuart stiffened. “Me?” he stated incredulously. “What makes you think that I am this protector?”

“Your dreams reveal that you are the one,” Salesh replied. “Derkha told me that the one to save Derkhana would be the one who dreamt of its destruction.”

Stuart listened as his chief engineer told about his world, his people, how he came

to Earth, and how the would-be ruler Kravis was due to return to Derkhana within the next few days. The tale that Salesh spoke of reminded Stuart of the Biblical stories that described the end of the world.

“A gateway will appear,” Salesh stated. “When it does, you must go through it.”

“Where does this gateway lead, Lieutenant?” Stuart inquired of his engineering officer.

“It leads to my world, Captain.”

Stuart rose from his chair, taking a sip of his tea. He faced Salesh. “I would be intrigued by the possibility of visiting your world,” he said. “But we are en route to a meeting at DS9 that may be essential to bringing the Dominion war to a close.”

“Captain,” Salesh said with confident authority. “The meeting at DS9 is not as important as saving a world.” He waited as Stuart sat back down. “If you put our meeting at DS9 before the fulfillment of your destiny as Derkhana’s chosen protector,...” Salesh urgently stated, “...then the war will continue for years.”

Stuart looked down at the now cold tea in his cup. “How do you know?”

Salesh contemplated his next words carefully. “Derkha told me.”

“I would like to meet this Derkha.”

The engineer allowed a slight grin to show. “Derkha would like that as well. He knows you already.”

Stuart did not understand what his officer was saying, but somehow he sensed that he should trust Salesh. “How do we find this gateway to your world?” he asked.

Lieutenant Salesh stood. Walking to the rear of the lounge he gazed at the streaking stars. “Derkha’s gateway will appear at the appointed time.”

Chapter 5

Blake Adams entered the holodeck. He recognized the standard woodland pattern that emulated Earth-like conditions so well. He walked down a path that seemed to wind through the thickest part of the trees. His heart skipped a beat as an alien jumped from the tree above, swinging a double-bladed sword, and blocked Blake’s path.

A screech, one like that of the mythical banshee, sounded from behind Blake. As he turned, Blake saw Commander Leeson atop a galloping horse, wielding a Klingon bat’leth. He saw her fling herself off of the horse, swinging wildly at the skull-faced alien.

Leeson swung the bat’leth at her holographic opponent with the skill of any Klingon warrior that Blake had seen, not that he had the opportunity to see that many. The alien monster deflected the woman’s blows with skillful, yet reckless, strikes with his own sword. Finally, Leeson knocked her opponent to the ground and struck it with a fatal blow to the neck. And the holographic warrior dematerialized.

“Nice job,” Blake said as he approached the first officer. “I’m glad that wasn’t

me,” he added with a twinkle in his eye.

Melanie Leeson lowered her weapon as she glared at Blake. “Actually, that was you,” she replied.

“How so?”

Leeson allowed herself a slight smile. Or was it a smirk? “In my mind,” she said, “that was you.”

“Taking your anger towards me out on that poor hologram?” Blake asked in a straight tone.

Silence.

“Commander,” Blake began. “I know that when we met at Starbase 82 I behaved like a child.” He looked down, trying to find the right words to say. “I was immature and I regret playing that terrible joke on you.”

Leeson clenched her fist. Her face began to feel hot as the blood rushed to her cheeks. “If you’re seeking forgiveness,” she said through gritted teeth, “you won’t get it from me.”

Blake took a step toward his superior officer. “We’re shipmates now,” he stated. “It’s been over eight years since...”

“Eight or eight hundred,” she interrupted. “There can be no forgiveness,” Leeson stated angrily. “Only retribution,” she added through clenched teeth.

Leeson turned on her heel and briskly walked into the woods as Adams watched her go, a look of sadness on his face.



Lieutenant Nakamara strolled through the corridor. As he passed the hatchway that led to Holodeck Two it opened, Commander Leeson storming out. The young security officer had worked closely with the first officer and knew that she was bothered by something. Actually, he could see that she was really ticked off. “What’s the matter, Commander?” he asked.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Leeson replied. “Where are you headed?” she asked.

“I was looking for you. The captain has called a briefing for all senior officers in fifteen minutes.”

Leeson, realizing that her uniform had been soiled during her fight with the holodeck monster, began to walk toward the nearest turbolift. “I better change into something a little fresher,” she stated. “Please let the second officer know about the briefing, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, Commander,” Nakamara replied as the turbolift doors closed behind Melanie Leeson.



Rob Stuart entered the main briefing room, Lieutenant Salesh following behind him. They both took their seats, Stuart at the head of the conference table. He surveyed his senior staff, all waiting expectantly to hear what their new CO had to say.

“As you know,” Stuart began, “we are heading to Deep Space 9 to be briefed on a mission that could bring about the end of the Dominion War. However, I have learned that something may happen to prevent us from reaching our destination.”

All the officers around the table began to feel uneasy. After a moment of silence, a moment that appeared to be eternal, Melanie Leeson spoke. “What do you mean, Captain?”

