

# To Boldly Go: Command Decisions

A U.S.S. *Providence* story

By Cleve Johnson

## *Captain's Log: Stardate 55237.2*

*Almost five weeks have passed since Melanie Leeson left to assume command of her own ship. Commander Adams has made great strides transitioning to his new role as the first officer, but I think he has a problem staying away from the helm controls. We remain at P'Khati as we assist the Runii people with what little aid this tiny vessel can provide for their recovery from the Selladon infestation. The Federation Council has authorized Starfleet to send as much relief as needed and I have been informed by Command that a ship has already been dispatched.*

Rob and Jan Stuart were sitting in the officer's lounge, enjoying the view of the planet P'Khati. They had finished breakfast and were ready to start another workday.

"Going planetside today?" Jan asked her husband.

Rob wiped the residual muffin crumbs from his mouth with a napkin. "No," he replied. "I'm letting Blake meet with the Minister of the Reconstruction. I just want a quiet day on the ship today."

Jan smiled. "Finally realizing you can't do everything by yourself?"

Rob raised his eyebrows at that. "I always thought I did a good job at delegating. Maybe I should pay more attention to that."

The doctor chuckled. "Just teasing," she said. "I think you do a wonderful job at delegation." Janice pushed her chair away from the table and stood. She took her husband's hand as he also got out of his seat. "I'm scheduled to meet with the regional hospital directors at the Government Center this afternoon to determine where the greatest need is for medical supplies."

"We've almost exhausted our emergency supplies, haven't we?" the captain asked his wife.

"Just about," Jan replied. "When's the relief ship supposed to arrive?"

"In thirty-five minutes." Blake Adams said, having entered the lounge just in time to hear the doctor ask.

The captain looked at the first officer as he approached. "Good morning, Blake. The relief ship is here?"

Blake nodded. "Just entered the system," he said. "But it's not just one ship."

"Starfleet sent two?"

"They sent four."

"Four ships! Why?" Jan said, surprised.

Rob shrugged his shoulders. “I figured they would send one of the larger starships. A *Galaxy* or a *Nebula* would be sufficient for providing aid.”

“Well, Starfleet did send a *Galaxy*-class,” Blake said. “And a *Defiant*, and an *Ericsson*... Oh yes, and a *Sovereign*.”

“Any communication yet,” Rob asked his first officer.

“We hailed them as soon as they dropped out of warp, but the only reply we got was to stand by,” Blake answered.

“That’s odd,” Rob sounded a bit concerned. “I suppose I should get to the bridge and see if I can get someone to answer.”

Jan, who stood behind her husband, winked at Blake. She and the first officer had already known who commanded the relief ships but were sworn to not give away the surprise. “I’ll let you two to your work,” she said. “I have work of my own in sickbay.”

“I don’t want to keep you from your job,” the captain said. Rob gave his wife a kiss and took her by the hand. The couple, followed by Blake Adams, started to walk toward the exit.



Stuart and Adams entered the bridge from the port side turbolift. They immediately walked to the center of the control room. Blake sat in his designated chair to the captain’s right, but Stuart remained standing and faced the viewer. “Put the starships on screen, magnification factor forty.”

“Aye, Captain,” Lieutenant Mary Goodman replied.

The site of the two largest ships appearing on the viewer awed Stuart. “Hail the lead ship, Lieutenant.”

“Hailing frequencies open, Sir.”

Stuart straightened his posture and pulled his uniform jacket down. “This is Captain Robert Stuart of the starship *Providence*,” he said. “Welcome to P’Khati.”

There was momentary silence. The image in front of the bridge shifted from the four Starfleet vessels, being replaced by a picture of the bridge of the *Sovereign*-class starship. The site of the man sitting in the CO’s chair—Charles Gardner—pleased Stuart. “Commodore Gardner! I had no idea that you would be coming out this far.”

Gardner returned Stuart’s good-natured smile. “Hello Robert,” he said. “Blake said you would be surprised.”

Rob shot a narrow glance at his grinning first officer. “He neglected to tell me you were heading up this mission,” he replied as he returned his attention back to Gardner. “I’m glad to see you again, but why did you bring half the fleet with you?”

“I only thought I had brought a quarter of the fleet,” Gardner smirked. “I’ll explain everything when I reach orbit. Prepare to beam aboard in about twenty-five minutes. I’ll see you then. Gardner out.”

As the image faded, replaced by the planet P'Khati, Stuart turned to face Blake Adams. He frowned at his XO. "You should have told me who was leading this little convoy."

Blake's grin grew bigger. "Sorry, Skipper. I was under orders to keep my mouth shut."

"You're incorrigible."



The energy beam dissipated, depositing Captain Stuart on the platform of the *Sovereign-class*' transporter room. He stepped down and reached out to Gardner's extended hand.

"Welcome aboard the *Majestic*."

"Thank you, Commodore," Stuart replied, pumping the other man's hand vigorously.

"I thought we had an understanding last year," Gardner stated with a mischievous scowl.

"Understanding, Sir?"

"I thought we were to be on a first-name basis," the commodore stated. "You're not my executive officer anymore, you know."

Rob blushed slightly. "Sorry, Com...Chuck. Old habits die hard."

Gardner could not argue that point. "Come on," he said, turning toward the door. "I'll give you a tour before the others beam over."

"Others?"

"The other CO's will be joining us for a mission briefing," Gardner said as the door slid shut behind the two men.



The tour had been thorough. Rob, who had never been onboard a ship as large as the *Majestic*, clearly felt a sense of awe. The level of sophistication of this class vessel lived up to its reputation.

The two men approached the entrance to the main conference room. Commodore Gardner stopped short of the spot where the sensor would activate the automatic doors. "What do you think, Robert?" he asked Stuart.

"Very impressive," Stuart replied. "It wasn't too many years ago that the *Galaxy-class* ships made every line officer drool."

Gardner laughed. "I think I did some drooling myself over one or two of them when they first starting being commissioned. Well, ready to meet your peers?"

"Lead the way, Commodore." Stuart realized his mistake when he saw Gardner give a deliberate look of irritation. "...I mean Chuck. I did it again."

Gardner didn't say anything, but turned and walked toward the doors that parted for the two officers. They walked into the conference room, finding two other officers conversing. They immediately stopped talking and stood at attention.

"As you were," Gardner said. "Please have a seat and we'll make introductions."

Stuart nodded to the other CO's as they sat on the opposite side of the curved table.

"Lieutenant Commander Jorge Romero of the *Victorious*," Gardner said, directing Stuart's attention to the human male. "And Commander Jenrizza Ul-maj of the *Coronado*."

"Glad to meet you," Stuart said. He was not familiar with what species the alien woman, who commanded the other *Ericsson*-class starship, was. He made a mental note to ask Commodore Gardner about that later.

"This is Captain Robert Stuart of the starship *Providence*," Gardner finished. "But the captain of the *Powell* seems to be tardy."

On cue, the doors parted once again. Entering the room, the other commanding officer walked toward the table and took his seat next to Stuart.

