

To Boldly Go: *States of Transition*

A U.S.S. Providence story

By Cleve Johnson

PROLOGUE

The interplanetary craft was on its way to the point of its origin. Two years, twelve days had passed since the first manned spaceship to Sella, P'Khati's nearest neighbor, had launched. Now, the ship and crew were coming home.

The inhabitants of the peaceful world awaited the return of the men and women who had bravely met the challenge to go boldly where none of their people had previously gone. The people were proud of their heroes, their discovery of life on the sister world. In four more days, the ship would land, and the people would rejoice in the accomplishments of the crew.

The director of the P'Khati Space Exploration Agency anxiously awaited word from mission control. For weeks he had fought the temptation to go to the control center himself. He had been worried that there had been no communication with the spacecraft since shortly after it left Sella months before. The creatures found on the neighboring planet were a great concern to the space agency and the government because the last report that came from the explorers indicated that two crewmen were dead, another four injured. In addition to that news, there had been no communication in almost five months.

PART I

Captain's Log: Stardate 55135.6

We have been mapping uncharted parts of the Beta Tongarii Sector as we travel farther away from the imaginary line separating the Alpha and Beta Quadrants. My science officer detected transmissions last week that seem to originate from a binary star system approximately two light years ahead of our present course. I have high hopes that the inhabitants are at a level of technology and sophistication that will allow us to make first contact.

Captain Robert P. Stuart had been standing, looking out the window into the vastness of space. He turned to face the door as he heard the chime, indicating that someone wanted to see him. "Come," he said as he took a step toward his desk.

Commander Melanie Leeson and Lieutenant Commander T'Les entered the ready room. "Sorry for the intrusion, Captain," Leeson said.

"Not at all, Exec," Stuart replied. "What can I do for you?"

“Commander T’Les has some information about the transmissions that she’s been monitoring,” Leeson said.

“Lieutenant Commander?” Stuart said as he pointed to the chair across from his desk. Stuart waited until the other two officers were seated before he sat down.

“I have discovered that the transmissions are coming from the second planet of the star system that we are approaching,” T’Les stated. “I learned a great deal about the culture and level of technology. I believe that they are aware of sentient life existing in other star systems.”

Stuart leaned back in his chair, locking the fingers of his hands together as he contemplated what the science officer had said. “Why do you think that, Commander?” he asked.

The Vulcan did not outwardly show emotions but carrying the genetic makeup of Romulan and Human blood, as well as Vulcan, she did have them. And her emotions told T’Les that aid should be rendered to the people of the second planet. “The transmissions include a call for help,” she replied. “It is directed toward deep space.”

Stuart’s eyes widened as he stared at the science officer. “Are you sure?” the captain asked. “Of course, you’re sure,” he added before T’Les could respond. “Exec, gather the senior staff. I want a conference in ten minutes.”

“Yes sir,” the first officer replied as she rose from her seat and exited the room.

“Captain, are we going to assist?” T’Les asked.

“I have to consider the Prime Directive,” Stuart said.

“I suggest that the Prime Directive does not apply since the people who sent the distress call apparently are aware of other intelligent beings in the galaxy,” the Vulcan argued.

“You may be right, T’Les,” Stuart said. “But we don’t want to jump to any conclusions.”

“Understood, Captain.” T’Les stood to her feet. “With your permission, I need to prepare for the staff meeting,” she stated.

Stuart nodded to the science officer. He watched as T’Les left his ready room. He had hoped that first contact could be made with the people inhabiting the star system that the *Providence* was now approaching. Unfortunately, the people that he wanted to meet seemed to be in trouble. And the Prime Directive might prevent him from helping.



Rob Stuart was the last to enter the conference room. He walked straight to the head of the table and took his seat. “As you all know, our science officer detected transmissions from the star system directly ahead,” he said. “She and her department have been monitoring those transmissions over the past several days, so I am turning this briefing over to Lieutenant Commander T’Les to bring us all up to speed on what has been discovered.”

“Thank you, Captain,” the Vulcan said. “Along our present course is a binary star system that contains an M-class world known to its inhabitants as P’Khati,” she began. This planet has a fairly advanced society known as the Runii. Their technology level is comparable to that of mid to late twenty-first century Earth.” T’Les rose from her chair and walked toward the large monitor on the wall. “The transmissions that we have received contain a variety of entertainment, educational, and informational programming. From our analysis, we have concluded that P’Khati has had a unified planetary government for more than one hundred thirty of their years.”

“Sounds promising for first contact,” the recently promoted Lieutenant Commander James Goodman said.

“Do they have warp capability?” Lieutenant Commander Adams asked.

“The Runii appeared to be in the initial stages of developing theoretical data, but the evidence suggests that only interplanetary travel has been attained,” T’Les replied.

“Excuse me, Commander,” Lieutenant Mary Goodman interjected. “What do you mean by saying they *appeared*? You used past tense.”

T’Les focused her attention on the chief engineer. “These transmissions are similar to what was once known on Earth as Frequency Mode radio waves,” she said. “The frequencies have traveled through space, but not faster than light speed.”

“So, the signals you’ve received are two years old,” Blake said.

“Or older,” T’Les replied. “The transmissions that you will see are from the planetary news service,” she stated. “The following excerpts will provide some interesting, and disturbing, information.” The Vulcan switched on the monitor. “Computer, access P’Khati transmission analysis log, news file delta two, time index three point two five.”

An image of a male Runii sat motionless behind a desk. In the background appeared a two-dimensional picture of a city skyline. The man sitting at the desk was humanoid in appearance, with dark brown eyes, black wavy hair, and brown skin. The features that distinguished his race from humans were the nose and hands. The nose had a third nostril centered between the other two and the Runii’s hands only had four digits instead of the usual five that most humanoids possessed.

“Computer, begin playback,” the Vulcan commanded.

“In our top story tonight, we have confirmation that the first manned spacecraft to Sella has reached its destination,” the man said. “*Good evening. I’m D’Nar Retha and this is a P’Khati News Service special report.*”

“Stop playback,” T’Les said. She looked at her fellow officers. “Sella is the third planet in the system and P’Khati’s nearest neighbor. It also is class M according to long-range sensors,” she added. “Computer, access time index six point two zero.”

A new image of the news anchor replaced the previous one. He wore a different color jacket, indicating that this recording must have been made at a different time.

“This is another special report that was made seventeen days after the previous recording,” the science officer stated. “Start playback.”