“Lieutenant Salesh has told me about his world,” Stuart said. “It appears that we are to fulfill the role of defending his people from an invader. An invader who wants revenge.”

“Our first priority should be to end the war,” Leeson said.

“Yes,” Blake Adams said. “We should end the war.”

Stuart noticed that Blake had emphasized his comment and directed it toward the first officer, who seemed to glare accusingly back at Blake.

“If we don’t go to defend Derkhana,” Stuart said, “we may be prolonging the war indefinitely.”

“How, Captain?” It was the young Asian security chief who uttered the question.

Stuart sighed. “I think I will let Lieutenant Salesh explain what he has told me.

Salesh spent the better part of the next twenty minutes retelling the story that he had shared previously with his captain. By the time that he had finished, the tension in the room had elevated several degrees. Some of the officers disbelieved the engineer flat out while some tried to keep an open mind. Counselor Goodman, who had studied theology before transferring to Starfleet Academy, saw many parallels in Salesh’s story with his own Judeo-Christian beliefs.

“How do we find this gateway, Captain?” James Goodman asked.

“If it even exists,” countered Leeson.

“We don’t go looking for it,” Stuart replied. “Lieutenant Salesh says that it will just appear at the proper time.”

“So what do we do?” asked Nakamara.

“We proceed to DS9,” Stuart stated. “And be prepared to make a slight detour.”

Chapter 6

The starship *Providence* sped through the void of space. Tension grew among the senior officers as each hour passed since the morning briefing about what might shortly come to pass. Some doubted that the events told by the chief engineer would actually happen; however, the captain believed. And that was enough to convince Blake Adams.

Blake turned away from the CONN to face his captain, his friend. “You ready for

dinner?”

Stuart, his gaze fixed upon the view screen, did not feel hungry. “Not yet,” came his reply after a few seconds of silence.

Blake, although concerned about his friend, tried to keep his mood light. “Saving your stomach from the replicator, eh?”

Stuart only smiled.

The turbolift doors opened allowing Commander Leeson and Lieutenant Commander T’Les, the Vulcan science officer, to enter the bridge. T’Les strode to her position at the science station while Leeson approached the captain.

“I’m here to relieve you, Captain,” she stated as she stood at attention.

Rob Stuart sat back in his chair, shifting his eyes from the view screen toward his first officer. “I thought that I would stay on duty for a little while, Exec,” he said.

Leeson took her position in the chair next to her captain. “It’s your decision, Captain,” Melanie Leeson said. “However, I think that waiting on the bridge for a mysterious gateway to appear is...”

“...A waste of my time,” Stuart finished his second-in-command’s sentence. “You’re right, Exec,” he said. “I leave the bridge in your capable hands,” Stuart continued as he rose from the command chair.

Leeson stood and moved to the center seat that had just been vacated by her superior officer as he walked toward the door to his ready room. “Beta shift,” Leeson said. “Assume your stations.”

Blake Adams rose as his replacement approached the CONN. “Fly well, Ensign.”

Blake headed for the ready room, Melanie Leeson’s eyes following him all the way until the doors closed behind him.



The huge ship approached the peaceful planet. The weapons, fully charged, were aimed carefully at the village of Derkhanans who sought the wisdom of the elders. The people of this world knew only peace under the tender care of Derkha. Now, that peace appeared to be waning.

“Ready to fire, Excellency,” a tall reptilian alien said.

Kravis looked at the view screen and smiled, his fists clenched in triumph. “I have the power to wipe them all out,” he said to no one in particular. “But I want them to serve me.”

Kravis contemplating his next course of action paced the through the control room of his ship. “Can you project a holographic projection of me in the village square?”

“Yes Sir,” the reptilian stated. “There may be some static because of the unusual properties of the planet’s atmosphere.”

Kravis walked toward the holographic scanner at the rear of the control room. “Prepare to scan me and project my image at three times my height,” he commanded. “I want them to look up to me.”



The villagers walked along the streets not realizing that their way of life was about to change. From the north, south, east, and west they walked toward the center of the village, the place of meeting where they gathered daily to sing to Derkha.

The twelve elders, Derkhanoma as they were called, welcomed their children to the gathering place as was the daily custom. They began to rejoice and sing to the one who had created them and placed them as the caretakers of this world.

It was Malesh, the father of those who tilled the ground for food, who noticed the abrupt change in the air. It seemed as if sparks flew out of nothingness. Then the image of Kravis, the betrayer, appeared. The people of Derkhana stopped their celebration as the gigantic image of Kravis seemed to look down on them, showing his disdain for them.

“I have returned to have my revenge upon you,” Kravis said, practically spitting the words out. “You will bow to me and be my slaves for eternity...” the evil would-be dictator said, “...or die.