Gardner noticed the surprised expression on Stuart's face. "I believe you know Captain Goodman," he said.

"Hello, Rob."

"Benjamin!" Stuart shook his old friend's hand. "It's been a long time. I didn't realize that you commanded the *Powell*."

"I took command two months ago. She's a far cry from the *Avenger*," Goodman said.

"I bet she is."

Gardner was glad to see the two captains converse, but he wanted to maintain an air of professionalism. "There will be time to catch up a little later, gentlemen."

"Sorry, Sir," Goodman said.

"No need to apologize, Captain," Gardner said. "I've kept Captain Stuart in the dark about why we're all here."

"Sir?" Rob Stuart realized that he was to be informed of what everyone else seemed to already know.

"Our five ships, along with the U.S.S. *Eclipse* on assignment at Jarek III, and the U.S.S. *Artemis* make up the newly formed 5<sup>th</sup> Exploration Task Force," Gardner began. "Now that the *Providence* has mapped most of this sector and part of the Hurak sector, Starfleet wants to do some major exploration of the area."

Stuart started to feel like his efforts had not been enough, but he remembered that his mission had been to map and do a quick survey of the Beta Tongarii sector and move on to the next one. He had done more than that during the past year and a half. He didn't need to feel threatened by the arrival of the other starships. His mission had always been

to do the preliminary work before more in-depth exploration would take place. Stuart just did not expect it to come so quickly. “What about helping the Runii civilization, Sir?”

“Our orders are to aid the Runii with medical supplies, food, and provide assistance in cleaning up their major cities in the northern continent,” Gardner said. “Any help we give in regard to the cleanup and repairing physical structures will be done using *their* technology. The Prime Directive must be adhered to.”

“How long will we be in this system, Commodore?” Commander Ul-maj asked.

“Captain Goodman will head the relief effort,” Gardner replied. “We estimate six to eight months.”

“Excuse me, Sir, but will all our ships be needed for that long?” Lieutenant Commander Romero inquired.

“No, Commander,” Gardner said. “The *Majestic* will stay here a few days to support the *Powell*. After that, we’ll head into the Hurak sector to see about establishing formal diplomatic relations with Hurak Prime.” Gardner looked at Captain Stuart. “Rob, I want you to accompany me and introduce me to your contacts.”

“Aye, Sir,” Stuart replied. “You mentioned the *Artemis* was also part of this group?”

“The *Artemis* is en route to Selerus,” Gardner said. “Captain Wynn is transporting a Federation ambassador there. The Seleri have agreed to let us set up an embassy on their world provided the ambassador and his staff were Saurian.”

“And what part will we play, Sir,” Ul-maj asked.

“I want you to leave tomorrow for the next sector and start to map it. Report any inhabited planets back to me,” Gardner stated. “Commander Romero, you will take the *Victorious* to patrol the corridor between Tranak space and Selerus. Try to stay away from the Tranak border. We don’t want to make them nervous about our presence.”

“We’ll keep a discreet distance, Sir.”

“What about my ship?” Stuart asked.

“The *Providence* will remain here at P’Khati for the time being, Rob,” Gardner said. “You and your crew have developed a rapport with the Runii that will be beneficial to Captain Goodman.”

“I agree,” Stuart replied. “And it will give Benjamin and me some time to reacquaint ourselves.”

Gardner nodded with a slight smile. “I think that is all for now. Captain Goodman has extended his invitation to each of you and your senior officers to a reception on the *Powell* at 1800 hours.”

“It will give us all a chance to get to know each other,” Goodman said.

“Dress whites are neither required nor expected,” the commodore said. “But I do expect you all to be there with your senior officers. Dismissed.”

The officers rose from their chairs and started toward the exit. Goodman lagged behind to talk with his former academy roommate. "I'm going to contact my brother, Rob. Can he and his wife have some time off so I can catch up with them?"

"Of course," Stuart replied. "I'll be glad to give them some well-deserved time off. And I'll make sure I have time for you, too."

Goodman gave Stuart a pat on his shoulder. "Good to see you again, Robert."

"And you, Benjamin."

The two men started for the exit, but Commodore Gardner called to Stuart. "Just a moment, Robert. I have something else to discuss with you."

"I'll catch you later," Ben Goodman said as he left the conference room.

"Later," Rob replied. He turned to face his former captain. "Commo...Chuck?" Stuart caught himself that time.

"Have a seat, Rob," Gardner said as he motioned toward the chair nearest him. "I wanted to know what you thought about the *Majestic*."

Stuart sat down. "Well, it's a very impressive vessel," he said. "I have to admit that its size is overwhelming."

"It doesn't take long to get used to *that*," Gardner said. "I found that I could find my way around fairly well after a few weeks."

"From what I've seen, she's much more sophisticated than the *Republic*."

"No argument on that, Robert." Commodore Gardner leaned back and fixed his gaze on his former first officer. He had been waiting for the right moment to give Stuart the news. Now seemed to be the best time. "The newest *Sovereign*-class to be commissioned is in the final stage of construction," he said. "She's called the *Monarch*...scheduled to be launched in three months."

Rob tried not to frown as he guessed where this conversation was leading. He did not react, at least by outward appearance, as he formulated a reply. "That's interesting, Chuck, but why would I be interested?"

Gardner kept a straight face. "You never play poker, do you?"

"I haven't developed a knack for it."

"It shows," Gardner chided Stuart. "Listen, Rob. Eighty years ago, the *Excelsior*-class was what every commanding line officer would sell their souls for. Ten years ago, it was the *Galaxy*-class ships.

"There's still plenty of people who strive for those big explorers," Stuart interjected.

"That's true, Robert, but the *Sovereigns* are all going to the elite captains—the best of the best!"

Stuart nodded. "That only makes sense," he stated.

Gardner left his chair and started to pace. He stopped and sat back down in the chair directly across the conference table from Stuart. “Starfleet Command is looking for the right person to captain the *Monarch*. They’ve narrowed the list to five candidates,” he said. “And you, my friend, are at the top of that list.”

The ball dropped. Stuart felt the stress of an internal war raging between his loyalty to his ship and crew and the honor that Starfleet bestowed upon him. “Why me?” he asked. “I don’t see myself as worthy of one of the most sophisticated vessels that Starfleet has ever constructed.”

Gardner waved off the humility that Stuart had displayed. “Let me be candid, Rob. You are a true explorer. You were sent to map one sector, but you did much more than that.”

“I think I just did what any other CO would have,” Stuart replied.

“Don’t be so modest, Rob.” Gardner wanted to drive his point home. “In less than two years you have mapped one sector and part of another. You defeated a Vendoth ship when the odds were in *their* favor and participated in the defense of Earth a short time later against them. And *they* definitely had the advantage. You also found a starship lost for more than sixty years...*and* rescued the survivors.”

Gardner kept pressing. “You’ve established first contact with five previously unknown species in the past two years. Most captains these days won’t make five first contacts during their entire careers.”