The image on the monitor began to move once again. *“This is D’Nar Retha with the P’Khati News Service, and this is a special report on the first manned mission to Sella,”* he stated.

Stuart watched and listened to the newsman. He noticed a look of concern, or possibly a worried look, on the alien’s face.

“Commander Tekath has reported the discovery of animal life forms on Sella,” Retha said. *“The discovery of life on another world was the expected hope of the space agency. However, one life form has proven to be dangerous to the crew of the Trajna’Kha.”*

“Stop playback,” T’Les said. “Notice that Mister Retha indicated that the discovery of life was expected.”

Stuart realized that his science officer had made her statement to point out that the Prime Directive might not necessarily deter first contact with the Runii. He nodded to the Vulcan, indicating that he wanted the presentation to continue.

“Computer, resume,” T’Les said.

“The commander has reported that several multi-tentacled creatures, which the Trajna’Kha crew has named Selladon after the animals’ planet of origin, have attacked one of the survey teams exploring the planet.” D’Nar Retha paused to allow the impact of what he had said to be felt by his audience. *“At least four of the crew have been injured and there may be possible deaths involved. We will have more information on our regular evening broadcast.”*

“Stop playback,” T’Les ordered. She looked around the conference table, noticing the looks of concern on the faces of her colleagues. “The following news broadcast did confirm the death of two crewmen,” she said.

“Do we have any information on the Selladon in the news broadcasts?” Doctor Janice Stuart asked.

T’Les raised an eyebrow. “Not precisely; however, there is some very brief news footage that did capture an image of a Selladon attacking a citizen on the outskirts of the P’Khati capital city several months later.”

“These things are loose on P’Khati?” Lieutenant Nakamara asked excitedly.

T’Les was momentarily silent. She looked at the security officer. She looked at her captain. “Yes,” she finally said. “To summarize the rest of the data, the spacecraft left Sella and returned to P’Khati,” the science officer said. “Communication with the ship ended within a few days after it started its return journey. Five months later, the ship crashed in an unpopulated area of the northern continent. Rescue teams were sent to search for the crew, but the reports show that neither the astronauts nor the rescue teams sent to find them, were ever seen again.”

“What happened to them?” the doctor asked.

“Unknown,” T’Les answered. “But twelve days later, dozens of Selladon begin to appear in the cities nearest the crash site and attack the people.”

Everyone around the conference table let the information sink in. No one knew what to say, so they said nothing, except for the CONN officer. "This is all very interesting from a scientific position," Blake said. "But what does this have to do with us?"

"I don't believe you said that, Blake," Doctor Stuart exclaimed. "We should help them."

"We can't ignore the Prime Directive," Blake stated.

"The Runii *are* aware of life outside of their system, Commander," the chief engineer said. "I think that nullifies the Directive. Don't you?"

Blake smiled as he quietly acknowledged that Mary Goodman had a good point.

"With your permission, Captain, I have one more transmission that I believe will clarify our response to this situation," the science officer stated.

"Go ahead, Commander," Stuart said.

"Computer, time index nine point seven three," T'Les said.

Again, the image changed to show D'Nar Retha. This time the news anchor was broadcasting from an outside location, in front of a tall building.

"Start playback," the Vulcan stated.

The image of Retha spun around as the noise of an energy beam firing could be heard in the background. "*The Selladon have infiltrated the outskirts of the capital,*" he said. "*Several people have been attacked by the creatures as they move through the streets.*"

Stuart could see the fear on the face of the Runii as he watched the monitor.

"*The Peacekeepers' stun weapons have had little effect,*" Retha said. "*It seems that the Selladon have a strong resistance to their energy beams.*"

A citizen ran across the street in the background. It was a Runii adult female, screaming as a large creature with many tentacles moved toward her. The woman tripped and tried to get up as Retha dropped his microphone and ran in her direction to help. But Retha was not close enough. He stopped cold as the creature reached the woman. The blob-like animal had one tentacle that came out of the top of its body. That appendage had a sharp needle-like stinger coming from the tip of the tentacle, which came down and embedded itself in the stomach of the woman, who winced and screamed all the louder.

Around the conference table, everyone had a sympathetic look of pain on their faces. Even T'Les, who kept her emotions closely guarded, came close to reacting to the images that she witnessed.

D'Nar Retha ran back toward the camera and bent down to pick up the microphone that was previously dropped. He lifted his hand to his ear, pressing on the listening device that was attached. "*This is absolutely horrible,*" Retha said. "*I have just witnessed an attack upon one of our citizens by a Selladon. The Peacekeepers have not been successful in stopping the alien animals' advance.*" Sweat broke out on the

broadcaster's face. *"Wait,"* he said. *"This just in. The Prime Minister is going to announce in response to this attack."*

Another man, sitting, in an ornate-looking office behind a large wooden desk, replaced the image of D'Nar Retha. He held a paper in his four-fingered hands and looked straight into the unseen camera. *"Fellow citizens of P'Khati,"* he began. *"The Selladon threat is growing rapidly. With a heavy heart, I ask that all Runii in the cities of the northern continent evacuate immediately to the southern continent and secluded islands."* The Prime Minister paused and wiped a tear from his eye. *"The subterranean transport tunnels connecting the two continents will be sealed by explosives within the hour to prevent the Selladon from spreading to the rest of the planet."*

Rob and Jan looked at each other, then back to the monitor, awaiting the Prime Minister's next words.

The Prime Minister of P'Khati took a deep breath before he spoke. *"I have always believed that the Runii are not alone in the universe. If there is an advanced space-faring race somewhere out there, please help us. We do not have the technology yet to leave our star system, but if the Selladon contamination spreads throughout our planet, we are a doomed people."*

"Computer, stop playback and deactivate monitor," T'Les said. She looked to her captain, her eyes pleading on behalf of the Runii.

"Exec, what would you do?" Stuart asked his first officer.

Melanie Leeson looked back to her CO. "They apparently know that intelligent life is not limited to their planet, so I would say that the Prime Directive does not apply in this situation," she said. "I would help them."

"Blake?" Stuart asked, turning his attention to his best friend. "What about you?"

Lieutenant Commander Adams nodded in agreement. "I think we should kick some Selladon butt," he replied.

Stuart also agreed that the help asked for by the Prime Minister should be given. He pressed the communication's touchpad on the conference table. "Lieutenant Kelly."

"Kelly here, sir," the relief CONN officer replied.

"Continue on our present course and increase speed to warp nine," Stuart said.

"Aye, Captain."

