

To Boldly Go: The Only Constant

A U.S.S. *Providence* story

By Cleve Johnson

Part I

Rob and Jan Stuart sat in the observatory lounge eating lunch. Rob had picked a table with a near perfect view of the berth where the *Providence* had docked the previous day, waiting until it would once again travel the infinite expanse of open space. Rob stared at his ship...former ship. He had to remember that Blake Adams was now the master and commander of the small starship.

“A penny for your thoughts,” Jan interrupted her husband.

Rob turned to face his wife. “What? I’m sorry. I must have been distracted.”

Jan smiled. “Obviously,” she said with a touch of sarcasm. “Do you regret your decision?”

Rob looked back out the huge transparent aluminum window, looking across the vast interior of Starbase 82. His eyes narrowed to make out the registry painted across the hull...and above it, the name:

U.S.S. PROVIDENCE

Rob turned back toward his wife. “As long as I have you at my side, I have no regrets,” he said. “But I’ll miss that little ship. More importantly, I’ll miss the people that we’ve served with.”

Jan reached across the table and placed her hand on Rob’s. “So will I.”

“Mind if I join you?”

Rob and Jan turned to see Blake Adams approaching their table. Both stood to greet the new CO of Rob’s former command. “Not at all, Blake,” Rob replied.

Jan wiped her napkin across the corner of her mouth, wiping away the remains of her lunch residue. “I think I’ll leave the two of you alone,” she said as she kissed Rob’s cheek.

“Don’t leave on my account,” Blake said.

“I want to take a look around the old station...see if anyone is still here that I served with.” Jan wanted to leave the two men to have one more goodbye before their destinies parted them. “Be careful out there, Blake,” she said, nodding her head in the direction of the giant space doors that were visible through the large restaurant windows.

As Jan turned to leave, Rob and Blake both sat down. Rob took a drink of the glass of water that he had been nursing earlier. Neither man said anything for a few moments.

“I guess this is goodbye,” Blake said, breaking the silence.

Rob shook his head slowly. “I don’t believe in goodbyes. We’ll see each other again.”

“And our friendship will last even if a thousand light years separate us,” Blake added.

Rob lifted his glass to salute his friend. “Here’s to the skipper of the starship *Providence*.”

Blake smiled as he looked around the table. He picked up the half-empty glass of milk that Jan had abandoned. He lifted it toward his friend. “And to the skipper of the starship *Monarch*.”

They drank the toast to one another and subsequently set down their glasses. Rob leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table after pushing aside his plate. “So have you reviewed the candidates for your first officer?”

“I read their files and interviewed two. I’m interviewing the last candidate in a couple hours,” Blake said. “Only three people applied for the position.”

Rob shook his head. “I can’t understand that,” he said. “What qualified officer would not apply for a position? Did Starfleet Command fail to post the position?”

“They posted it the same day that you decided to transfer to the *Monarch*,” Blake said. “It seems that most qualified officers are looking for a more prestigious position than being the first officer of a small scout ship like *Providence*.”

“Obviously they don’t understand how exciting it is to be the first to open up new frontiers,” Rob said. “So...are you leaning toward anyone in particular?”

Blake nonchalantly nodded his head to the side. “I’m strongly considering a Lieutenant Green. He’s the senior CONN officer on the *Shran*.”

Stuart sat up. Clearly, concern etched his face when he heard the name. “Not Ronald Green, I hope.”

“His first name’s Ronald,” Blake said. “You know him?”

Stuart slowly leaned back in his chair. “I know what he’s capable of.” Stuart let his mind drift back into the past—a memory of his encounter with *Commander* Ronald Green from an alternate future.



Rob Stuart stood on the bridge of the *Providence*—the one from the future—staring at the phaser pointing toward him.

“I can’t let you tamper with the timeline, Captain,” *Commander* Ronald Green stated coldly. “Stuart was supposed to die down on the surface. If he dies here the original timeline will probably be corrected with very little difference.”

Blake Adams slowly stepped toward *Commander* Green. “Put the phaser down, *Commander*,” he said.

Green turned the weapon toward Adams. “I don’t want to hurt you, Captain,” he said. “But you have messed up our history. And I have to fix it.”

Blake stopped and held out his hand, palm up. “I am ordering you to give me that phaser, Mister Green,” he said in an angry tone.

Green did not waiver. “I don’t take orders from traitors, Sir.” And Green turned the phaser back toward Stuart and moved his thumb over the trigger.