Stuart got out of his chair and started toward the replicator. “You don’t mind if I get some tea, do you?” he asked Gardner.

“Not at all. I’ll take some, too,” the commodore replied.

Rob returned to the table, two steaming cups in his hands. He placed one in front of Gardner before sitting down. “Good tea,” Rob said after taking a sip.

Gardner ignored his cup and resumed the conversation. “Rob, everything that you’ve accomplished while commanding the *Providence* is a feather in your cap. To your credit, you haven’t settled to stick to the defined mission parameters of the *Ericsson*-class.” Gardner paused to gage Stuart’s reaction. The captain did not outwardly display his thoughts or his feelings, so the commodore continued. “You’re an explorer, Rob. You’ve earned the right to command one of the top-of-the-line ships—a ship designed for exploration.”

Stuart took another sip of his tea and slowly lowered the cup. “I thought I was in command of a ship designed for exploration,” he said with a slight smile.

Commodore Gardner shook his head. “Limited exploration,” he said. “You command a *scout* vessel that will never give you the opportunity to do what you really want to do, Rob.”

Stuart thought about that for a moment. He always thought that he had been doing *exactly* what he wanted. “What about my other commitments?”

Gardner knew that Stuart referred to his marriage to a Starfleet doctor. “If you accept command of the *Monarch*, Janice will be assigned as your CMO.”

“And the *Providence*?”

“I’ve been assured that she will continue her current mission under Blake’s command,” Gardner replied. “Unless you have any concerns about Blake taking over.”

“He has my full confidence,” Stuart said. “But Blake just received a promotion. Starfleet would never promote him to captain this soon.”

“Starfleet has adopted a policy of allowing line officers with the rank of commander or lieutenant commander to captain the smaller size starships,” Gardner said. “In fact, that’s the growing preference. That’s one of the reasons Starfleet wants to give you a larger vessel.”

“I understand that most CO’s of the *Ericsson*-class ships hold the rank of full commander.”

“All but you and Captain Ben-Yosef,” Gardner replied. “And he’s also being considered for a new assignment.”

Stuart shook his head. “This is a big decision. I’ve grown attached to my ship...my crew.”

“It’s not about the ship. It’s not about the crew,” Gardner said firmly. “It’s about *you*, Rob. An offer like this may not come again. At least not for a while.”

Rob rose from the chair and walked to the large windows that provided a beautiful view of the planet below. He looked and saw his vessel in orbit, closely following the *Majestic*. “I’ll need some time to think about this,” he said without turning to face the commodore. “This affects Jan, also. I need to discuss it with her.”

Gardner left his seat and approached Stuart from behind and placed a hand on the other man’s shoulder. “I understand, Rob. Talk it over with your wife,” he said. “All I ask is that you look at your career objectively.”

Stuart turned to face his long-time mentor and friend. Smiling, he said, “I promise to do that, Commodore.”

Gardner shot a look at Stuart. “Call me Chuck.”

Stuart laughed as he shook Gardner’s hand. “I better get back,” he said. “I’ll see you later on the *Powell*.”

“See you then,” the commodore replied.

Rob turned and started toward the exit. He left the room and made his way to the nearest turbolift. The doors slid shut. “Transporter room,” he told the computer.

“Please specify by deck or transporter room number,” the feminine voice said.

“Whichever one is nearest,” Stuart said with a sigh. He shook his head as the lift sped to its destination. He felt torn between the ship and crew that he knew and the opportunities that awaited if he agreed to command the *Monarch*.



Janice walked into her quarters. She noticed Rob standing in front of the window, looking out into the vastness of space. She had only been married to him for a little more



than a year, but she had learned to read his moods by his mannerisms. “I didn’t know you were back,” she said. “You could have stopped in sickbay to say hello.”

Rob turned toward his wife and forced a smile. “Sorry,” he said. “I needed some time to think about some things.”

Jan had read her husband correctly. Something was bothering him. “Want to talk about it?”

“Sure,” Rob said. “It concerns you as much as it does me.”

“Okay, honey, start from the beginning,” Jan said as she walked toward her husband. She took his hand and sat on the couch, pulling him to sit down next to her.

Rob looked at his wife. His eyes were gentle, yet hesitation could be seen there. “Starfleet Command wants to reassign me to another ship. You would come with me, of course.”

Jan did not know what to think about leaving the *Providence*. She perceived that Rob was not too sure about leaving either. “What are you going to do?”

“Don’t you mean what are *we* going to do?”

Janice thought about her previous marriage to Paul Edwards. She remembered that the marriage ended because he had placed his career ahead of all other concerns, including personal relationships. Jan was fortunate to have found Rob. He was so different. Yes, his career was important to him. Family and friends were of higher importance. “Tell me about the assignment,” she said.

“It’s a new *Sovereign*-class explorer. The commodore said that I was at the top of Starfleet’s list to be her captain.”

“You’re certainly at the top of my list,” Jan said, smiling at her husband. “Would we be assigned to this sector?”

“I doubt it,” Rob replied. “But Chuck did indicate that we would be going on an exploration mission.”

“Starfleet must know that you need a new challenge,” Jan said. “And it would give us an opportunity to increase our family.”

Rob regarded his wife. “Now *that’s* something we haven’t discussed before.”

“I know you like kids, Rob,” she said. “I never brought it up before because the *Providence* isn’t a big enough ship to support families. If we take this assignment, we would have a chance to have children. And at my age, the time to have children is running short.”

Rob thought about having kids. He devoted himself to Starfleet, and to Jan. She was correct in pointing out that he loved kids. “That’s something new to the equation, Jan. I just want to make sure that this would be the right move at this time.”

Janice hugged her husband. “Whatever you decide is fine with me, Rob. As long as we’re together.”

Rob stood up and took Jan's hand, pulling her up. He kissed her on the back of her hand and smiled. "I love you, Janice."

Returning the smile, Jan looked into her husband's blue eyes. "And I love you."

After a few moments of silently admiring one another, Rob stepped back. "I have an idea for filling our evening, but we're expected on the *Powell* for a reception," he said. "Unfortunately, attendance is required."

"I suppose we're too dedicated to disobey orders," Jan said.

Rob smiled. "I suppose we are." He took his wife in his arms and began kissing her.



Commander Blake Adams entered the bridge. He strolled toward the center and acknowledged Lieutenant Commander T'Les, who occupied the center chair during the current shift. "Captain Stuart's not back yet?"

"The captain returned at 1437 hours," the Vulcan stated. "Shall I call him to the bridge?"

"That's alright, Commander," Blake said. "I'll make my report to him later. Anything I should know about?"

"All senior officers are required to attend a reception on the U.S.S. *Powell* at 1800 hours," the Vulcan stated.

"Who's idea was that?"

"I believe it was at the suggestion of the *Powell*'s commanding officer, Commander."

"I hope the officers of those other ships like to have fun," Blake replied. "I'll be there with bells on." He looked at the junior officer manning the CONN station. "Mister Kelly, can I see you in the captain's ready room?"