Stuart looked at the security chief. "Yoshi, prepare a security team to accompany Commander Leeson and Lieutenant Commander T'Les to the planet's surface once we arrive," he said. "What's our ETA, Blake?"

The second officer did a quick calculation in his head. "About thirteen hours, Skipper," he replied.

Stuart rose from his chair and scanned the expressions on everyone's face. "We will do what we can to help these people," he said. "But remember, these events are at least two years old. We may find that the whole population has been wiped out when we get to P'Khati," he added. "Dismissed."

The senior officers, except for Leeson and Jan Stuart, exited the conference room. Rob Stuart approached the first officer. "I want you to get some sleep, Exec," he said. "I expect that you will need to be at your best for this one."

Leeson agreed. "I try to be my best for every away mission, Captain," she replied. "I won't disappoint you."

Stuart smiled as the XO left the room. He looked at his wife. "And what can I do for you, Doctor?"

Jan gave her husband one of those "Don't patronize me" looks. "I think I should go on the away mission, too," she said.

"I think it is too dangerous," Rob replied.

"If I weren't your wife..." Jan started to say, but Rob cut her off quickly.

"You still wouldn't go," he said authoritatively. "Not on this one."

Jan took Rob's hand in his. "We agreed that we would not let our marriage interfere with our duties," she said.

Rob smiled at his wife. "Even if you were someone else, I wouldn't put you in harm's way until the security team went in first," he said. "Now let's get some dinner before I have to relieve Blake."

The Stuarts walked toward the exit, still holding hands.

PART II

Several hours later, Rob Stuart entered the bridge. He walked toward the center of the room where Blake Adams stood next to the CO's chair. "I bet you thought I would never show," he told his friend.

"I did start to wonder if you were going to let me keep the keys to this car," Blake replied with a smirk. "Nothing to report as yet, Skipper. Our ETA is five hours, twenty-three minutes."

"Very good," Rob said. "I have the bridge."

"Can I fly now?" Adams asked.

Rob smiled. "I think you should get some sleep," he said. "I'm going to need you wide awake by the time we reach orbit."

"As you wish," Blake replied. The second officer turned and moved toward the turbolift.

Stuart sat down in the command chair and immediately noticed Lieutenant Commander T'Les still at the science station. "You should get some rest as well, T'Les," he said.

The science officer turned her chair to face the captain. "As a Vulcan, my physical stamina allows me to stay active for several days without sleep," she said. "I prefer to continue my analysis to discover anything that may aid our rescue mission."

“You’ve done a thorough job, Commander,” the captain said. “Now go to your quarters and get some rest before we reach P’Khati.”

T’Les started to object but recognized the determined look upon her captain’s face that indicated he would not take an answer of “no.” “Very well, Captain,” she said as she rose from her seat. “I will return to my station in four point five hours,” she added as she left the bridge.

Within minutes, Lieutenant Gonzalez entered the bridge and sat at the science station vacated by T’Les. She quickly checked the monitor for any messages that her superior may have left. Finding none, Gonzalez continued to analyze the transmissions that T’Les had previously been working on.

Stuart hit the touchpad on his armrest, pulling up the data collected so far on P’Khati. He visual skimmed the information collected from the long-range sensors. It appeared to be a typical M-class world, resembling Earth in most ways. The oxygen content did show to be slightly richer than Earth, gravity point nine eight standard. It even had a natural satellite in orbit, not much smaller than the Earth’s moon.

“Captain Stuart?” the ensign at the tactical console interrupted the thoughts of his CO.

“Yes Ensign?” the captain replied.

“There’s a priority two message coming in from Starbase Eighty-two, Sir,” the young officer said.

Stuart rose from his chair. “Route it to my ready room, Ensign,” he said as he turned and started toward the door. “Mary, the bridge is yours.”

“Yes sir,” Lieutenant Mary Goodman replied from her position at the engineering console.

Stuart walked to his desk, sat behind it, and turned the monitor on. “Computer, access Starfleet priority two message,” he said.

“Please enter Starfleet priority level two code,” the feminine voice of the computer said.

“Code Stuart alpha two sierra three seven,” the captain said.

“Code accepted,” the computer replied. *“Message is from Admiral Martin Dean, commanding officer, Starbase eighty-two.”*

“Time lag?”

“Three hours, fifty-two minutes, thirty-one point four seconds.”

“T’Les has been working on the computer again,” he said to himself.

“Please restate the inquiry,” the computer said.

“Never mind, Computer,” Stuart said. “Begin playback.”

The image of Admiral Martin Dean appeared on the monitor. He was sitting behind a large desk, a painting of an *Excelsior*-class starship on the wall behind him. The man had dark hair with gray starting to take over. A few wrinkles were around his eyes,

especially noticeable as he smiled. *“Hello Captain Stuart,”* he said. *“I trust that you’re doing well.”*

Stuart had only met the admiral once, during *Providence’s* last stop at Starbase Eighty-two. Martin Dean had taken command of the starbase only a month before that. Gaining command of the starbase was an assignment the admiral considered to be in his best interest, although some of the senior admirals at Starfleet intended for it to be a step down the career ladder for Dean. Rob had heard rumors that the admiral did not always agree with Command and made no effort to hide his opinions—a fact that made Martin Dean a few enemies back at HQ.

“I wish we could have a more interactive conversation with you, Captain, but since it will be four hours before you get this I might as well just spill the beans upfront,” Dean said, clapping his hands together. *“I have been asked by Starfleet Command to pass on some news concerning your first officer.”*



Stuart entered the bridge and walked toward the tactical station. “Ensign, send a transmission to Starbase Eighty-two, Admiral Dean’s attention,” the captain said. “Give him my compliments and relay the details of our current rescue mission. Tell him that I will send an update and ETA for rendezvous within twenty-four hours.”

The ensign did not know what rendezvous the captain referred to but being an ensign he did not feel the need to know. “Yes sir,” he replied.

Stuart turned toward the center of the bridge where Lieutenant Goodman stood next to the captain’s chair. “How do you like the center seat?” he asked the chief engineer.

“I find it comfortable, Captain,” she replied. “But I don’t think that my talents and training quite fit it.”

Stuart smiled at that. “Well, you never know what the future may hold, Lieutenant. I need you to keep the watch a little longer,” he said. “Have Commander Leeson join me in my ready room.”

“Aye Captain,” Mary said as her CO reentered his sanctuary.