The phaser discharged, but Adams had already lunged toward his new first officer. Captain Blake Adams fell to the deck, knocking Green’s weapon to the floor with him. Stuart and James Goodman rushed to tackle Green before he could recover the phaser. A punch from Stuart and Green hit the tactical console with his head. Green was unconscious.

Rob Stuart turned to see Janice already feeling for a pulse on Blake’s neck. He feared the worst. And Stuart knew that his fears were confirmed when Jan looked up with tears trickling down her face, shaking her head.

Stuart knelt down beside his friend. Emotion welled up within him as he struggled to maintain composure. “He gave up everything to save me,” Stuart said. “His command. His career. His life.”¹



“Rob? Are you okay?”

Stuart, his thoughts interrupted, returned to the present. “Sorry, Blake. My mind was somewhere else.”

“You mind explaining what you meant by that last comment?”

Stuart thought about the repercussions of what he wanted to tell his friend. It was a violation of the Temporal Prime Directive, but Rob decided that his friendship with Blake Adams took precedence. “I’m going to tell you something that is strictly off the record,” he said. “Unless you want Temporal Investigations after the both of us, you’ll keep this to yourself.”

Blake saw the seriousness in his friend’s facial expression. “I sure don’t want trouble with *them*,” he said. “What happened?”

Rob proceeded to tell Blake about his near-death experience almost two years prior. He told him how a future version of Blake Adams and some of the crew conspired to travel back in time to save Rob from dying...changing history in the process. He told Blake how the future Ronald Green had stowed away on the *Providence* and tried to correct his timeline by attempted murder. Rob told Blake how his alternate self from the future died at the hands of Green.

Blake let out a heavy sigh, contemplating the situation. “But that was another Ron Green. Since the timeline changed, wouldn’t he change, too?”

“Perhaps, but I believe that people are who they are,” Rob said. “If he was capable of killing you in an alternate reality, he’s capable of killing you in this one.”

Blake pursed his lips and leaned back in his chair, gently rocking on its back legs. It was as if he dared the chair to tip backward, but the new CO of the starship *Providence*

¹ Excerpted from the Star Trek *Providence* short story *A Time to Die...A Time to Live*.

kept perfect balance. “Well, I suppose I’ll need to consider this bit of information in my decision.”

Stuart relaxed with the knowledge that Blake had access to the truth of what Green might be capable of. “You’re the skipper now, Blake. Who you choose as your exec is up to you, but I wanted...needed to make sure that you had all the facts about one of your choices.”

“Thanks, Rob,” Blake said as he moved forward, his chair now resting on all legs. Rob nodded to his friend. “Don’t mention it.”

The two men stared at their drinks for a few seconds. Blake, not taking his eyes off the glass that he slowly rotated in his hand, broke the silence. “I’ll take good care of her.”

Rob smiled, knowing that Blake was referring to the ship. “I know you will, Blake. Remember to take care of yourself, too.”

Blake looked at Rob with a mischievous gleam. His eyes took on a sparkle whenever he thought of a joke or had a smart-alecky comment. “I always do *that*.” Despite his good humor and apparent disdain for seriousness, on most occasions, Blake wondered how their friendship—his and Rob’s—would change due to the vast distance that would soon separate them. “It won’t be the same without you,” he said.

“I’ve thought the same thing,” Rob said. “About how different life will be without you and I serving together, that is. I guess it’s true that change is the only constant in the universe.”

“Yeah, I guess it’s true.” Blake stood up and straightened his uniform. “I better get going, Rob. I need to conduct an interview.”

Rob stood and stuck out his hand toward his best friend. They clasped their hands together and shook firmly. “I don’t know when we’ll have the chance to get together again, Blake, but what’s a few hundred light years between friends?”

“That sounds like something I would say,” Blake replied. He grabbed Rob and gave him a firm bear hug. After letting go, the two men backed away from one another. Blake nodded to his friend. “Goodbye Rob.”

Stuart shook his head slowly. “No. No goodbyes, Blake,” he said. “Until next time.”

“Until next time.” Blake turned and left the restaurant, allowing Stuart to peer out the windows to take one last look at the U.S.S. *Providence*.



Blake reviewed Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot’s file one more time before the interview. He was impressed with Lightfoot’s performance record as both a scientist and an officer. He took special note of her excellent marks at the command school—top of her class.

The chime sounded, interrupting Blake’s thoughts. He glanced at the chronometer display in the lower corner of the computer monitor. *She’s prompt*, he thought. “Enter.”