"Aye Sir," Eric Kelly said as he got out of his chair. The young officer activated the backup holographic pilot before following the first officer into the captain's office.

T'Les allowed her eyes to follow the two officers. She contemplated Commander Adams' comments and decided that human humor did not have any basis in logic.

The doors slid shut and Lieutenant J.G. Kelly stood at attention, waiting for Commander Adams to speak.

"At ease before you strain a muscle, kid."

Kelly relaxed. He really hated to be called "kid," but knew that Adams meant it in an endearing way. "You wanted to see me, Sir?"

"Have a seat, Eric," Blake said. "This isn't official, but I found out something about the Runii that might interest you."

"Sir?"

"I noticed in your records that you were a hovercraft racer."

“Yes Sir,” Kelly replied. “I’ve raced since I was fourteen.”

“How good are you?”

“I was the youngest racer to compete at Indianapolis, Sir. I qualified and came in sixth out of thirty-three the summer before I entered the Academy.”

“I’d say that was pretty good,” Blake replied. “The Prime Minister told me about the annual hovercraft race they used to have before the Selladon came,” Blake said. “They plan to reinstate the race as part of the celebration for returning to the northern continent.”

“And you thought I would like to go to watch, Sir?”

Blake smiled. “I wanted to know if you would like to race in it.”

Kelly’s mouth dropped open. “I’d love it! It’s been a long time since I’ve had the chance to race.”

Blake enjoyed watching the excitement burst forth from the young man who had taken over as the senior CONN officer only weeks before. “I’ll get you entered as soon as I get the skipper’s okay,” he told Lieutenant Kelly. “I’m sure he’ll agree.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Kelly replied. “When’s the race?”

“It’s scheduled in two weeks, the twelfth day of Yanen by their calendar.”

“Can I build my own hovercraft,” Kelly asked. “I have a few designs in the database that I could choose from.”

“I will find out the requirements and what specs they will allow,” Blake said. “I’m sure we can replicate whatever parts you need.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

“Don’t mention it, kid. Now you better get back to your station before Commander T’Les comes looking for you,” Blake jibed. “You know how emotional she gets.”

Lieutenant Kelly smiled, knowing that Commander Adams liked to joke at others’ expense. “Aye, Sir,” he said, trying not to laugh. He turned and left the ready room.

Blake grinned. He liked the young officer and felt genuinely happy to give Kelly a chance to do something enjoyable. There was something about the young man that reminded Blake of himself. He turned to look out the window. As Blake watched the revolving planet below, he knew that Eric Kelly would bring honor to his ship on race day.



The social center known as Ten-Forward was bustling with activity. Officers from the five starships orbiting P’Khati were all engaged in various conversations, mostly about their homes and families. Very few chose to talk about work. This was a social event and the people wanted to keep it that way. Starfleet was life for the officers of the five ships, but each one recognized the importance of putting duty and responsibility behind—at least for a few hours.

Blake Adams, carrying a glass of synthehol, approached James and Mary Goodman. “Can you believe that your brother’s bar doesn’t stock Vanilla Coke, James?” he said. “I thought these *Galaxy*-class ships came fully stocked.”

“Is there a problem with your drink, Commander?”

Blake spun around to face the captain of the starship *Powell*. “Captain Goodman! Uh, not at all, Sir.” His face started to feel warm as Blake tried to get his foot out of his mouth.

James, unlike his older brother, had inherited some empathic ability from his mother’s Betazoid ancestry. He could sense the discomfort that Blake Adams felt and James thought the situation amusing.

The older Goodman smiled as he patted the *Providence*’s first officer on his shoulder. “I’m just giving you a hard time, Blake. I was wondering where Rob and Janice were.”

Blake shrugged his shoulders. “I thought they would be here when I arrived, but I haven’t seen either one of them.”

As if they knew that they were being talked about, The Stuarts entered Ten-Forward. Blake watched as a waiter walked toward them with a tray of drinks. They each took a glass of a pink-colored liquid and looked around the room. Spotting Blake and the three Goodmans, Rob and Janice started in their direction. But Commodore Gardner intercepted them.

“I wondered when you two would show yourselves,” Gardner said as he shook Rob Stuart’s hand.

Rob smiled at his former CO. “Are we late, Sir?” he replied, trying to act as if he and his wife had arrived promptly.

“It’s good to see you again, Commodore,” Janice said with her usual warm smile.

Gardner took Jan’s hand in his, drawing it toward his face as he bent down to kiss the back of it. “The pleasure is mine, Janice. And please call me Chuck,” he said, glancing at Rob with a mischievous wink.

Jan laughed nervously. To call a flag officer by his first name seemed uncomfortable, but she wanted to abide by Gardner’s wishes. “Rob tells me about the offer that you made.”

“And the offer is for you as well,” the commodore said. “So, what do you think?”

Janice took a sip from her glass before answering. “It sounds like a wonderful opportunity, Chuck. I told Rob that I would support his decision, whatever it may be.”

“Is this something that you want?” Gardner asked the doctor. “Surely, you have your own ambitions.”

“Of course I do, but my ambitions are second to my love for Rob,” Jan said. “Our marriage comes before our careers.”

Charles Gardner considered Jan’s words. He smiled and lifted his glass. “May you and Robert find happiness in marriage and in career.”

Jan and Robert lifted their glasses in unison.

Rob felt like the commodore was pressuring him to make a quick decision about the *Monarch* and decided to change the topic of conversation. "I contacted the Hurak as you requested. Commander Tal's ship will meet us in the Baladin system."

"Baladin system?"

"Yes, Sir. It's an uninhabited star system about four days away at warp five," Rob said. "Tal will meet us there in six."

Gardner nodded. "Very good," he said. "We'll leave the day after tomorrow."

"Where are *we* going?" Janice asked as she crossed her arms, looking at Rob.

"Robert didn't tell you?" Gardner asked. He immediately wished he would have thought of a better way to phrase the question after seeing the way that Janice eyed her husband. "I never thought to invite you along," he said, "but your presence would be welcome if your duties allow."

"Thank you," Jan said. "I think I could use a change of scenery." The doctor looked at Robert. She tried to convey a look of anger to let him know that she was not happy with his failure to tell her that he would be away for a few days. Janice was not actually mad, but she wanted Rob to think that she was.

Robert looked at his wife and winked. He could see the gleam in Jan's eye, although she put on the appearance of being angry. "I was planning on telling you this afternoon, but something came up."

Janice burst out laughing. "I guess you were a little distracted," she said.

Gardner did not understand what Janice found so funny, but she decided not to pursue it. He realized that it must be an inside joke. "So, will you be joining us?"

Jan looked at her husband to read his expression. "I go where Rob goes," she said. It was a statement to encourage Rob in his decision. She wanted him to know that she was behind whatever choice he would make—stay with the *Providence*, or transfer to the *Monarch*.



Blake Adams entered the officer's lounge. His eyes scanned the room, looking for his commanding officer. When he saw the captain sitting at a corner table, Blake started toward his CO.