Death was a non-reality to the Derkhanans who were immortal. The Derkhanoma were the oldest, the first to be created and the procreators of the rest of the population. They were at least four thousand years old, although they appeared to be only in their late thirties. Death had never happened on this world and the threat of it did not bring the fear that Kravis had hoped. He had seen death countless times among the aliens that he had encountered since being banished by Derkha millennia before. In fact, he caused much of it. Kravis had forgotten that death had little or no meaning to his immortal kinsmen.

Three of the Derkhanoma—Malesh, Salesh, and Torloth—stepped forward to address Kravis’s image. “You have returned as we knew that you would,” Torloth stated.

Kravis was surprised at the statement made by Torloth. “How did you know?” he asked, uneasiness coming over him as powerful waves of surf would hit a sandy beach.

“Derkha has revealed everything to us concerning your return,” Malesh said.

“And your end,” Torloth added, sadness filling his very being.

Kravis’s image looked down at the three elders of Derkhana. He almost wished that he was in their presence, physically, so that he could lash out at them for sending him to the other side of the galaxy. “I will land my army on the outskirts of the village and you will bow down to me,” he said. “And you will sing your songs to me instead of to Derkha.”

Salesh, the father of the builders, stepped forward. “You will not succeed,” he said. “Derkha has promised to bring one who will protect us from you.”

Kravis sneered. “Who is this so-called promised one:”

“We do not know, but he will drive you into a raging pit of flames,” Salesh stated.

“And what say you about this, Torloth?” Kravis asked defiantly.

Torloth looked into the eyes of Kravis. “Your end is at hand,” he said, a tear streaming down his cheek.



Blake sat on the couch in the captain’s ready room. “So, do you believe Lieutenant Sales?” he asked his captain.

Stuart shrugged. “His story is hard to believe,” he said, “but our chief engineer believes it. And he projects an aura of trustworthiness.”

“I’m not much on supernatural happenings,” Blake said, “but I think that we should consider that what he says might be true.”

“Absolutely,” Stuart replied. “The unknown is why we’re out here.”

Just then, Stuart and Adams felt the ship shudder slightly as the intercom whistled.

Stuart tapped the communicator pin on his chest. “Stuart here,” he said. “What’s happening?”

“You better come out here, Sir,” Melanie Leeson’s voice replied.

“On our way.”

Stuart and Adams briskly entered the bridge, their eyes riveted on the view screen.

Leeson rose from the center seat, yielding it to her captain. “We came out of warp right as it appeared,” she told her CO. “We’ve tried evasive maneuvers to go around it, even back away from it, but...”

“It moves with us?” Adams asked.

“It stays directly in our path,” Leeson continued. “We can’t seem to shake it, Sir.”

Stuart sat down as Adams relieved the Beta shift CONN officer. “The question,” Stuart began, “is *should* we try to shake it?”

Commander Leeson could not believe what Stuart was saying. “Sir?”

Stuart straightened his uniform jacket. “Have Lieutenant Sales come to the bridge.”

“I’m here, Captain,” Sales said as he exited the turbolift.

“Is this Derkha’s gateway?” Captain Stuart asked, motioning to the viewer.

“Yes, Sir.”

“We can’t seem to go around it or back away from it,” Stuart said. “What if we moved toward it?”

Sales, a look of peace on his face, looked directly into his captain’s eyes. “Then we will find ourselves in orbit around Derkhana,” he said. “Trust your heart, Captain.”

Stuart gazed back at Salesh, remembering those words in one of his dreams. “We go through it then,” he decided. “Everyone take your stations.”

“I protest, Captain,” Leeson said.

“Protest noted,” came Stuart’s reply. “However, I don’t see any other option.”

“Captain,” the Vulcan science officer said, offering her input for the first time.

“Yes, Lieutenant Commander?”

“I have scanned the anomaly and it appears to have similar properties of a type 2 wormhole,” T’Les stated icily, “however, there seem to be some readings that I have not encountered before.”

Stuart nodded to his science officer. “Thank you, Commander,” he said. “CONN, set course for the center of the gateway and engage at one-half impulse.”

“Aye, Captain,” was Blake Adams reply as his fingers did their magic on the flight console.

The U.S.S. *Providence* flew straight toward the center of the gate and disappeared from their part of the galaxy.

Chapter 7

Kravis’s army had landed several kilometers south of the village. They advanced through the jungle slowly as trees had suddenly appeared where, according to the orbital scans, there were none previously.

“Lord Kravis,” the apparent leader of the reptilian army spoke into his communications device.

“*What is it, General?*” Kravis’s voice replied.

“The foliage is growing at tremendous speed,” the general explained. “It is as if the planet has come alive to defend the villagers,” he added.

On the ship, Kravis ran to the scanning station across the control room. He angrily punched at the buttons to activate the viewer to see what his ground forces were encountering. “Use weapons at full power to burn that jungle if you have to,” he demanded.

“*Yes Sir,*” came the voice of his general through the com system.

As Kravis tried to control his outburst one of the aliens approached him, wondering what his commander would do after hearing the report that he was about to deliver. “Excuse me, Sir,” the reptile said quietly.

“What is it?” Kravis said abruptly.

“I want to report an energy surge on the far side of the planet.”