It was unlike her captain to make her go get sleep before a potentially dangerous away mission, then wake her up two hours before she needed to, but Melanie Leeson knew that Stuart must have a good reason for doing just that. The first officer exited the turbolift and immediately strode toward the door that led into the captain’s ready room. She pressed a button to announce that she had arrived, and the door slid apart within seconds, inviting her to enter.

Stuart sat behind his desk, taking a sip of his favorite beverage—hot apple cinnamon tea. He set his cup on the edge of the table. “Come in, Exec,” he said. “Have a seat.”

Leeson sat across from Stuart, wondering why he had called her in. “You wanted to see me, sir.”

Stuart nodded. "I'm sorry to wake you early," he said. "But I didn't think the news should wait."

Now Leeson's curiosity was aroused. "News? What news, Captain?"

Stuart could not help but smile at his first officer. He knew that what he was about to say would produce shock and disbelief in her very soul. "I received a transmission from Admiral Dean," he said. "It seems that you are to get a ship of your own."

Leeson's mouth fell open. For a moment, she was speechless. "Sir?"

"You heard right, Exec," Stuart said. "Or I should say, Captain."

"I...I don't know what to say," Leeson said. "I'm not ready for this yet."

Stuart smiled again at his first officer. "I remember saying the same thing to my uncle when he dropped the news on me that I was to get the *Providence*." He replied. "You may not feel ready but trust me...you are."

Leeson leaned back in her chair, stunned by the news of her pending promotion. "Why me?" she asked but did not give Stuart time to answer. "I expected to be your first officer for at least another year or two before I would be qualified for a starship command."

"I have full confidence that you can do the job, Mel," Stuart stated. "Admiral Dean can explain it to you in his message." He touched a button on the computer monitor and turned it toward his soon-to-be former first officer.

Leeson watched as the image of Admiral Dean in his office appeared.

"Commander Leeson," the image on the screen began. *"Your captain has informed you of your upcoming promotion, but I wanted to pass on some information before it becomes official. There is a situation brewing that spells trouble for the Federation. I am not at liberty to give you the full story at this time, but a representative from Starfleet Command will pick you up at Beta Tongarii in a few days to transport you to Utopia Planitia, where you will take command of your ship."*

Leeson was trying to take all of what the admiral was saying, but she was still in shock over being promoted. It was what she had been working toward for more than two and a half years, but now that a starship command was being offered, she felt unworthy and a little scared of the prospect.

"You probably have a lot of questions." Dean continued. *"Sorry, but most of those will have to wait until later. I can tell you that you were chosen for this command because of your background in security, and in the command ability that you have demonstrated as Captain Stuart's first officer."*

Leeson felt her cheeks heat up, making her realize that she was blushing from embarrassment. She could only hope that her captain would not notice. Of course, she realized that he would most likely notice the change of color on her face. Especially, if her cheeks were as red as she imagined.

"For now, I will just offer my congratulations and wish you good luck," the image of Admiral Dean said. *"One last thing, Commander. Don't bother trying to turn*

down this command.” The admiral paused as he showed a toothy grin directed toward the unseen Commander Melanie Leeson. *“You don’t have a choice in accepting or not. The orders are already written.”*

The computer screen went black, and Stuart turned the monitor back toward himself. He picked up his cup of tea and took a sip. Still holding the cup, he calmly faced Leeson. “Congratulations, *Captain* Leeson.”



Captain Leeson. Why did he have to put so much emphasis on the title, Melanie thought as she walked through the corridor toward the transporter room. I can only hope that his confidence in me proves to be true.

Leeson wrestled with her thoughts and feelings but knew that she had to redirect her focus away from her future and toward the mission at hand. She came to the doors separating the corridor from Transporter Room One and entered as they parted to allow access. She saw Lieutenant Nakamara, four members of his security force, and Lieutenant Commander T’Les waiting.

“Are we ready?” the first officer asked the security chief.

“Yes sir,” Nakamara replied.

Leeson faced the science officer. “Anything you need to add to your previous briefing before we beam down, Commander?”

“The scans that we have made since arriving in orbit show no humanoid and few animal life form readings on the northern continent,” T’Les said. “Other life signs are indeterminate.”

“Very well,” Leeson replied. “Phasers on heavy stun. Everyone be careful down there.”

Leeson, T’Les, and the security team stepped up onto the transporter platform. “Chief McKinney?”

“I’ll be setting you down at the center of the capital city, Commander,” the transporter chief said. “Under the circumstances, I’m going to keep a transporter lock on each member of the away team.”

“Good idea,” Leeson said. “Energize.”

PART III

Melanie Leeson felt the warm breeze hit her face as her molecules reassembled. She looked around, holding her hand phaser in a ready position. “Fan out, but keep an open communicator channel,” she said. “T’Les? Anything?”

The Vulcan monitored the readout on her tricorder. “I detect no humanoid or animal life within the immediate area, Commander,” she stated. “However, I believe that the Prime Minister’s office is the building at the end of this street.”

“Seems like the best place to start,” Leeson said. “Let’s go.”

Commander Leeson, Lieutenant Commander T'Les, and two security crewmen started walking toward the government building in the middle of the capital city. They noticed along the street a few wrecked hovercrafts with the skeletal remains of the Runii drivers who once piloted those vehicles. The evidence of scattered garbage and broken tree limbs indicated that the city had been abandoned long ago.

"They definitely left in a hurry," Leeson commented.

"I estimate that the city has been devoid of humanoid life for two point zero three standard years," T'Les stated. "Perhaps any records we find in the government offices will shed light on the exact departure time."

"That point may be moot, Commander," Leeson replied as the quartet continued walking toward the building. "But maybe we can find some way to help the survivors of this world."

Leeson finally reached the entrance to the government facility, finding the doors unlocked. She motioned to the security crewmen, who entered the building with phasers drawn.



Lieutenant Nakamara led his security team through the streets. They kept watching for any movement, any noise. The city was certainly a mess with windblown garbage that had been collected over two years.

"Excuse me, sir," Crewman Tucker said.

"What is it?" Yoshi replied.

"I'm getting some funny readings on my tricorder, sir."

Yoshi stepped closer to the crewman to look at the readings. "What have you got?"

"I'm not sure what these readings are, but they seem to be coming from that building over there," Tucker said while pointing to a structure to his left.

"Let's check it out," Nakamara said. "Stay alert."

The trio entered the abandoned building, continually looking to each side and behind. Yoshi could not explain the feeling that he was experiencing, but he felt that danger was near.



Captain Robert P. Stuart entered sickbay, where his wife sat behind her desk studying the readouts on her computer monitor. He stood in the doorway watching her. "Do you have a minute?" he said to his wife.