Rob Stuart noticed the approach of his first officer and motioned him to sit down. "Have a seat, Blake," Stuart said. "I was just having breakfast. Would you like something?"

"I ate in my quarters," Blake replied. "I didn't get a chance to give you my report on the meeting with the Prime Minister yesterday. Do you have a few minutes?"

"Did the meeting go well?" Stuart asked before taking a bite of scrambled eggs.

"As well as we expected," Blake said. "I understand that Captain Goodman is going to take charge of the relief project."

Rob finished chewing his food. "That's correct," he said as he wiped the corner of his mouth with his napkin. "But you will be working closely with him since you have already had significant contact with the Runii government."

"What about you, Skipper? I figured that you would lead the relief effort."

Stuart grinned at his first officer. "I'm afraid I won't be here," he stated flatly.

"Oh? Where will you be?"

"Jan and I will be going with Commodore Gardner to rendezvous with the Hurak," Rob said. "We leave at 0800 tomorrow."

"The Hurak? Why?"

"The Federation wants to build some diplomatic credibility in this area. Form alliances." Rob's tone seemed different to Blake. It was as if the captain's thoughts were on something other than the present conversation.

Blake frowned. "How long will you be gone, Rob?"

"Not more than a couple weeks," Rob replied. "Any particular reason I shouldn't be away?"

"Well, the Runii are having a big party to celebrate their return to the northern continent and the end of the Selladon infestation," Blake said. "It's two weeks from today."

"I can talk to Commodore Gardner about it," Rob said. "Our presence at the celebration would solidify the relationship that we've started here."

"You bet it would, Skipper, but I have another reason for wanting you to be there."

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"They will have a hovercraft race as their main event." Blake paused. "I want your permission to enter Lieutenant Kelly in the race."

"Have you talked to the Runii about this?"

"Yep. They think it would be great to have an outsider in the race."

"What are Kelly's chances if he races, Blake?"

"I'd say excellent, Skipper. Eric is an experienced hovercraft racer," Blake stated. "He once raced at Indy."

"Indianapolis?"

"Yes, Sir. Came in sixth."

Rob pondered the thought of one of his crew participating in, and possibly winning, a big racing event. It could reflect well on the Federation in the eyes of the Runii. "Permission granted," he said. "I'll do what I can to make it back for the festivities."

Blake's face glowed like the exhaust of an impulse engine. "I'll get him entered today," he said. "Eric will be glad to hear the good news."

Stuart was glad he gave a reason for Blake to be happy. It would make his next words easier for Blake to accept. "Speaking of news, I have something to tell you, Blake."

Adams' reverie subsided as he saw the expression on his CO's face. It was an expression that told Blake that Stuart's upcoming revelation would not be a happy one. "I'm not sure I want to know," he replied.

Stuart leaned over the table, closer to his long-time friend. He looked around to make sure that no others were within earshot of his voice. "This is not to be repeated," he whispered.

Now Blake knew he was about to receive bad news. "I'm your friend, Rob. I won't say a word to anyone."

Stuart sighed heavily. "I have been offered another command," he stated. "If I take it, the situation opens up an opportunity for you. You would be named CO of the *Providence*."

Blake's mind began to flood with conflicting emotions. He knew that he wanted a command of his own one day, but was not sure that he was ready for that responsibility yet. He had known Rob Stuart for several years, been mentored by him. Blake valued his friendship with Rob and wanted to continue serving with him. But he certainly would not want to keep Rob from advancing his career. "Congratulations, Skipper," he finally said.

"Don't congratulate me yet, Blake," Rob replied. "I haven't decided if I'm going to take it."

"What would hold you back, Rob?"

Stuart thought a moment. "I don't know, Blake. Leaving the *Providence* never occurred to me until Chuck delivered Starfleet's offer," he said. "I'm torn between a great opportunity and a ship and crew that I'm comfortable with."

"A ship is just a ship, Rob," Blake said. "As for your crew, your friends...well, we can manage."

Stuart smiled at his friend. "I'm confident that the crew could get along without me just fine, but I would miss each one of you terribly. You most of all."

"And you will be missed, too," Blake stated. "But that's not a good enough reason to stay. You need to think about what's best for you *and* Jan. I assume she would go with you."

"I wouldn't even consider the offer if she wasn't," Rob replied. "I need time to think about it."

"Sure you do, Skipper. It's a tough decision," Blake said. "One question."

"Go ahead." Rob leaned back.

"What ship did they offer you?"

“She’s called the *Monarch*,” Stuart said. “She’s the next *Sovereign*-class to be launched.”

Blake shook his head. “Forget what I said about a ship just being a ship,” he said with a hint of jealousy. “You can’t turn that down, Skipper.”

Stuart rose from his chair, leaving the empty breakfast dishes for the steward to clean up. He felt that Blake was pressuring him. Rob actually believed that he could turn it down if Starfleet’s offer did not suit him. “I need time to think about it,” he repeated. “I’ll be in my ready room if you need me.”

Blake watched his friend walk toward the exit. He did not want Rob to leave, but neither did he want him to stay. Blake hated feeling torn.



Rob Stuart looked at the books on his shelf. He grabbed two of his favorite novels, The Lord of the Rings and Murder at the Andor Consulate, and placed them in his cylindrical suitcase. He looked over his shoulder, calling to his wife in the other room. “Janice, are you about ready?”

“I’ll be there in a minute.”

Rob closed the suitcase and picked it up, slinging the carrying strap over his left shoulder. “We shouldn’t keep the commodore waiting, dear.”

Jan peeked into the bedroom, smiling. “I’m ready.”

Rob returned his wife’s smile. “What took so long?”

“I copied the data codes of your favorite foods from our replicator onto this,” Janice said, holding an isolinear chip.

“I’m sure what I like are standard in all Starfleet replicators,” Rob stated.

“There are a few things that may not be standard,” Jan replied. “I’d rather be safe since we’ll be gone for a couple weeks.”

Smiling, Rob exited the bedroom and took Jan’s hand in his. The two officers left their quarters hand in hand and started down the rounded corridor to the turbolift. They entered, not saying a word. Jan knew that her husband’s mind was on the offer that Starfleet had made—the offer of a new ship. Was it indecision that she saw in his eyes? Jan wondered what thoughts were going through her husband’s mind.

The turbolift doors closed. “Transporter room one,” Rob said, not looking at his wife. “I imagine that Chuck will use this mission to try to sway my decision.” He turned to face Janice, his eyes unreadable. “What should we do, Jan?”

Jan squeezed Rob’s hand, not letting go. “You’ll make the right choice for us, Rob. I have no doubt about that.”

Rob smiled at Jan. “Thank you,” he said as he drew her close and kissed her. “I love you.”



The doors parted and the Stuarts walked into the corridor. It was only a few steps to the transporter room. The doors slid open and they entered the room. Chief John McKinney was on duty behind the console.

“Hello Chief,” Rob said.

“Good morning, Sir,” McKinney replied. “Coordinates are set for you to beam to the *Majestic* when you’re ready, Captain.”