“Can you identify what caused the surge?”

“No Sir,” he stated. “Not at this range.”

Kravis turned to face the flight control station. "Bring us around to the other side of the planet," he ordered.



Stuart saw the greenish-blue world appear on the screen. One moment the screen showed stars, then a flash of light, and now a beautiful planet. He had never seen a world that looked so beautiful in his life.

Commander Leeson sat next to her CO without saying anything. She was awed by what they had just encountered. Perhaps the chief engineer's story was right, as hard as that seemed to Leeson.

"Full sensor scan," Stuart said.

Lieutenant Salesh approached the center of the *Providence* bridge. "Welcome to Derkhana, Captain," he said genuinely glad to be home.

"What next, Lieutenant?" the captain asked his engineer.

"I suggest we conceal ourselves," Salesh K'Tok said. "I sense Kravis approaching."

Lieutenant Commander T'Les turned from her science station. "I am detecting a ship on an intercept course, Captain," she stated unemotionally.

Stuart did not hesitate, his next decision being clear. "Bring the Holographic Cloaking Device online," he said. "Make them think that we are an asteroid or small moon."

"Aye Sir," Lieutenant Mary Goodman replied. Program Asteroid Two is online and engaged."

The starship's appearance changed. The immediate space around the hull shimmered and where an *Intrepid*-class ship once orbited Derkhana, now a huge rock occupied its location. Or that was how it seemed.

"Holocloak is stable, Captain."

"Thank you, Mary," Stuart said to his OPS officer.

"Should I raise shields, Sir?" Nakamara asked.

"Will they be detected through our cloak?" Leeson inquired.

"Negative," replied T'Les. "The technology of the alien ship is relatively primitive by our standards."

"How primitive?" Stuart asked.

T'Les never let her eyes leave her science view screen. "Their shields and weapons are at approximately ninety-seven point two years behind ours and they do not have transporter technology."

"What kind of life readings are you getting?" Leeson wanted to know.

"There appear to be two hundred twelve reptilian aliens on the ship," T'Les

stated. "There is also one humanoid with similar DNA to our chief engineer."

"Kravis," Lieutenant Salesch stated.

"It should also be noted," the science officer said as she faced the middle of the bridge, "that there are over fifteen hundred reptilian aliens on the planet surface."

A tear formed in the corner of Salesch's eye. "They are advancing on the village," he said, having access to supernaturally revealed knowledge.

T'Les raised her eyebrow, amazed that Lieutenant Salesch knew without seeing the events that she knew by scanning the surface. "You are correct," she said as the rest of the bridge crew just looked at the engineer, mouths open in awe.



Kravis paced the bridge of his ship, not knowing what to expect. The prophecy that had come to his people concerning his return disturbed him greatly, especially the part about his destruction. But revenge clouded his mind, preventing him from the wisdom of retreating back to the other side of the galaxy.

"We do not detect anything unusual Lord Kravis," one of the aliens reported. "The only object on this side of the planet is a small orbiting asteroid."

Kravis' eyebrows creased as he thought about what had just been said. "Derkhana has no moon or asteroids in orbit," he stated to himself. Kravis looked at the viewscreen. "Scan that object," he demanded.

The alien who had reported to Kravis quickly went to the scanning station to do as he had been ordered. "No anomalies, Sir," he said. "It reads as a typical asteroid made of iron, nickel, and granite."

Kravis stood in the middle of the control room, staring at the image of the space rock on the viewer. Something did not seem right to him. "Lock weapons on that object and prepare to destroy it," he said.



"The aliens are charging their weapons, Captain," T'Les announced.

"They can't see through our cloak, can they?" Blake Adams inquired.

"Negative," T'Les replied. "They do not have technology advanced enough to detect us."

"Blake," Stuart said. "Prepare to warp out of orbit."

"Aye," Adams replied while setting the course.

Melanie Leeson observed her captain with mild curiosity. "What are you planning Sir?"

Stuart smiled. "We are going to deceive the deceiver."

"They're preparing to fire, Sir," Nakamara stated.

Stuart did not acknowledge his tactical officer but turned his attention to OPS.

“Program our simulation to appear to explode as their weapons hit,” he said calmly. “Blake, go to warp a second after they fire.”

Blake nodded and turned back to his console. “What course, Skipper?”

“Take us past the next planet out from their sun,” Stuart replied. “And turn us around to head back on an intercept course,” he added.

Leeson’s respect for her CO increased as she began to realize what Stuart had in mind. “A frontal attack, Sir?” she inquired.

“I hope to convince Kravis to withdraw,” Stuart said. “Hopefully, without firing a shot.”

“I appreciate your desire for a peaceful solution, Captain,” Lieutenant Salesh began, “but you will not convince Kravis to leave. He only understands force.”

“What do you suggest, Lieutenant?”

Salesh peered into Stuart’s soul. “It is Derkha’s will that you face Kravis at the village square where he will try to kill you,” Salesh said in a matter-of-fact tone. “He will not succeed.”