The door slid open and Jada Lightfoot entered Blake's ready room. Her dark eyes matched the color of her silky hair. Her combined native American-Israeli heritage could be seen in her appearance. Lightfoot was young, about thirty years old, but she displayed herself as one who was mature beyond her years. As she snapped to attention, an aura of professionalism radiated from the officer—obviously one of those by-the-book types. “Lieutenant Commander Jada Lightfoot reporting,” she said formally.

Blake suppressed the laughter that struggled to escape his mouth. *Way too formal.* “At ease, Commander,” he said as he stood to greet the applicant. “Have a seat.”

Lightfoot gracefully moved to the chair in front of the desk, opposite of Blake's own. “Thank you, Sir,” she said as she started to sit.

Blake sat down in like manner and reached across the desk to shake the young woman's hand. “I understand that you recently graduated from the command school. Top of your class.”

“Yes Sir,” Lightfoot replied, trying not to blush. Fortunately, her skin tone helped to mask the physiological reaction to the mention of her achievement.

“What command experience do you have, Commander?”

“I led twelve successful simulated away missions at the command school, Sir,” Lightfoot said. “Some of the mission profiles were quite challenging.”

Blake nodded. “I'm sure. But how many non-simulated away missions have you led?”

Lightfoot shifted her weight in the chair. To her chagrin, Jada had little practical experience as a command-level officer. “I led a science team to survey the Nekrata habitat on Maya Two when I was head of life sciences on the *Sanchez*.”

Blake leaned back and considered Lightfoot's qualifications...or lack thereof. “Being the first officer of a starship is more than just completing the requirements of command school,” he said. “Even if you were valedictorian of your class, that doesn't mean your book work can take the place of practical experience.”

“Permission to speak freely, Commander?” Jada asked with her jaw set firmly.

Blake nodded. “Of course.”

“With all due respect, how can I get practical experience unless I have the opportunity to do so?”

“Good point,” Blake said. “According to your record, you have excelled at everything that you have done. I'd like to believe that you could do the same thing if I chose you as my first officer.” Blake sighed. “I would be less concerned about your lack of experience if our mission didn't take us to unexplored space. There's always the possibility of danger on the frontier.”

“I understand that, Commander Adams,” Jada said. “I only ask for the opportunity to prove myself.”

“I'll have to think about it, Lieutenant Commander,” Blake said. “I have two other applicants that I have to consider.”

“May I ask when your decision will be made?”

Blake’s eyes rolled up to peer at the ceiling as he thought about his timetable. “Within forty-eight hours,” he said after a few seconds. “And I assure you that I will give you equal consideration.” *I’m starting to sound like Rob*, he thought.

“That’s all I ask, Commander Adams,” Jada said.

Blake rose and stuck out his hand. Jada followed suit and shook his hand firmly. “Thanks for coming, Lieutenant Commander.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Jada said. With that, the young woman turned and exited Blake’s office.

Before the door slid shut, Lieutenant J.G. Eric Kelly stepped close enough to prevent the door from closing. “Do you have a minute, Skipper?”

Blake motioned for the young officer to enter. “Sure, Eric. What’s on your mind?”

Kelly stepped into the office and approached Adams’ desk. He stopped but remained standing. He did not want to assume that he could just sit down without his CO’s invitation to do so. And what he had to say did not warrant a drawn-out conversation. “I hope I’m not intruding, Sir.”

“I could use a little intrusion right now,” Blake said. “It keeps me from thinking too hard.”

“Sir?”

“Nothing. Just things I need to decide.”

Eric got Blake’s meaning. “Ah. Choosing the new XO is tough on you, Sir?”

“I’ve never been in this position before,” Blake said as he shrugged it off. “Anyway, what can I do for you?”

Eric had almost forgotten why he came in. “I wanted permission to run some flight simulations and make changes to the CONN control panel...to make it more efficient.”

Blake thought the layout of the console was efficient enough...for him. But Eric was now the senior flight officer and Blake wanted to accommodate the young man. To give him some liberty in his new position. “Fine with me,” he said. “But just remember, you have to train all the other flight officers once you’re done playing around with the controls.”

Eric smiled and nodded. “Thanks, Skipper.”

“No problem.”

The younger man turned and exited the room, leaving Blake to mull over his choices for first officer. He quickly reviewed the three officers’ interviews in his mind. *Witherspoon’s too much like me*, Blake thought. *I need a complement, not a clone. Green’s had some command experience, serving as duty officer from time to time. But I’m not sure I can trust him after what Rob told me.*

Blake pulled up Jada Lightfoot's record on the terminal and looked through it for the fourth time in two days. *Lightfoot has an excellent record and already has the rank, but she seems too formal. Her command simulations show that she is a strict by-the-book officer.* Blake turned off the monitor and leaned backward, placing his hands behind his head. "That could be a good thing," he said to the empty room. "I'm so laid back and she's so...well, she too by-the-book. Maybe we could meet somewhere in the middle and make a good team."