Rob led his wife by her hand up the steps into the chamber. “Thank you, Chief. I thought Commander Adams would be here to see us off, but we shouldn’t keep Commodore Gardner waiting too long.”

The doors to the transporter room slid open as Blake Adams rushed in. “Wait a minute, Mac,” he told the transporter chief. “I’d like to have a word in private with the captain and CMO before they leave.”

“Certainly, Sir,” McKinney said as he stepped from behind the console. He left the room and the doors closed behind him.

“I was wondering if you have decided anything yet.”

Rob looked at his wife, then back to Blake. “Not yet, Blake. I’ll let you know when I get back.”

“Can you at least tell me which way you’re leaning, Skipper?”

Rob smiled and shook his head. His determination would not allow him to be pushed into taking command of the *Monarch*. Not by Commodore Gardner. Not by Blake Adams. Not by anyone. “You’re in command until my return, Blake. I will let you know my decision then.

Blake nodded and stepped behind the control panel. He verified the pre-assigned coordinates and faced his CO. “Energizing.”

Captain and Doctor Stuart dematerialized, leaving the first officer alone. “What will your decision be, Skipper?” Blake muttered to himself.



***Personal Log: Stardate 55276.5***

*Our meeting with Commander Tal and the Hurak delegation went well. The Majestic is returning to P’Khati and should be there tomorrow. I must make a decision soon, regarding the direction that my career will go. Do I accept command of another ship, or do I stay with the Providence? Jan will stand by me either way, but I wish she would be more helpful by telling me her preference. So far, she hasn’t been as helpful as I would like. On the other hand, Commodore Gardner is more than helpful with his advice.*

Captain Robert P. Stuart exited the turbolift and entered the bridge. He looked around the control center of the U.S.S. *Majestic* in search of his former CO. Stuart did not see Commodore Gardner, but he instinctively knew where the other man would be. He walked toward the executive officer who was sitting in the center seat. “Is the commodore in his ready room, Commander?”

“Yes Sir,” the first officer stated.

“Thank you,” Stuart replied as he turned to walk toward the CO’s office. For the past two weeks, Commodore Charles Gardner had been after Stuart, pressuring him to accept Starfleet’s offer to take command of the new *Sovereign*-class U.S.S. *Monarch*. Stuart knew it would be a great opportunity, but he was not sure that he wanted to leave the *Providence*. He was not sure that he wanted to leave his friends, especially Blake Adams who he had served with for more than ten years.

The door slid open and Commodore Gardner started to step out but stepped back into the room when he saw Stuart approaching. “I was just on my way to see you,” Gardner said. “Please come in, Robert.”

Stuart entered and faced Gardner. He waited until the door closed before speaking. “Why is it so important to you that I accept command of the *Monarch*?”

Gardner smiled. “It’s not important to me,” he said. “I’m just the messenger boy, Robert. I will tell you that this is important to *you*. Specifically to your career.”

“Please don’t hold anything back, Chuck.” Stuart stared at the senior officer. “If I’m going to accept this command, I need to know everything.” He stepped toward Commodore Gardner and looked at the other officer with a determination that he had rarely shown. “Is my uncle behind this?”

Gardner hesitated before answering. “No, Robert. Your uncle Bob is not behind you being offered command of a *Sovereign*,” he said. “He’s proud of you, of course, but he knows how you feel about favoritism. He’s kept himself out of this because he doesn’t want to appear that you are getting the *Monarch* because of your family relationship.” The commodore placed his hand on Stuart’s shoulder. “As chief of operations, he will sign the orders, but there are others at Starfleet Command who have suggested your reassignment. They want you to accept this command.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say that certain admirals want you to have a command that will put you in the spotlight,” Gardner said. “Some of those admirals would like to see you join their ranks one day and a prominent command position like this one is a necessary step in that direction.”

Stuart shook his head in disbelief. “Are you saying that Starfleet wants to promote me to admiral?”

Gardner chuckled. “Eventually, yes,” he said. “Of course, that’s a few years away, but you have been pegged as one of those who will have the opportunity to lead Starfleet into the next century. You have what it takes, Robert.”

Stuart walked to the window and stared at the stars streaking by. He thought about what the commodore had said. He thought about his dreams of exploration. The thought of joining the admiralty had never occurred to him before. All he ever wanted was to explore the unknown, something that he had devoted his life to doing. Now, he was being told that he could one day be a part of Starfleet Command, making decisions that would guide the direction of Starfleet. And that direction would be toward the unknown if he had any say in it. Stuart’s desire to see the exploration of new worlds and seeking out

new life forms to return to the forefront of Starfleet's mission would play heavily in his choice. "I'll give you my decision by tonight," he told Gardner. "If you'll excuse me, Chuck, I need to talk this over with Jan one more time."

"I understand," Gardner said. "I'll see you and your wife for dinner. How's 1730 hours in my quarters?"

Stuart nodded. "We'll be there."



Commander Blake Adams entered the holodeck. He found himself in the pit area of the Indianapolis Hoverdome. He watched Lieutenant Kelly's hovercraft as it exited the track and entered the pit. The vehicle came to a stop in front of Adams and the hatch opened. Eric Kelly climbed out of the hovercraft and noticed the first officer watching.

Adams walked toward the young helmsman and waved. "How are you doing, kid?"

Kelly smiled proudly. "I just beat my previous time by twelve seconds, Commander."

"That's great kid," Adams said. "Do you think you're ready for the real race?"

"I'll feel better if I had a chance to practice more on the real track."

"Well, the rules only allow a one-time practice session to familiarize you with the track," Adams said. "Is your hovercraft ready to fly?"

"Yes Sir," Kelly said with confidence. "Lieutenant Goodman and Chief McKinney have been a great deal of help."

"They told me that vehicle will be transported to the surface within the hour. Your practice session is scheduled for 1840 hours, ship's time."

"I'll be ready, Commander," Kelly replied. He tossed the helmet that he was holding in the cockpit of the hovercraft. "End program," he said. The racing arena disappeared, replaced by the holodeck's gridlines. "I want to thank you for entering me in the race, Commander."

"It's my pleasure, kid," Blake said. "I just want to see if you're as good a pilot as I think you are."

Kelly started to blush. He knew that he was good, but he tried to keep his modesty about his abilities. "I'll make you proud of me, Sir," he told Adams.

Blake Adams smiled and patted Lieutenant Kelly on the shoulder. "I'm already proud of you, Eric."

The two officers left the holodeck, talking as the door opened automatically for their departure. "The captain should be back by race time, Eric," Adams stated. "You can prove to *him* how good you can fly."

Kelly, placing all modesty aside, decided to talk to the first officer on his own level. "It's a good thing that I perform well under pressure, Sir," he said. "I don't think I'll have a problem showing the captain that I can out fly *you*, Commander."

Blake laughed deep from the most inner parts of his belly. As he looked at Eric Kelly, Blake remembered himself at that age. Kelly reminded Blake of himself—only Blake was not as serious as the younger man. He felt that the relationship between him and Kelly was similar to the one that he had with Rob Stuart, but Blake was the mentor in this case.