“How can you be sure?” Leeson angrily asked.

“We have the promise of Derkha,” the engineer replied confidently.



Kravis watched the viewer as energy beams lanced from his ship and struck the asteroid. It exploded, creating a flash of light that obscured the temporary departure of the Starfleet vessel.

The alien starship flew through the fictitious debris as it continued its orbit around Derkhana, with Kravis unsuspecting of what the next few minutes would bring. He paced back and forth across the bridge of his alien vessel as one of his minions approached.

“Lord Kravis,” the alien began.

“What is it?” Kravis asked in an irritating tone.

The alien bowed fearfully. “Sensors detect an object moving toward us.”

Kravis felt a twinge of fear as he remembered what the elders of Derkhana had told him about a coming protector. “Another asteroid?” he asked, hoping that it was as natural as that, but knowing that he was wrong.

“It appears to be a spacecraft, Sir,” the lizard-like alien stated. “And it is coming very fast.”

Kravis began to quake inside, sensing that his end might be at hand. “Activate defensive systems and prepare to launch fighters,” Kravis ordered.



The starship *Providence* sped toward Derkhana, ready to defend the peaceful world from a would-be dictator. The next actions of her crew would decide a world’s

fate.

Rob Stuart watched the view screen, as did the others on the bridge, wondering how this impromptu mission would end. “Standard orbit,” he said. “Bring us within ten kilometers of their ship.”

“Aye Skipper,” Blake Adams replied.

Melanie Leeson looked to Lieutenant Nakamara who manned the tactical station next to CONN. “What’s the tactical situation, Lieutenant?” she inquired nonchalantly.

“They have established shields and have weapons locked on us, Commander,” he said without taking his eyes off of his control panel.

“Let’s knock on the door, Lieutenant,” Stuart said.

“Sir?” Nakamara replied.

“Open hailing frequencies.”

“Aye Captain,” the young security chief stated.

Stuart stood and approach the view screen. “This is Captain Robert P. Stuart of the Federation starship U.S.S. *Providence*,” Stuart began. “Please respond.”

Silence.

Stuart waited. He was a paragon of patience.

Nakamara turned toward his captain. “They are receiving us, Sir.”

“This is Captain Stuart of the U.S.S. *Providence*,” Stuart repeated. “I know that you are receiving our transmission.”

Again, silence.

Stuart returned to his command chair. “We are here on a mission of peace, invited by the *legitimate*,” he emphasized the word, “government of Derkhana to defend against a possible invader.” Stuart waited a moment before continuing. “If you are this invader,” he paused for effect, “I invite you to withdraw.”

Silence.

Stuart stared at the view screen. “I await your reply.”

He did not have to wait long. As Stuart and his crew watched the image of Kravis’s ship on the viewer they noticed a bright light streak toward them just before the deck shuddered beneath them.

“Damage report,” Leeson said.

“No damage, Commander,” Lieutenant Mary Goodman reported from OPS.

Stuart stood up and approached the view screen again. “Channel open.”

“Open, Sir,” Nakamara said calmly.

“Your ship is primitive by our standards,” Stuart said. “I suggest that you stand

down or we will be forced to fire.”

The image of the ship on the screen continued to fire at the *Providence* with little effect.

“Target their weapons array and prepare to fire phasers,” Stuart said. “Thirty percent power should do it.”

“Aye Sir,” Nakamara said as he began the targeting program.

“Give me two bursts, Lieutenant,” Stuart said. “One to take out their shields and the other to disable their weapons.”

The chief engineer, who had been quiet for several minutes, approached his captain. “He will not surrender, Captain,” Salesh stated. “But he will try to get an advantage by deception.”

“Understood,” Stuart replied. “Fire.”

With two shots the alien ship lost its shields and ability to fire weapons. Stuart thought about disabling the engines of Kravis’ ship as well; however, he hoped that the aliens would leave on their own accord. And they would need the use of their engines.

Nakamara looked up from his station. “We’re being hailed, Sir.”

Stuart looked at his friend Blake at CONN, then at his first officer. Both were smiling. “Open channel.”

The image of the alien vessel on the main viewer was replaced by another image, similar in appearance to Lieutenant Salesh. But this Derkhanan did not have the peace and contentment in his demeanor that the engineer displayed. This Derkhanan’s eyes were filled with hate.

“I see that you have decided to finally communicate with us,” Stuart said.

Kravis glared over the distance at Stuart. “I am Kravis, Lord of Derkhana,” the evil Derkhanan stated.

“You are an outcast from this world,” Stuart replied. “The rightful lord of this world brought us here to stop your invasion.”

Kravis smiled, the corruption showing on his face. “I see that I am outmatched.”

Stuart stared at his opponent, not allowing his body language give way to his emotions. “Will you withdraw from this planet?”

“I would like to confer with you in person,” Kravis announced. “I realize that you would not trust me if I invited you to my ship,” he continued. “And I do not wish to come aboard yours.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Neutral ground, Captain,” Kravis said. “Let us meet at the village square on the planet.”