Part II

The U.S.S. *Providence* sailed toward the Beta Tongarii sector. Blake looked out his cabin windows, wondering what changes were in store. He still felt odd in his new position as CO, but he acknowledged that he would get used to the changes. Like Rob told him only a week before, change is the only constant.

Blake's thoughts were interrupted by the communication system signaling an incoming call from sickbay. "Go ahead, Doctor."

"If you have a minute, Captain, I would like to see you in sickbay."

Blake rolled his eyes at the sound of the word 'captain.' It made him feel strange whenever one of the crew called him by that title. *I'm only a commander, after all, he thought.* But according to naval tradition, as Lieutenant Commander T'Les had told him the other day, the commanding officer, regardless of rank, should be addressed as 'Captain.' Blake would just have to accept that.

"Anything wrong, Doc?" Blake asked.

"No emergency. I just need to see you."

"I'll be there in a few minutes," Blake replied as he reached down for his uniform tunic that had been dropped on the couch earlier. As he put on his uniform top, Blake wondered what the new CMO wanted.



Blake entered sickbay and approached the CMO's office. He stopped at the open door and poked his head inside, seeing the doctor entering information into the computer terminal via a keypad. "You wanted to see me, Doc?"

Doctor Neil Hogan motioned Blake to sit down but did not look up from the monitor. "I'll be with you in a minute," he said as he completed his task.

Adams had heard that Doctor Hogan, a New Zealander in his early fifties, could be eccentric, even to the point of borderline insubordination toward superiors. Blake held an appreciation for a man who spoke his mind, but as the doctor's CO, Blake had to keep Hogan in check. "You did call me, Doc. You could at least talk to me now that I'm here."

Hogan looked away from the monitor and smiled mischievously. "What's the hurry, Captain? You weren't on duty."

Blake smiled back. "As CO I'm always on duty."

"Quite true, Captain Adams, but it isn't your shift," Hogan replied. "Besides that, the computer told me you were in your quarters."

“I’m so glad you’re keeping tabs on me, Doc,” Blake said with more than a hint of sarcasm. “Now what did you want me for?”

“Time for your semi-annual physical, Captain.”

Blake shook his head. “Better check your records, Doc. I just had mine less than two months ago.”

“That one was done by Doctor Stuart,” Hogan said. “I’m the new doctor and I am going to reschedule all physicals to establish a medical baseline. And seeing that you’re the commanding officer, you will set a good example for the crew by being the first one that I do.”

“You’re kidding.”

Hogan’s face turned serious. “Do I look like I’m kidding, Captain Adams?”

Blake started to leave the CMO’s office. “I don’t have time for this, Doc. You can do my physical according to schedule.”

“As I stated, Captain Adams, I have changed that schedule,” Hogan said. “And regulations give me the authority to order a physical when I deem necessary.”

“You’ve read the whole book,” Blake said, scowling.

Hogan smiled triumphantly as he pushed his chair away from his desk and stood up. “I’m so glad you see it my way, Captain. Now, if you’ll follow me to the examination table we can get...

“Bridge to Captain Adams.”

Blake tapped his communicator insignia. “Adams. Go ahead, Yoshi.”

“We’re receiving a priority one transmission from Starbase 82, Sir,” the tactical/chief security officer said.

Blake was tempted to commandeer the doctor’s office just for the pleasure of throwing the arrogant jackass out but decided that it would be more advantageous to leave the doctor’s domain. “Patch the message through to my ready room. I’ll be right there.”

Neil Hogan frowned at Adams as the commanding officer exited sickbay. “Don’t think this will get you out of your physical,” he said to the door that had closed after Adams’ exit. Hogan shook his head and started back toward his office. “If I’m not careful, I’ll start talking to myself.”



Commander Adams entered his ready room and turned the computer monitor as he sat down. It came to life as he pushed the communication control.

The image of Admiral Martin Dean, commanding officer of Starbase 82, appeared. “*Well, Blake,*” the admiral said, “*I know it’s only been a week since we saw each other. So don’t think I’m checking up on you already.*”

Blake smiled. He had known Admiral Dean most of his life. The two men had similar personalities and understood each other well. The admiral, sensing a natural

camaraderie, took an interest in Blake as a teenager and sponsored the young man when Blake applied to Starfleet Academy. "It must be important, or you wouldn't have sent a priority message, Admiral," Blake stated.