As he remembered his friendship with Stuart, Blake's thoughts changed to sadness. What would his friend decide?



Rob Stuart entered the quarters that had been assigned to him and his wife. When he did not see her, he started toward the replicator. "Computer, one glass of ice water."

Stuart took the glass out of the dispenser and started to drink it when the door slid open. Janice walked into the room and smiled at her husband. "I thought you were with the commodore," she stated.

"I was," Rob replied. "He's expecting us for dinner in his quarters tonight."

"I was hoping for our last night on the *Majestic* to be just for us," Jan said warmly as she walked closer to her husband. "I had something special planned."

Rob smiled at that. "I suppose we could cut dinner short," he said. "But we do need to meet with him. I told him we'd give our decision tonight."

"And what's our decision, Rob?"

Robert took his wife's hand in his. "I don't know, Jan. I'm not sure what we should do."

Janice pulled herself closer to Rob and kissed him lightly on his lips. "I'm okay either way," she said. "I gave you my input before we left the *Providence* two weeks ago."

"I need you to tell me how you feel about it," Rob said emphatically. "Tell me what you want to do."

Jan shook her head. "I can't make the decision for you, Hon." She looked into Rob's eyes. "You're a Starfleet captain. You constantly make decisions. Why are you hesitant about this one?"

Rob lowered his eyes. "I don't know."

Janice gently placed her hand on his chin and raised his head, causing Rob to look at her directly. "I think you do," she gently scolded her husband. "Tell me."

Rob forced a smile. "There are several variables involved," he said. "If we want to have children, the time is soon just as you told me a couple weeks ago. And you're right about a small ship like *Providence* not being the place to raise kids."

"But that's not all, is it?"

"No, it's not," Rob replied. "It feels like...well, it's like we'd be losing members of our family."

Janice nodded. "I know the feeling, Rob. Mel just left a couple months ago."

“And the idea of leaving Blake is hard to swallow,” Rob added. “He’s like a brother to me. In fact, Blake is closer than my real brother.”

“I know,” Jan replied. “But this will give him an opportunity to command as well.”

Rob nodded in agreement. “He’ll make a fine CO...if he can keep from pulling his practical jokes.”

Jan started to laugh at her husband's comment. “He hasn’t played that many jokes, has he?”

“No, he’s matured some during the past few years,” Rob said, trying to suppress his laughter at the memories of years past. “I guess that his added responsibilities have mellowed him some.”

“I’ll take your word on that since I didn’t know him in his wilder days,” Jan said. She looked at her husband and saw in his facial expression that something else had entered the equation. “You haven’t told me everything, Rob. I see it in your eyes.”

Rob led Jan to the nearby couch where they sat down. He took her hand again. “Chuck informed me about Starfleet’s motivation to offer me this command,” he said. “He said that it was a necessary step toward the admiralty.”

Jan’s mouth dropped open. “The admiralty,” she echoed. “I didn’t think you were interested in that.”

“I wasn’t,” Rob replied. “I’ve only wanted to explore the unknown, but now that the idea of one day becoming an admiral has been planted...”

“You’re thinking about it.”

“Yes,” Rob said. “One day, I could be involved in directing Starfleet’s course. The thought of that is overwhelming.”

“Then you should put *that* thought out of your mind,” Jan stated.

“I didn’t expect you to say that,” came Rob’s reply.

Jan smiled at her husband as she squeezed his hand. “I think you should concentrate on the more immediate benefits of commanding the *Monarch*, not so much as looking at it as just a stepping stone to what may happen years from now.” She waited to see if Rob would answer, but he did not say anything. “I’m just saying that you should keep your primary goal of exploring the unknown as the basis for your decision.”

Rob could see the logic of his wife’s statement. “So the question is whether we explore the galaxy aboard the *Monarch* or aboard the *Providence*.”

“Exactly,” Jan said. “Which command will give you the best opportunity to accomplish your goal?”

Rob kissed his wife. “Thanks dear. You’ve helped tremendously.”



Blake Adams stood in the officer’s lounge, facing the observation windows that looked out into space. He did not hear the approach of the man coming toward him.

“Blake?”

Adams turned to see Counselor Goodman standing behind him. “James. I didn’t hear you.”

“Is something bothering you?”

“No,” Blake said. “Why do you ask?”

James, being partially empathic, felt the first officer’s tension build. “You haven’t been acting as...well, like you normally do,” he said. “I’ve sensed that you are anxious about something.”

Blake smiled. “I’ve just had a lot on my mind lately, James. Nothing to worry about.”

“It’s my job to worry about the crew’s emotional well-being, Blake,” Goodman said. “I’ve noticed that you seem sad one minute, happy the next. You’re feeling a deep sense of loss, but at the same time, you are anticipating something that you’re looking forward to. I have also noticed that you’ve been keeping to yourself lately.”

“Thanks for your concern, James, but I’m okay,” Blake lied.

“Don’t shut me out, Blake,” the counselor said. “I know something’s bothering you. I would like you to come to my office so we could talk about this in private.”

Blake wanted to tell James about the possible departure of the Stuarts, but he had promised to keep it to himself until Rob returned with a decision. Blake realized that he was experiencing a conflict of emotions. He had served with Rob Stuart for more than ten years, been his best friend. He wanted what was best for Rob, but the idea of not being on the same ship bothered him. On the other hand, he wanted to command the *Providence* if the opportunity was there to do so. That possibility made him feel nervous and inadequate in one sense, but ecstatic in another.

Blake patted James’ arm. “Okay, I’ll admit that I’ve been preoccupied lately with Lieutenant Kelly’s race.”

“I think it’s more than that,” James stated.

Blake nodded. “Okay, you win. I do have something that’s bothering me, James, but I don’t want to talk about it just yet,” he said. “I can sit down with you sometime after the race tomorrow and talk about it then. Okay?”

James stared at the first officer, sensing that the man was getting angry—a trait that was not normal for him. “Alright,” he said reluctantly. “I’ll wait until tomorrow.”

“Good,” Blake said. “Now if you don’t mind, I want to go back to enjoying the view.” He turned back to stare out the windows, dismissing the counselor.

As Goodman walked away, Blake wondered if Rob had made his decision. Would he stay or would he go? And what would that decision mean for the *Providence*...and for Blake Adams?



The next day Captain and Doctor Stuart stepped off the transporter pads. They looked at each other, wondering why Blake was not present to welcome them aboard. “Where’s Commander Adams, Crewman?” Rob Stuart asked the woman behind the transporter console.

“He’s on the surface, Captain,” the young woman replied. “He waited as long as he could, but...”

“The race is today,” Stuart interrupted. “Jan, we better beam down so we can at least watch part of the race.”

“You go ahead, Rob,” the doctor said. “I’ll get us unpacked. I’m anxious to get back to sickbay, too.”