“I’ll be there in one hour,” Stuart said.

Leeson and Adams stared at their captain but said nothing.

“One hour,” Kravis repeated. “I’m sure that we can resolve this conflict then.”

Kravis’s image disappeared from the view screen, replaced by the alien ship once again.

Leeson approached Stuart. “This is not a good idea, Captain,” she whispered. “As your first officer, I must point out that your place is on the ship. I am responsible for your safety.”

Salesh approached and entered the conversation. “I will be responsible for the captain’s safety,” he said to Leeson. “Only the Protector can resolve this.”

Stuart looked at Leeson. “I’m leaving the ship in your hands, Exec.”

“I will obey your orders, Sir, but I don’t have to like them,” Leeson protested.

Stuart patted his second-in-command on the shoulder as he turned toward the turbolift. He left the bridge as Salesh K’Tok walked right behind him.

Chapter 8

The captain of the starship *Providence* strode through the corridor with the ship’s chief engineer at his side. As they approached transporter room two, Counselor Goodman met them.

“Permission to join the away team, Sir,” Goodman said.

Stuart’s lips curled upward slightly as he regarded the younger brother of his Academy roommate and friend. “Why would you want to come, Counselor?” he inquired.

“I studied theology before joining Starfleet,” he replied. “I thought that this would be an interesting study of the beliefs of the Derkhanans.”

Salesh K’tok looked to his commanding officer. “The counselor would be welcomed by my people,” he stated. “Derkha welcomes him as well.”

Stuart placed his hand on the counselor’s shoulder, pulling him toward the door of the transporter room as it swished open. “Then I also welcome you to join us, James.”

As the three stepped up on the transport platform Doctor Edwards ran into the room and stepped up to the platform, taking her place behind Stuart.

Stuart looked at the CMO. “Where do you think that you’re going Doctor?” he asked.

“This is an unknown and potentially dangerous situation that may require my medical services,” she stated firmly. “Besides that,” she continued, “the first officer ordered me to go.”

Stuart tapped his combadge. “Stuart to bridge,” he said.

“Bridge here,” came Melanie Leeson’s voice over the intercom.

“We are ready to beam down Exec,” Stuart said. “Monitor the situation and keep

me informed of any hostile actions by the alien ship or the invasion army on the surface.”

“Aye Sir,” Leeson’s voice replied. “And be careful.”

Stuart looked toward the transporter chief and nodded.

“Energizing,” the chief said as he worked the controls that dematerialized the away team.



As the away team rematerialized in the energy of the transporter beam they found themselves in the middle of the main intersection of the village. Stuart took a deep breath, taking in the oxygen-rich air that seemed to be more refreshing than any planet’s atmosphere that he had visited before.

The village elder approached the four newcomers that beamed out of seemingly thin air, his arms outstretched toward the chief engineer. “Toshasa meeta,” he said as Lieutenant Salesh embraced him.

“Yanto Toshasa,” Salesh K’Tok answered joyfully.

Stuart, the doctor, and the counselor looked at each other. “The universal translator seems to be off-line,” Stuart said.

The engineer addressed his CO. “My people’s language cannot be translated by conventional means.”

“How do we communicate with you?” the doctor asked.

“Derkha revealed your language to me when I first came to Earth,” Salesh said. He paused. “I would like to introduce my father Salesh, the elder of this village and one of the Derkhanoma.”

“Greetings from the United Federation of Planets, Elder Salesh,” Stuart said with his arms crossing his chest. “I am honored to be in your presence.”

Stuart waited for his chief engineer to translate, but was surprised when the elder Salesh spoke in Standard.

“The honor is mine,” the elder stated. “Derkha has privileged me to greet the Protector.”

“You know our language?” Goodman asked in surprise.

“It is Derkha who gave us language,” Salesh (the elder) said. “It is no great mystery that he makes it possible for us to understand each other.”

“Kravis will be arriving shortly, Elder,” Stuart said to the Derkhanan. “I suspect that he will try to gain an advantage through deception.”

The elder looked Stuart in the eyes, contentment filling his own features. “He will try to kill you, Protector,” he said. “But Derkha is with you. Derkha has destined you to defeat Kravis.”

Stuart gained strength from the confidence that his engineer’s father portrayed.

Derkha was still a mystery to him, but Rob Stuart believed that what was told to him about his role in saving Derkhana was, in fact, the truth.



On the bridge of the U.S.S. *Providence*, Melanie Leeson watched the view screen, seeing a shuttle leave the alien ship. Presumably, Kravis was on that shuttle.

“*Providence* to the away team,” she spoke into the intercom, but she was greeted with static.

“We have lost communication with the captain, Sir,” Nakamara said.

“Try to reestablish,” Leeson ordered.

Blake Adams tried to make light of the situation. “Don’t worry Commander,” he said. “Lieutenant Salesh promised that Rob would be safe.”

Leeson shot a glare at Adams. “I’m not sure that I trust him,” she exclaimed. “This whole thing could be a setup to capture the captain and this ship.”