Admiral Dean's facial expression turned from joviality to concern. "*You're right, there,*" he said. "*We lost contact with the Artemis. Her last known position was grid 244 of the Beta Tongarii sector.*"

"That's near the Gratzik Nebula," Blake said. "Nothing dangerous to a Federation starship in that area."

"*What about the Tranak?*"

Blake shook his head. "I don't think so, Admiral. They're only aggressive when someone gets too close to their territory and grid 244 is several light years outside their borders." He paused, remembering the few previous encounters that the *Providence* had with the xenophobic Tranak. "Besides, their weaponry wouldn't have a chance at penetrating the *Artemis*' shields."

"*Sounds like we have a real mystery on our hands, Blake.*" Admiral Dean forced a smile. "*Your orders are to search for the Artemis and report what you find. I hope that this is just a problem with the ship's communications.*"

"Me too," Blake said. "I'll let you know what we find out, Admiral."

"*Good luck, Blake. Dean out.*" The admiral's image faded from the darkening screen.

Blake stood and moved toward the door that separated his office from the bridge. The doors parted and he stepped into the command center of the *Ericsson*-class starship.

"Captain on the bridge," Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot, the *Providence*'s new first officer, announced to the other bridge occupants.

Blake kept telling himself that Lightfoot would become less formal with time. At least he hoped that she would. "Mister Kelly, set course zero two eight mark seven. Increase to warp nine."

"Aye Skipper," the young J.G. said as he quickly entered the new course and speed.

"Engage," Blake said. He turned to the young woman standing next to the center seat. "Commander Lightfoot, please inform senior staff that there will be a briefing in ten minutes."

"Yes Sir," Jada replied as Blake reentered the ready room.



Captain's Log: Stardate 55387.8

We have entered grid 244 on the edge of the Gratzik Nebula and started our search for the Artemis. We have continued hailing the ship without reply. Long-range sensors have, so far, not detected any sign of her.

“T’Les, anything?” Blake asked.

The Vulcan science officer turned toward Commander Adams. “Negative, Captain,” she said. “Our sensors can only penetrate two thousand kilometers into the nebula. If the *Artemis* is inside, we will not be able to detect it. I suggest we launch a class one probe to increase our range.”

Blake nodded. “Whatever you think, Commander. Launch when ready.”

The probe exited the starship’s forward launch tube, speeding toward the layers of stellar gas in the distance. It entered the swirl of various colors and faded from view.

“Telemetry readings indicate that the probe has penetrated the nebula,” T’Les stated. “Forty-seven point six percent hydrogen, thirty-nine point one percent helium, two point...”

“I know you’re thorough, T’Les, but we’re looking for an *Intrepid*-class starship. This isn’t a survey of nebula gases,” Blake interrupted.

“My apologies, Captain,” the Vulcan replied. “I will concentrate solely on readings pertinent to locating the *Artemis*.”

Blake smiled approvingly, trying not to offend his science officer. “Good.”

“I recommend that we send a general hail to the *Artemis*, Sir,” Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot stated.

Blake nodded his approval. “Make it so, Jada,” he said, making a point to use the first officer’s first name in an attempt to help her be less formal. He preferred to use the first names of those he worked with.

“Captain, the probe has detected evidence of a plasma trail leading out of the nebula at coordinates five seven by two eight by four one,” T’Les said.

“Eric, change course. Full impulse.”

“Aye, Skipper,” the young CONN officer replied. “Our ETA is four and a half minutes.”



Captain’s Log: Supplemental

After following the Artemis’ impulse trail for more than five hours, we have emerged from the nebula. Lieutenant Commander T’Les has informed me that long-range sensors have detected the ship heading for Romulan space. We are in pursuit.

“How long till we catch her, Mister Kelly?” Blake Adams asked.

“Forty minutes at present speed, Skipper.”

Blake, swiveling his chair around to face the OPS/Engineering station directly behind him, addressed the chief engineer. “Mary, I may need more from your engines. Will that be a problem?”

Lieutenant Mary Goodman checked her console. “I can give you warp nine point three. Nine point five for a short time if you need it.”

Blake looked over his shoulder toward Eric Kelly’s back. “Time to intercept if we increase to nine point five, Lieutenant?”

Kelly entered some calculations into his control panel and turned his head back toward his CO. “We could overtake the *Artemis* in less than twenty minutes.”