"For you, I have as many minutes as you want," Janice replied with her usual smile and wit. "What's up?"

Rob sat in the chair across the desk from his wife. "I'm trying to decide if initiating contact with the Runii will violate the Prime Directive," he said. "I wanted to know what you think."

Jan reached out to hold her husband's hand. "You always do what's right, Rob," she said. "I've never known anyone with more integrity and devotion to duty as you. I'm sure that your decision will be the right one."

Rob squeezed his wife's hand. "Thanks for your confidence. I hope I can live up to it," he said. "But that doesn't help me in my immediate decision."

"Since the Runii seem to be aware of us, I don't think the Prime Directive applies," Jan said.

"But they're not aware of us," Rob said. "At least not aware of us, specifically."

"You heard the appeal from the Prime Minister, Rob," Jan said. "He seemed convinced that people from another world would have the technology to travel to their world..."

"But that could be supposition," Rob interrupted. "I can't risk interference with a developing culture."

Jan breathed a heavy sigh. "What if it is not supposition?" she asked. "Besides, they sent a call for help. And based on what the Prime Minister said, there may not be much of a civilization left to develop."

"Bridge to sickbay," Blake Adams' voice came over the intercom.

"Sickbay, what is it, Blake?" the doctor asked.

"Yoshi's team has been attacked by some of those creatures," Blake said. *"They're beaming directly to sickbay now."*

Jan jumped out of her chair and rushed through the door, Rob quickly following. They entered the main examination room just as the transporter beam dissipated. "Nurse?"

At the sound of the CMO's voice, a young woman quickly entered from an adjacent office.

Rob Stuart stayed back, feeling helpless that he could not help. "What can I do?" he asked more from desperation than having the medical skill to be of real help. He was surprised when his wife had told him to help her lift one of the security crewmen onto the examination table. "What about Yoshi and Crewman Setlak?" the captain said.

"Yoshi has some cracked ribs," Janice replied as she worked on the other injured crewman. "Setlak is dead." She paused and looked at the security chief as the nurse helped him on a biobed. "Computer, activate EMH One."

The Emergency Medical Hologram appeared. "Please state the nature of the medical emergency," he stated.

"See to Mister Nakamara. He has some broken ribs," Jan stated. "Rob, hand me that hypospray that's on the table."

Rob grabbed the hypo and gave it to his wife, who immediately injected it into the side of Crewman Tucker's neck. "Will he be alright?"

“I’m not sure,” Janice replied. “He has a puncture wound in his abdomen, which should heal well enough, but the medical tricorder is picking up an unknown chemical element in his bloodstream.”

Captain Stuart walked to the bed where Lieutenant Nakamara lay. The EMH completed passing a bone knitter over his chest. “What happened Lieutenant?” Stuart asked.

“We were checking out one of the buildings downtown when several of the Selladon came out of nowhere,” Yoshi said. “One rushed Tucker and stabbed him with one of its tentacles. There was a stinger on the end of it.”

“Just one of the tentacles?”

“Yes sir,” Yoshi said. They have twelve tentacles around its body and one that comes out the top with a stinger on it.”

“What about you and Setlak?” Stuart asked. “How did you get your injuries?”

The chief of security tried to sit up, but the EMH pushed him gently back onto the bed. “You would be well advised to stay put, Lieutenant,” the hologram said.

“Yes Doctor,” Yoshi replied. “To answer your question, Captain, Setlak and I saw the Selladon attack Tucker,” he said. “We rushed the creature from different sides, and it swung its tentacles at us. I was hit in the chest and thrown against a wall. Crewman Setlak was hit in the head.”

The EMH pressed a hypospray to Nakamara’s neck. “This is for the pain,” he said. “You will be sore for the next day or two, but your bones have been mended.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Yoshi said.

“You can thank me by turning me off,” the EMH stated.

“Computer, deactivate EMH,” Stuart said.

The hologram disappeared. He would wait in that cyber realm until called upon again.

Doctor Stuart walked toward Yoshi and the captain. “Crewman Tucker is resting,” she said. “I would like you to do the same, Lieutenant,” she added.

“Yes, Doctor,” Nakamara replied. “How long until I can return to duty, Captain?”

“Once the doctor says so, the captain replied.

“And that won’t be for at least a couple of days,” Janice interjected. “I want you in sickbay for the next twenty-four hours. Then we’ll see.”

Rob stepped away from the security chief’s bed, followed by his wife. He lowered his voice so he would not be heard by anyone except Janice. “I’m sure Yoshi will be fine, but what about Crewman Tucker?” he asked.

Jan crossed her arms and shook her head with little assurance. “He’s been infected by some type of...venom, for lack of a better term. I’m going to keep a close watch on him.”

“Bridge to Captain,” Blake Adams’ voice came through the intercom speaker.

“Go ahead Blake,” Stuart said.

“Mel and her team have just beamed up,” Blake announced. *She’s on her way to sickbay.”*

“Thanks, Bla...”

The double doors parted, and Commander Leeson strode into the room. She noticed Yoshi on one of the biobeds and started toward him, but Jan Stuart gently caught the first officer’s arm and guided her to the center of the room to join the captain.

“She’s here,” the captain said. “Stuart out.”

Leeson faced her CO. “What happened?” she asked.

“Crewman Tucker was stung by one of the Selladon,” Stuart said. “Yoshi and Setlak tried to help him and got thrown across the room by a swipe of one of the creature’s tentacles.”

“Mel, Yoshi will be fine in a day or two,” Jan said. “He had some broken ribs, but he’ll be fine.”

“And Crewman Setlak?”

“His neck was broken,” Jan said sadly. “He must have died instantly.”

Melanie Leeson’s shoulders slumped. “I didn’t know him well, but he seemed to have what it takes to be a good security man.”

“Did you have any trouble down there?” the captain asked his first officer.

“We had a close call with two Selladon after we left the government center,” she said. “We beamed up before they got too close.”

“Were you able to find any records that might be useful in dealing with the creatures?” the captain asked.

“T’Les is reviewing what she downloaded to her tricorder,” Leeson stated. “We did discover that the Selladon emit some sort of EM field that confuses our sensing devices.”

“Which is why we can’t detect them as life forms,” Jan Stuart said.

Rob started to pace in front of the two women. He rubbed his chin as he pondered the situation. “How long until T’Les is finished with her analysis?”

“She estimated thirty minutes,” Leeson replied. “And you know how accurate her estimates tend to be.”