“With all due respect,” Adams replied, “you need to lower your shields and learn to give your shipmates a little credit.”

“Back off Adams,” Leeson angrily said. “Or I will *relieve* you of duty!”

The bridge officers all stared at the first officer, alarmed at the emotional outburst that she had just displayed.

Lieutenant Commander T’Les broke the silence. “Commander,” she stated unemotionally. “I have scanned the shuttle. Kravis is not alone.”

“We have to contact the captain,” Leeson said. “Find a way to communicate with him ASAP.”



Lieutenant Salesh approached his captain. “Sir,” he began, “we have lost communications with the ship.”

“What?” Stuart said in surprise.

“I believe that Kravis must be jamming the signal,” the chief engineer continued. “I believe that he will be here in moments.”

Stuart’s jaw was set firmly in place --a trait that came naturally when serious situations arose. “Get your people to shelter,” Stuart ordered. “I want you and the counselor to take cover behind the meeting hall.”

“What about you, Captain?” the counselor asked.

“It’s time for me to fulfill my role,” he said as he walked toward the doctor.

As she turned, Doctor Janice Edwards realized that her CO was determined to fulfill his destiny. She only hoped that she would not have to patch Stuart back together when this fight was over. “Good luck Captain,” was all she could think to say.

Stuart smiled. "Luck does not play a part in this Doctor," he wryly stated. "Take cover with Lieutenants Sales and Goodman."

"Aye Captain," Edwards said as she hurried down the dirt street.

Stuart heard the noise of Kravis's shuttle approaching. He stood in the middle of the village square, watching the approach of the landing shuttle. *Showtime*, he thought.

The shuttle hatch began to open as soon as the ship rested on its landing pads. Kravis exited, followed by several reptilian warriors. Stuart noticed that they had weapons drawn and pointed at him.

"I figured that you would negotiate this way," Stuart said plainly. "I hoped that you would have a little sense of honor, but I see that I am wrong."

Kravis smirked at his opponent. "Honor is for fools," he spouted. "And fair play is for the weak."

Stuart never flinched as Kravis moved forward. "You will not protect these people," Kravis stated. "But you will die just as they will."

Stuart stared Kravis in the eye as he contemplated his next words. "I will not die," he said. "Neither will the peaceful people of this world."

Kravis laughed at the foolishness of this so-called Protector of Derkhana. "Kill him," he commanded as he stepped out of harm's way.

The warriors stepped back and lowered their weapons.

"What are you doing?" Kravis furiously demanded. "I said to kill him!"

The alien in charge of the small band of troops stepped forward. "Only a coward has others do his killing," he calmly stated. "If you defeat this man we will do as you command." He paused, watching Kravis's face turn dark blue with rage. "If, however, you are defeated we will withdraw and never return."

Kravis spun back toward Stuart, drawing an energy pistol. He fired. Nothing happened.

Stuart stood frozen in his tracks. "I am under the shield of Derkha," he said.

Kravis threw down his weapon and charged toward the Starfleet captain. Stuart waited until Kravis was only a few steps away before he moved. But when Stuart moved he did so with lightning agility, grabbing Kravis's wrist and flipping him over his shoulder. Kravis landed with a thud.

Kravis jumped back up, slightly dazed. He charged again at Stuart, who tried the same maneuver without the same success as before. Kravis toppled the captain with strength unfelt by Stuart the first time. *That hurt*, Stuart thought, but he would not give Kravis the satisfaction of admitting his discomfort.

The outcast Derkhanan grabbed Stuart and began to punch him with furious might as the Federation officer did his best to deflect the terrible blows. Stuart did not know how much more pounding he could withstand from his opponent, who had much more

strength than the human.

Kravis picked up the human and threw him toward the well at the intersection. As Stuart hit the ground, he felt the heat coming from the well. Where cool water could be gathered earlier, flames now appeared. As he struggled to get to his feet Stuart remembered that Derkha had revealed to him that he would drive Kravis into the fire. Rob Stuart realized that he had to time everything just right.

Kravis breathed heavily as he prepared for the final blow. He pulled out a dagger from a sheath hidden behind his back and started to run at Stuart. Stuart had regained his footing in time to see the insane agent of evil coming at him with his knife drawn.

Stuart waited, exhausted from the previous pounding that Kravis had inflicted. When Kravis was practically on top of him, Stuart reached out for Kravis's arms, fell back to the ground, and shoved his feet into Kravis midsection. As he did so, Kravis's knife cut into Stuart's wrist, but the human would complete his maneuver amidst his pain.

Kravis flew through the air, screaming as he saw the flames moving toward him. Or was he moving toward the flames? He could not stop his tumble and then... time seemed to stand still for Kravis. He was standing in the midst of the flames, paralyzed. He felt a presence, but could not see anything.

Rob Stuart rose from the ground. Everything around him had changed. The village was no longer around him. Instead, he was encircled by a bright light. He saw Kravis floating motionless in a freefall position. Stuart approached his opponent and felt a powerful sense of peace. But not from Kravis. Stuart felt the fear that Kravis was experiencing.