Blake looked back at Goodman, his facial expression asking if the engines could handle the strain.

Mary Goodman nodded. “We can handle that without a problem, Captain.”

Blake turned his chair back to the forward position. *I don’t know if I can get used to being called ‘Captain,’* he thought. “Okay kid, take us to nine five.”

“Aye Skipper.”

“Yoshi, any response to our hails?”

“No Sir,” Lieutenant Nakamara replied.

Blake rubbed his forehead. “Discontinue hails until we catch up with her,” he said. “Jada, we may have to board her.”

Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot had been entering information into a tricorder. “I’ll put together an away team, Captain.”

Blake felt uneasy about his first officer leading an away team. It would be her first ever. He didn’t consider the twelve simulated away teams that she led while at the command school as valid experiences to prepare her for the real thing. If the *Artemis* required boarding, Blake decided that he would lead the away team himself.

Twenty minutes passed quickly and the *Providence* approached the *Intrepid*-class starship. Silence still blared loudly over the communications frequencies as the *Artemis* continued its trek toward the Romulan Empire.

“We’re coming up on the *Artemis* fast, Skipper,” Lieutenant Kelly said.

“What’s her speed?”

“Warp seven point two.”

“Take us within five hundred meters and match speed, Lieutenant,” Blake said. “Yoshi, open a channel.”

“Hailing frequencies open, Sir,” Nakamara said.

“This is Commander Adams of the U.S.S. *Providence*. *Artemis*, please respond.”

“Captain.” It was T’Les who spoke. “They cannot respond.”

“Why not, Commander?”

“No one is alive on the *Artemis*, Captain,” the Vulcan stated coolly. “Life support is not functioning.”

“What?”

“According to sensor scans the life support has been offline for several hours,” T’Les said. “Internal temperature is negative seven point five one degrees Celsius. Oxygen content is only two point four percent.”

“What could have happened?” Lightfoot asked.

Blake closed his eyes and sighed deeply. He knew several officers that served on the *Artemis*. The senior flight officer was in Blake’s Academy class. On opening his eyes, Blake stared at the other ship’s image dominating the viewer. “T’Les, bring up the *Artemis*’ prefix code and patch into their systems. We’ll bring her out of warp and reactivate life support.”

T’Les activated the LCARS interface and began the task of searching for the other starship’s prefix code. Every Starfleet vessel had its own code to lock out the main computer core from potential incursion by a hostile force. Fortunately, each Starfleet vessel also contained a computer record of all other Federation starships’ codes for such situations as this one. “The code has been changed, Captain,” the Vulcan stated. “We cannot access the *Artemis*.”

Blake got out of the center seat and began pacing. As he made his third pass in front of the main viewer, he looked at the other ship with the stars streaking by. “Options?”

“We could fire phasers at the nacelles to bring the ship out of warp,” Nakamara said.

“That would be too dangerous, Yoshi,” Mary Goodman said. “The stress of bringing the *Artemis* out of warp like that could tear it apart.”

“An away team could transport at warp, Captain, if both starships’ velocity were identical,” T’Les said.

Blake mulled that option over in his mind. “Have we matched velocity yet, Eric?”

“Aye Skipper.”

“Good,” Blake Adams stated. “Yoshi, Mary, you’re with me. Commander Lightfoot, have Doctor Hogan meet us in transporter room one.”

“Sir?”

“Do you have a problem with that, Jada?”

Jada, pursing her lips in frustration, thought about holding her tongue. She decided against that strategy and let out a deep breath. “Yes Sir, I do,” she said. “With due respect, Sir, as commanding officer your place is here. As first officer, mine is leading the away team.”

“That *is* in accordance with regulations, Captain,” T’Les chimed in.

Blake Adams, realizing that his officers were...not exactly against him, but right about the regs, decided that he should address his concerns to Jada Lightfoot...in private. “Can I see you in my ready room, Commander.”

Lightfoot frowned as she followed Adams into his ready room. Once the door slid shut behind them, Blake turned around and faced his XO. “Don’t take this personal, Jada, but I don’t want your first real away mission to be so . . .”

“Mysterious,” Lightfoot interjected. “Commander, I know that I can do my job. Why did you choose me as your first officer if you weren’t going to trust me to fulfill my role?”

Blake realized that he had not been fair to Jada. She was right and he was wrong. He had always relied on Rob, Melanie, himself. He would have to learn to rely on Jada. It would be a change, but what was it that Rob had told him? Change is the only constant in the universe. “I’m sorry, Jada,” he said.