Rob kissed his wife and returned to the transport chamber. “I’ll be back,” he said. Stuart turned his attention to the crewman manning the console. “Beam me to Commander Adams’ location.”

“Aye Captain. Energizing now.”

Stuart found himself in the guest suite overlooking the track. He looked around, noticing several Starfleet officers mingling with some of the Runii officials. Occasionally, the people would stop their conversations to check the monitors to see which driver was in the lead.

“Over hear, Skipper,” Blake Adams called out from across the room.

Stuart saw Blake waving his arms to get the captain’s attention. He walked briskly toward his first officer. “Blake!” Stuart worked his way through the crowd until he reached him. “You thought I wouldn’t make it.”

“I figured that you just wanted to make a big entrance,” Blake stated. He looked at his friend and CO to see if the man’s face would reveal what decision had been made. As Blake looked, it was as if he could see into his friend’s mind. And he became aware of the command decision that Rob Stuart had made.

“Sorry I’m late, but the *Majestic* just made orbit about twenty minutes ago,” Stuart said. “So, how’s our boy doing?”

Blake looked over his shoulder toward the window that faced the track. “Come see for yourself. I’ve saved you a seat.”

The two men walked toward the window and sat down in the empty chairs that Blake had reserved. Neither man said anything for a couple minutes as they watched the numerous hovercrafts zoom past the grandstand at several hundred kilometers per hour. Finally, unable to wait, Blake broke the silence.

The first officer leaned toward Stuart. “I think I know your decision, but I need to hear you say it,” Blake whispered.

Stuart looked around him to see if any other Starfleet personnel were close enough to overhear. In a low voice, Stuart told his friend what he had both dreaded and looked forward to. “Jan and I will be leaving the *Providence*.”

Blake simply nodded. He did not want Rob to leave. They had served together for more than a decade, been friends. Rob had been Blake's mentor and confidante. Blake Adams did not want that to change. But he realized that change was the only constant in the universe.

Rob Stuart felt the same way as his friend, but he knew that their friendship would continue even if hundreds of light years separated them. "It was a hard decision to make, but after considering everything I think I made the right choice."

"Things won't be the same," Blake said.

Stuart, ignoring the race, focused his attention on Blake. "No, they won't be the same," he replied. "But change has a way of helping us grow."

"And it keeps us from getting bored," Blake added as he smiled at Stuart. "So, how soon till you have to leave?"

Stuart smiled. "The *Providence* will take one more voyage with me in command. We leave for Starbase 82 tomorrow. From there Jan and I will catch a transport back to Earth."

"At least you'll have a few days to say your goodbyes," Blake said.

"And you will have time to review the service records of several candidates for your new first officer as well, Stuart said. "Starfleet will try to arrange transport for any you want to interview while at the starbase."

"I think I'll ask T'Les if she wants the position before looking at anyone else."

"She will be honored that you ask, but I bet she won't accept," Stuart said.

"You're probably right, Skipper, but I'll ask anyway."

The two men glanced through the window to watch the race. They both noticed Lieutenant Kelly's vehicle moving closer to the leader of the pack.

"Too bad that Eric doesn't have a few more years experience," Blake stated. "I'd make him first officer."

Rob nodded. "He's got the potential," he said. He looked at Blake. "I take it that Mister Kelly reminds you of someone. Reminds you of yourself, perhaps?"

Blake smiled. "Maybe," he replied. "But he needs to lighten up. I was never that serious."

"I can't disagree with you on that," Rob said, starting to laugh.

Rob and Blake turned to watch the race once again. Many changes were ahead for both men. But for the present, they would enjoy the next few hours without worrying about the future.



***Captain's Log: Stardate 55344.2***

*This is my final entry as commanding officer, U.S.S. Providence. It has been my honor and privilege to command this vessel and this crew. The men and women that I have*



*served with these past few years have earned my greatest respect and friendship. They are my family and I will miss them. I am confident that this ship—little, yet mighty—will continue to be on the forefront of exploring the final frontier under the command of Blake Adams. May he become the CO that I know he is capable of.*

The starship *Providence* entered the large spacedock facility of Starbase 82. Captain Rob Stuart rose from the center seat as the ship approached the docking berth. He looked around the bridge at the officers that he had served with for almost three years. The turbolift doors slid open; Jan, James Goodman, and Chief McKinney entered the bridge.

Rob Stuart stepped away from his chair and approached the tactical station. He reached out his hand to the chief of security. “Yoshi, it’s been a pleasure.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Lieutenant Nakamara said as he shook the captain’s hand. “The pleasure has been mine.”

Stuart walked to the OPS/Engineering station and shook Mary Goodman’s hand. “You are one of the best OPS officers that I’ve worked with, Mary,” he stated. “And you’re quickly becoming one of the best engineers. I’m sure that you will continue to excel.”

“Thank you, Captain.” A tear formed in Mary Goodman’s left eye.

“James, I want to thank you for your counsel during the past few years. I know that you will give Blake the support and advice that you’ve given me.”

James Goodman shook Stuart’s hand vigorously. “Take care Captain,” he said.

Stuart moved toward Chief McKinney and patted him on the shoulder. “Mac, thank you for your service to this ship and to me,” he said. “You have beamed me out of more than one close call as I remember.”

“Smooth sailing Captain.”

Stuart turned to face Lieutenant Commander T’Les at the science station. He did not approach her but held up his right hand in the traditional Vulcan salute. “Live long and prosper, Commander T’Les.”

The science officer returned the gesture. “Peace and long life, Captain Stuart. May your journey bring good fortune.”

Stuart turned to face the CONN position. “Mister Kelly?”

“Sir,” Lieutenant Kelly stood and faced Stuart.

“As my last command as your CO, I want you to do two things.”

“Just name them Sir,” Kelly replied.

Stuart kept himself from smiling. “First, try to relax and not be so serious,” he said. “Second, I want you to refer to Commander Adams by the same term he has called me.”

Blake fidgeted as he saw Kelly's eyes shift toward him. He saw a hint of a smile tug at the young helmsman's mouth and a mischievous gleam in his blue eyes.

"I can do that Sir," Kelly said.

Stuart turned to Blake and pointed to the command chair. "It's yours, Blake. You're the skipper now."

Blake looked at the center seat, then back to Stuart. "I hope I can fit in it."

Stuart smiled at his friend. "I'm sure you can, Blake. Your butt isn't *that* big."

Blake smiled at Stuart. "My humor's been rubbing off on you, hasn't it?"

"We all have our cross to bear," Stuart replied. He grabbed Blake's shoulders and pulled him close. "This is not goodbye," he whispered. "We'll keep in touch, no matter how many sectors separate us."

Stuart let go of his friend and stepped toward his wife. He took her hand and they both faced the officers that were all watching them. Rob nodded to his crew. "Computer, effective immediately, U.S.S. *Providence*, NCC-81901 is under the command of Commander Blake Adams. Code: Stuart Alpha one seven Iota nine."

Rob and Jan Stuart, hand in hand, turned and entered the turbolift. Their time aboard the *Providence* had come to an end.