Stuart smiled at that. “Okay Commander...you and T’Les meet me in my ready room in forty minutes,” he said. “Jan, would you join us as well?”

“I think I should stay here with Tucker,” Jan said.

Rob nodded in agreement. “Okay. I’ll make sure you get any information relevant to the physiology of the creatures.”



T'Les and Melanie Leeson just left the meeting with the captain. It was an informative meeting that led to a way to modify the tricorders to be able to read the Selladon life signs. The analysis that the science officer provided would also help to determine the right phaser setting to incapacitate the creatures without killing them.

The big question concerned the Prime Directive. How could Stuart help the Runii deal with the Selladon without violating the principles of non-interference? Or should he just give the order to break orbit and head for Beta Tongarii?

The chirping of the intercom signal interrupted his thoughts. "This is Stuart," the captain said.

"We're being hailed by the Runii, Skipper," Blake Adams' voice said.

"I'm coming out," Stuart replied as he rose from the chair behind his desk and made his way to the door that led to the bridge.

Blake met his captain and friend partway between the center of the bridge and the entrance to the ready room. "The Prime Minister is hailing us, Rob," Adams stated. "It's audio-only."

Stuart stopped and faced Adams. "How do they know we're here?" he asked. "I thought our shields would prevent detection."

"They must have better sensing devices than we thought," the second officer replied.

"I've been wrestling with myself and the Prime Directive over contacting these people, and they beat me to the punch," Stuart stated.

Adams thought that was humorous, and his face let it show. "Since they're calling us, that should take care of your wrestling match."

Stuart smiled. Having made his decision, he walked over to the tactical station, where Ensign Patrick operated the communications from the ship to the planet. "Open channel, Ensign," he said.

"Aye, Captain. You're on," the acting chief of security said.

Stuart stood up straight and pulled his uniform jacket down. He wanted to look his best when dealing with the head of state, even if it was only an audio transmission. "This is Captain Robert P. Stuart representing the United Federation of Planets," he said. "We received your call for help and have come in peace to establish relations and offer our assistance."

He said it. Prime Directive or not, Rob was now committed.

"On behalf of the planet P'Khati and the Runii people, Captain, I thank you," the alien voice said. *"Would it be possible to meet face to face to discuss our situation, Captain?"*

Stuart looked to Blake, still standing near the center of the bridge. "I think that would be prudent, Mister Prime Minister," he replied. "Where should we meet?"

"I invite you to join me at the government retreat area on the southern continent," the leader of P'Khati said. *"I think that would be more discreet, Captain."*

"Agreed," Stuart said. "Are you at the retreat now, Mister Prime Minister?"

"Yes, I am there now. It has been the government's central location since the Selladon invasion forced us to flee the capital city."

"We will lock in on your communications signal to determine coordinates," Stuart said. "I and a delegation from my ship will arrive shortly."

"I look forward to meeting you, Captain Stuart."

"And I look forward to meeting you, Prime Minister," Stuart replied.

Stuart turned to Adams after the transmission ended. "Where's Mel?"

"Sickbay," Adams replied. "She went to check on Yoshi and Crewman Tucker."

"Bridge to sickbay," Stuart spoke to the air. "Is Commander Leeson there?"

"Leeson here," the first officer replied after a short pause.

"Meet me in the portside shuttle bay," Rob said.

"You better come to sickbay first, Rob." It was the voice of Janice Stuart who spoke over the intercom this time. *"It's Crewman Tucker."*

"On my way," the captain replied as he started toward the turbolift door.

PART IV

Jan met her husband as he entered sickbay and pointed toward the examination table. "Something strange is happening to Tucker," she said.

Rob walked into the alcove where the injured security crewman lay unconscious. He noticed that the man's skin was wet. The captain's nose reacted to a noticeable odor that seemed to emanate from the substance that covered Tucker's body. "What's happening?" he asked his wife.

"His skin started secreting some type of fluid a few minutes ago," the doctor said. "I've never come across anything like it."

"Can you do anything to stop it?"

"I don't even know what the substance is yet," Jan replied. "His life signs are dropping to dangerous levels."

Commander Leeson approached the Stuarts. "Is it a reaction to the Selladon venom?"

Jan pulled out a medical tricorder from the pocket of her lab coat. She activated the device and pointed it at the man on the table. "It has to be," she said. "But I have no clue how to counteract the poison."

Rob put a hand on his wife's shoulder to show that he sympathized with her dilemma. "Do what you can, Jan," he said. "Exec, we're going to the planet surface to meet with the Prime Minister. Have Counselor Goodman join us in the shuttle bay."

“Why don’t we just beam down, Captain?” Leeson asked.

“I don’t want them to see our level of technology,” Stuart replied. “It might frighten them if we appear out of nowhere.”

“Understood,” Leeson said. She turned and left the room.

Rob Stuart faced his wife. He gently kissed her, as he always did before leaving the ship on an away mission. “Have T’Les share what she learned in her analysis,” he said. “It might be helpful.”

Jan nodded. “Come back soon,” she said, squeezing the hand of her husband.

Captain Stuart kissed his wife once again and left the room.



Two uniformed Runii escorted Rob, Melanie, and James into a large office. The chairs looked comfortable, arranged in a circle to foster discussion among those who would work out the problems of the planet.

The guards indicated that the trio of Starfleet officers should be seated until the Prime Minister arrived. They did so as the two Runii exited the office.

“Maybe we should have worn our dress whites,” Stuart said, half teasing his first officer and counselor.

The door to the office opened and a regally dressed Runii male entered. He stood about six feet tall, had brown hair, and wore a shiny pendant that dangled from a chain around his neck. Rob assumed the design of the medallion indicated that this person was a government official, probably the Prime Minister. His assumption was correct.

Stuart stood to his feet, followed by the other two officers. He did not know if the Runii greeted others with a handshake or other gesture, so Rob waited for The Prime Minister to take the lead.

The man stuck out his four-fingered hand, offering it to Stuart. Rob grasped the other’s hand and shook it. “I’m Captain Stuart,” he said.

“Jorlen B’shen, Prime Minister of P’Khati,” the alien stated.

“A pleasure to meet you, sir,” Stuart replied. He stepped back and pointed to his officers. “May I present Commander Melanie Leeson, my first officer, and Lieutenant Commander James Goodman, ship’s counselor.”

The Prime Minister shook the hands of the other two officers and sat down in a chair directly across the circle from Stuart, facing him squarely. Stuart and the others returned to their sitting positions. “Before we begin, Captain, I want to thank you for any assistance that you can give.”