Lightfoot anticipated her relegation to the bridge, as her CO would go, potentially, into harm’s way. But it was *her* duty. “Captain . . .”

Blake smiled. “You’re right, Jada. You will lead the away team.”

“I know you don’t consider simulated away missions on a holodeck as . . . what did you say?”

“I said that you will command the away team,” Blake said with a wide grin. “It’s your duty as the first officer according to the regs and you are perfectly capable. I’m sorry for . . . not trusting you.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Lightfoot replied. “I won’t let you down, Captain.”

“No, I don’t think that you will,” Blake said. “Now get your team together and get over there. Find out what happened, Jada.”

“Yes Sir,” she said. Then Jada Lightfoot, first officer of the U.S.S. *Providence*, turned and exited the ready room. She started toward the turbolift and stopped as the doors whooshed open. “Lieutenant Commander T’Les, Lieutenant Goodman, Lieutenant Nakamara, with me.” She tapped her communicator. “Doctor Hogan, report to transporter room one for away team duty.” Lightfoot, followed by T’Les, Goodman, and Nakamara, entered the lift.

Blake watched his officers leave the bridge. Once the turbolift doors closed, he turned and walked toward the center of the control room and sat in his chair. *They’ll be fine*, he told himself. *She’ll do fine*.

Part III

Donned in space suits, the away team materialized on the bridge of the *Intrepid*-class starship. The lights were dimmed red, making it difficult to see, but the helmet lights helped to illuminate the room.

Nakamara looked around the room, noticing that some of the officers and crew were on the floor near the entrance to the ready room, but most were still at their posts when death overcame them. “I hope I can show that much devotion to duty when my time comes,” he said. He made a mental note that those on the floor wore the gold tunics of support personnel, probably from the security section since phasers were near the bodies—some still clutched tightly in dead hands. Apparently, they had tried to get into the CO’s office. But why? He pulled out his tricorder to scan the other side of the door.

Hogan used his tricorder to scan the bodies of the *Artemis*' bridge crew. "They're all dead," he said. "At least three to four hours, I'd say."

"Commander," Lieutenant Goodman said from the engineering station. "It looks as if all life support, engineering, and navigation have been locked out and rerouted to the captain's ready room."

Lightfoot joined Goodman behind the engineering console to look over the readings. "What about computer access?"

T'Les, already at the science console, gently moved the dead body of the duty science officer that was slumped on top of the controls. She quickly worked the touchpad controls to access the main computer. "The computer is still online, Commander, but main functions have been locked out by the captain," she said. "It appears that the crew was trying to regain control when they died."

"Can you access the logs?" the first officer asked.

T'Les continued to run her long fingers gracefully across the console. It only took a few seconds for her to get the information that she searched for. "All of the captain's personal logs during the last four days are encrypted, but I have access to all others."

"Start with the first officer's logs to see if they shed light on what happened," Jada said.

"Commander Lightfoot," Nakamara said to get the first officer's attention.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"There's a force field protecting the entrance to the ready room," the senior security officer said. "It looks like they were trying to burn through the bulkhead with phasers. I scanned the room and determined that there's one body in there. I assume that it's Captain Wynn."

"Don't assume anything, Lieutenant," Lightfoot said. "How long will it take to finish cutting through to deactivate the force field?"

"They almost reached the circuitry, so I would say that it shouldn't be more than ten minutes."

"Make it so, Lieutenant," Lightfoot said. She turned and stepped down the platform, walking in the direction of the science station. "Anything from the logs, Commander T'Les?"

The Vulcan woman straightened and put her hands behind her back. She faced the first officer. "According to the first officer and chief medical officer, Captain Wynn apparently suffered some sort of mental breakdown. There were no warning signs leading to his mental collapse."

Doctor Hogan approached the two women. "There are always warning signs," he said. "People just don't snap that easily. Especially not people like Jeremy Wynn."

"You knew him, Doctor?" Jada asked.

"We served together a long time ago," Hogan said, the sound of grief projecting through his vocal inflections.

“I’m sorry for the loss of your friend,” Jada said, trying to comfort the older man.

“Thank you, Commander,” Hogan said. “I’ve served in Starfleet long enough to have experienced the loss of several friends. I’m afraid it never gets easier.” The doctor turned and walked away.

Jada and T’Les watched Hogan step away to be alone—to mourn.

“Commander Lightfoot, I found one other point of interest in the ship’s logs that may be relevant to the situation,” the Vulcan stated.

Jada, finding it difficult not to feel the doctor’s inner pain, turned back to the science officer. “Go ahead, Commander.”