“What’s happening?” Stuart asked to no one in particular.

Stuart heard a voice call his name softly.

“Robert,” it said.

“Who are you?” Stuart asked, looking around and seeing only light.

“I am Derkha,” the voice said. “I am without beginning, without end,” the voice continued.

Stuart had many questions for Derkha, but he did not know whether or not to ask them. But he was curious and he had his duty as a Starfleet officer to learn all he could about new life that he encountered.

“What will happen to Kravis?” he asked, wondering if Derkha would destroy him.

“Kravis will be sent to another galaxy where he can harm no one else,” the voice said. “And from where he will never return.”

“But how will he be stopped from trying to enslave another world?”

“He will be completely alone. Where I send him, no others exist.”

Stuart thought that death would be a more merciful sentence. But there was something that he had to know. “Why did you choose me to defend Derkhana from

Kravis?”

Derkha remained silent.

“Surely you have the power to do it yourself,” Stuart added.

“My ways are too simple to comprehend, Robert,” Derkha replied. “I have many reasons for using you as the protector of my people, but it was for your benefit more than for my people’s benefit.”

Rob Stuart knew the answer to the next question but decided to ask anyway. “Are you who I think that you are?”

Stuart could almost feel Derkha smiling at him.

“I AM,” the voice resounded.

Suddenly Stuart found himself standing in the middle of the village street where he battled Kravis. The natives surrounded him, Counselor Goodman, Doctor Edwards, and Lieutenant Salesh at his side.

“This is amazing,” the doctor exclaimed.

“What’s that, Doctor?” Stuart asked.

“Kravis cut your arm,” she said incredulously, “but there is no sign of a wound now.”

“Such is the way of Derkha,” the engineer said.

The elder Salesh approached as the crowd parted respectfully to let him through. “Thank you, Protector,” he said as he placed his hand on Stuart’s shoulder. “I wish you well on your journey.”

Stuart nodded his head toward the reptilian army that had surrendered their weapons. “What of them?” he asked.

The elder looked at the aliens. “They may leave in peace. We have no argument with them.”

“No bitterness for attacking you?” Goodman asked.

“Such is not our way,” the younger Salesh answered.

Stuart gazed at his engineer. “And will you be staying, now that you are home?”

“I love my home, Captain,” Salesh said, “but it is the will of Derkha that I remain with your people...for now.”

“Then let’s go home,” Stuart said, tapping his combadge. “Stuart to *Providence*.”

“*Captain*,” Melanie Leeson’s voice said surprisingly. “*Are you alright?*”

“The situation is under control, Commander,” Stuart said. “Bring us home.”

The elder Salesh, a look of peace and contentment on his face, looked at his son. “Toshasa K’Tok,” he said.

Lieutenant Salesh smiled at his father. “Toshasa benu,” he replied as the away team was engulfed by the transporter beam.

Epilogue

Captain’s Log: Stardate 52979.2

“We have arrived at Deep Space Nine after traveling back through Derkha’s Gate. To our surprise, we have discovered that, although we spent only two days at Derkhana, several weeks have passed here. The best news that we received upon our return is that the war with the Dominion has come to an end. I understand that Captain Sisko was lost during a personal battle on Bajor with Gul Dukat; however, Colonel Kira assures me that he is not dead but living with the Bajoran Prophets in the Celestial Temple. Most people at Starfleet Command do not accept the Bajoran explanation and they are mourning Sisko’s loss, but after what my crew and I have just experienced...”

The chime to Stuart’s ready room door sounded.

“Come,” Stuart said as he paused the log recording.

Commander Melanie Leeson entered the room and stood in front of the captain’s desk.

Stuart greeted his first officer warmly. “Won’t you have a seat, Exec?” he said, motioning to the chair across the desk from his position.

“I read your report of the fight with Kravis,” Leeson said while sitting.

Stuart looked quizzically at his XO. “You seem bothered about what you read,” he said.

Leeson leaned back in her chair. “I don’t understand why the Derkhanans would just release those reptile aliens after what they did.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “It did not seem natural to... to...”

“To forgive,” Stuart finished.

“Exactly.”

Stuart smiled. “Forgiving somebody who has wronged us does go against our nature,” he said.

Melanie Leeson sat silently, contemplating what her captain had just said. “Perhaps I need to quit holding the eight-year-old grudge I have with Mister Adams and show some forgiveness as well,” she finally said.

“Perhaps you’re right,” Stuart said.

“Thanks for your time, Captain,” Leeson said as she rose from her chair and headed for the door. “Mister Adams please report to the officer’s lounge,” she said tapping her combadge.

Stuart chuckled as the door to his ready room slid shut. “Computer, resume recording log,” Stuart said.

“The effects of our visit to the world without end have been beneficial to not only

me but to my first officer as well. Another war, one of a personal nature, has ended.”

So begin the adventures of the U.S.S. *Providence*.