Stuart nodded to the leader of P’Khati. “I feel it important to tell you, sir, that whatever aid we can give must not violate our laws,” he said. “I am bound not to interfere with the natural development of your culture.”

“I appreciate your candor, Captain Stuart,” B’shen said. “I do not expect to be given advanced technology or anything that would be detrimental to my people. All I want is to free my world from the Selladon.”

“Do you want us to use our weaponry to kill them, Mister Prime Minister?” Commander Leeson asked rather bluntly.

Stuart shot a glance at his first officer for her apparent lack of diplomatic etiquette.

The Runii leader noticed Stuart’s reaction and allowed a smile to appear on his face. “It’s quite alright, Captain,” he said. “I like people who say what they think.”

“I apologize for being rude, sir,” Leeson said.

“No offense taken,” the Prime Minister replied. “Actually, my advisors and best scientists have put together a plan to return the Selladon to our sister planet. We have built four spacecraft that can be controlled remotely to transport them back to Sella.”

“That sounds like a very costly undertaking,” Counselor Goodman stated.

“It is, Counselor,” B’shen said. “But we believe that the Selladon have a right to live just as we do. We would rather not destroy them unless absolutely necessary.”

“Very admirable,” Stuart said. “But if you already have the ships to send the Selladon off your planet, why do you need us?”

“We don’t know how to herd the animals onto the ship without putting our people in danger,” B’shen said. “We are hoping that you may know of a way to get the creatures on board the ships safely.”

Stuart looked at his officers, realizing that they were thinking the same thing that he was. They used a shuttle to come to the surface so the sight of people materializing “out of thin air” would not startle the Runii. But he decided that Prime Minister B’shen could be told about the transporter and how it could be used to solve the Selladon problem without actually sharing the technology with the Runii. Stuart faced the man sitting across from him. “We have a way to help you.”



The shuttlecraft *Chekov* rose through the atmosphere, leaving P’Khati behind. It had been a productive meeting with the Prime Minister to rid P’Khati of the Selladon and restore the planet to its natural development.

The captain noticed his first officer had been quiet for most of the return trip back into orbit. He knew that Melanie Leeson doubted her ability to command a ship of her own. But Stuart could see the potential of his second-in-command that she had yet to see in herself.

“That went well, don’t you think?” Stuart said.

Leeson, who had been looking out the shuttle’s window, turned to face her captain. “Yes sir,” she replied. “I’m glad that we will be able to help.”

“Fortunately, they already had the plan in place to send the Selladon back to their native world,” Stuart said. “They just had not figured out how to get the creatures onto the spacecraft that would take them home.”

“And our transporters will take care of that,” Leeson added.

“This society is farther along than we originally thought,” James Goodman interjected. “Perhaps they can be approached for Federation membership within the next few years.”

“They certainly have the potential,” Stuart said. “Speaking of potential, Exec, you need to look at yourself more objectively.”

“Sir?”

“I don’t have the counselor’s empathic abilities, but I can see that you’re feeling overwhelmed with the journey that you will soon make,” the captain said. “You’re more ready than you realize.”

James Goodman did feel the first officer’s elevated stress level, but he did not know what the captain was referring to. He could guess, based on the conversation, Commander Leeson was about to be transferred to another assignment. Possibly a ship of her own?

Melanie Leeson forced a grin. “Thank you for your confidence, Captain,” she replied. “I’ll try to live up to your expectations.”

“Not my expectations, Mel. Live up to yours,” Stuart replied. “Rely on your senior officers’ input but remember that the final decisions of command will rest on you.”

Good guess, James thought to himself.

Leeson let her captain’s words sink deeply into the core of her being. “Thank you, Captain,” was all she said as she returned to looking out the window at the stars.



As soon as the *Chekov* was secured in the landing bay, the chief engineer greeted Stuart, Leeson, and James Goodman as they exited the shuttle. “Doctor Stuart would like to see you right away, Captain,” Mary Goodman said.

Stuart could only think of one reason that would cause his wife to request his presence with that much urgency. “Crewman Tucker?”

“I think his condition has grown worse, sir,” the engineer said.

Stuart, with Leeson at his side, started walking away from the shuttle. He made a complete stop and turned back to the ship’s counselor. “James, please keep anything you heard on the shuttle to yourself for now,” he said.

“Yes sir,” Goodman replied.

Stuart and Leeson resumed their route to the shuttlebay’s exit.



Grown worse? That was a major understatement.

Captain Stuart looked at the bed where Crewman Tucker lay. The man could no longer be recognized as a human being. “What happened?”

“The secretion from his skin is some type of chemical compound that hardens into something that resembles a cocoon,” Jan stated. “With the help of Commander T’Les, I was able to fine-tune the medical tricorders to read through the EM field that he started producing.”

“EM field?”

“The same thing that the Selladon generate,” Jan clarified. “Tucker is going through some type of transitional state. His DNA is being completely rewritten.”

“Do you mean he’s becoming one of those creatures?” Melanie Leeson asked.

Jan nodded. “It’s how they reproduce,” she said. “Tucker wasn’t injected with venom. He was inseminated.”

“You’re kidding,” Rob said.

“I’m afraid not,” the doctor replied. “The Selladon use humanoid or animal hosts as the genetic material to procreate. Unfortunately, there’s no way to reverse the process.”

“So you’re saying that Tucker is dead,” Leeson stated coldly.

Jan heard the first officer’s anger in her voice. Jan felt the same way herself. Losing a patient was always difficult but losing one in this way was unthinkable. “Yes,” she finally said. “For all practical purposes, he’s gone.”

“When will the Selladon emerge from the cocoon?” the captain asked his wife.

“I’m not sure,” Jan replied. “I’ve got a level one force field around the examination alcove.”

“Good,” Rob said. “I’ll have security assign someone to sickbay... Where is Yoshi, anyway?”

“I released him to his quarters,” Jan replied. “He can return to duty in a couple of days.”

Rob kissed his wife on the cheek. “Keep me informed. I’m going to check in on our security chief to see if I can cheer him up.”

“Captain?” Leeson said, getting his attention as he started to leave.

“Yes, Exec?”

“Are we doing the right thing by transporting the Selladon back to their planet?” Leeson asked. “They’re just animals, so why don’t we wipe them out with phasers or radiation?”

“We’re here to help the Runii, Exec,” Stuart said. “And they have decided to recognize the Selladon as having the right to live.”

“But they’re just primitive animals, Captain,” the first officer replied. “I don’t see the point, especially since the Selladon are the cause of so much loss of life.” Melanie

Leeson was thinking about the lives of Setlak and Tucker, not the thousands of Runii that had been transformed into alien animals. At that moment, she wanted revenge against the Selladon. An eye for an eye, life for a life.

“I understand your position,” Stuart stated. “But the Runii are very ecologically minded. They prefer to preserve all life, even life as deadly as the Selladon.”

Despite the captain’s argument, Leeson still felt anger toward the creatures. And the Runii seemed to feel little need for vengeance against the creatures, but *she* needed revenge for the deaths of her shipmates. “And what about Tucker?” she asked. “What’s left of him is being transformed into one of those things.”

“We’ve lost two valued members of our crew,” Rob said. “We can’t bring them back, but we will use this Selladon to learn what we can,” Rob pointed to the examination alcove as he spoke. “Then we send it back to Sella along with the others.” He turned and left sickbay, leaving his first officer to ponder the burdens of command.

Commander Leeson did not agree, but she would abide by the decision of the Runii government and her captain.

Leeson walked toward the examination alcove, to where the doctor stood close watch over her patient. “You said Tucker was going through a state of transition,” she said. “I think I know the feeling.”

Jan tried to smile, although she was feeling helpless about her patient. “Rob told me about your promotion,” she said. “Congratulations.”

“Thanks, Jan,” Leeson replied. “I almost wish I could turn it down.”

Janice was not sure that she had heard her friend correctly but realized there was nothing wrong with her hearing. “Why do you say that?”

“I’m not ready,” Leeson said.

“I wouldn’t say that,” the doctor said. “You’ve worked hard to get where you are, Mel. I think you’re experiencing stage fright.”

“Stagefright?” Leeson was dumbfounded. “I’m not an actor in a play, you know.”

“The principle is the same,” Janice stated. “And it’s perfectly normal.”

Leeson turned around to face the door and took a few steps. She stopped. Turned around. Smiled at her friend. “Thanks, Jan,” Melanie said. “I needed to hear that what I’m feeling is normal.”

“Racquetball tonight?” Jan inquired. “I think I could use the stress relief, too.”

“I’ll see you at 1800 hours,” Leeson replied as she left sickbay, knowing that playing racquetball would not be enough to ease her current feelings.



Melanie Leeson stood on the main street of the capital city, facing two Selladon. One tried to flank her, but she leaped out of its way. The phaser did not affect the creatures, at least not at the stun settings. She threw the phaser away and reached down

next to her, finding a Klingon bat'leth. Grabbing the weapon, she began to wield it as any skilled Klingon could.

The two Selladon, not having any visible optical organs, moved steadily closer to Leeson. They seemed to operate on instinct as they approached, knowing precisely where the first officer was located.

One Selladon quickly rushed toward Leeson and thrust the appendage with the stinger toward her, but the first officer was keenly aware of every move the creature made. And she was ready.

The blade came down swiftly on the appendage. The stinger was cleanly removed from the animal's body, and it began to shake violently as green liquid oozed from the wound at the end of the snake-like tentacle. It collapsed after only a few seconds of hemorrhaging and the creature moved no longer.

Leeson spun around with another swift slice of the blade and simultaneously cut through two tentacles of the second Selladon. It made a terrible screeching sound as it backed away from the human warrior. But Leeson's mission was clear. She swung the blade once more, for one final blow, cutting through the membrane of the single cell that was the body of the animal. Green plasma gushed from the creature, and it collapsed into a dead heap.

The first officer took a deep breath and turned around. To her surprise, Lieutenant Yoshi Nakamara was there, watching. "What are you doing here, Yoshi?" she asked. "I thought the doctor put you in your quarters to rest."

Yoshi smiled. "I am resting," he said. "Especially since you killed two of those things."

Leeson knew that Yoshi understood what she was feeling. He probably felt it more since he was the commanding officer of the two that died. "It's not the type of justice that I wanted to enforce, but it does make me feel better," she stated.

"I feel better, too," Yoshi replied. "But I wonder what that says about us—our need to avenge the deaths of our comrades."

Suddenly, Leeson realized that she was wrong to seek to destroy the creatures that took the lives of Tucker and Setlak. She did not stop to realize that the Selladon were mere animals that were only doing what was instinctively normal for them. "You're a wise person, Yoshi," Leeson said. "Perhaps we can find a way to mourn the loss of our crewmen without the need to destroy life in the process."

Nakamara smiled. "I hope we can," he said.

As the two officers walked down the street, Leeson looked at the war-torn surroundings. "Computer, end program," she said, and the capital city of P'Khati faded into the familiar yellow gridlines of the holodeck.

EPILOGUE

Captain's Log: Stardate 55143.5

We have transported all the Selladon to the Runii interplanetary spaceships. They are safely on their way to Sella, where they should arrive in approximately four months. I have established a dialogue with the Prime Minister of P'Khati to offer Federation assistance for the rebuilding of the capital city and resettling of the northern continent. I have made Commander Leeson's upcoming promotion and transfer known to the crew. We are en route to Beta Tongarii, where we will rendezvous with the starship Artemis. Melanie Leeson has been a great asset to this ship and me as my first officer. She will be sorely missed by the entire crew.

Blake Adams entered the captain's ready room. "You wanted to see me, Skipper?" he said.

Rob motioned for his friend to sit down. He waited until the second officer positioned himself in the seat on the opposite side of the desk. "I have a special assignment for you," Stuart said. "I would like you to organize a party for Melanie."

"It would be a pleasure, Rob," Adams replied.

Stuart took a sip of tea before speaking again. He set the cup on the corner of his desk and looked at Blake with a most serious gaze. "No practical jokes," he said.

Blake gave Stuart the "me?" look. The truth was that Blake had learned his lesson years before when it came to playing practical jokes on Mel Leeson. "Understood, Skipper."

"Good," Rob said. "A first officer needs to display at least a little maturity."

Blake, for the first time that he could remember, was speechless. "What did you just say?"

Rob's mouth went wide as he stood and offered his hand to his best friend. "Congratulations," he said as Blake rose and shook the captain's hand. "I've submitted the request to Starfleet Command for your promotion and new position," Rob said. "It should be official in a few days."

"Thanks, Rob," Blake said. "I don't know what to say."

"That would be a first," Stuart replied. "Now get out and plan that party."

Blake smiled. "Aye aye, Skipper." The new first officer of the starship *Providence* exited the room, leaving Stuart to finish his tea.

The End