“The *Artemis* responded to an alien ship’s distress signal four days ago, coinciding with the security encryption on Captain Wynn’s personal logs.”

“Doesn’t sound like a coincidence, does it?” Lightfoot mused.

“Negative,” T’Les replied. “The ship was a small vessel, apparently on a survey mission. A micrometeor struck the ship, penetrating the engine core. The ship was brought into the shuttlebay and Captain Wynn offered the aliens safe haven until their ship was repaired.” T’Les’ facial features started to shift, a concerned look was evident. “It should be noted that during the aliens’ stay, Captain Wynn spent a considerable amount of time alone with them.”

“Are you suggesting that there is a connection?”

“I do not have enough evidence yet to form a hypothesis, but it is logical to assume that the aliens’ time on the *Artemis* is connected to Captain Wynn’s mental state.”

Jada would have rubbed her chin if not for the helmet that she wore. “Lightfoot to *Providence*,” she said, activating the communications link.

“*Go ahead, Jada,*” the voice of Commander Adams echoed inside her helmet.

“We need a computer link up, Sir,” Lightfoot said. “I want to upload the logs and other records for analysis.”

There was a slight pause before Blake’s reply. *Lieutenant Gonzalez is establishing the link now,*” he said. “*Can you bring the Artemis out of warp?*”

Jada paused to look toward the ready room. Lieutenant Nakamara had just removed a section of the bulkhead that had been cut through with his phaser. Lightfoot watched the security chief reach his hand into the wall. There was a flicker of energy in front of the door as Nakamara deactivated the force field. She nodded affirmatively as Yoshi stuck his thumb up, the door sliding open simultaneously.

Jada returned her attention to Commander Adams. “We’re still working on that, Captain. Hopefully, we can regain control of propulsion and navigation before too long.”

“*Keep me in the loop, Jada. Adams out.*”



Captain's Log: Stardate 55388.5

The away team has gained control of the Artemis and brought her out of warp. We are continuing our investigation into the mystery of what happened, but it appears that Captain Wynn had a mental breakdown and killed his crew. Early evidence suggests that he may have been under alien influence. If so, he should not be held accountable for his actions.

“Come in,” Blake said in response to the chime.

The door to the captain's ready room slid open. Lieutenant Commander James Goodman entered and sat across from his CO. “How's it going, Skipper?”

“Not you too,” Blake said. “It's bad enough that the kid calls me that.” Blake referred to Lieutenant J.G. Eric Kelly as ‘kid.’ “I wish Rob wouldn't have ordered him to call me Skipper,” Blake said with a grin.

James' face lit up. “You can only blame yourself, Blake,” he said. “If you wouldn't have called Captain Stuart that...”

“I guess I should have looked ahead a long time ago,” Blake said. “My past has caught up to haunt me.”

James chuckled at Blake's statement. “The past tends to change people.”

“It's the only constant,” Blake said.

“What's that?”

“Change,” Blake said. “It's the only constant in the universe.”

“I guess I never thought of it that way,” James replied. “Well, I've noticed that command has changed you. You're becoming more...responsible. More serious.”

“That's a terrible thing to say,” Blake said. “I think I had more fun when I was an irresponsible first officer.”

James smiled. “Speaking of responsible, Blake, I have to tell you that the new XO is quite the go-getter,” James stated. “I think she has what it takes.”

“I think you're right, James. She certainly proved herself to me.”

Both men fell silent. They knew that they needed to talk about what happened to Captain Wynn, but neither wanted to do that. The thought that a man could kill more than one hundred fifty people—his crew, some that were close friends—was horrendous.

After several moments of silence, the two officers looked at each other. Counselor Goodman broke the silence. “The logs of the CMO and first officer show without a doubt that Captain Wynn did suffer some type of personality change. He seemed to be acting rationally, but without any warning, he snapped and locked himself in the ready room.”

“And then he changed the codes,” Blake added. “He shut off the life support.”

“Yeah. He shut off the life support,” James echoed. “Doctor Hogan is doing an autopsy to find signs of outside influence.”

“I understand that the doctor knew Captain Wynn,” Blake said.

“Yes, he did. Blake, the doctor is taking this hard, but he’s trying not to show it.”

“That’s brave of him,” Blake said as he leaned back in his chair.

“It may be brave, but it’s not good to hold grief in,” the counselor stated. “It’s not healthy.”

“Then you should address your concerns with him, Counselor,” Blake stated. “I would, but I don’t think that he is willing to listen to me.”

“Why not?”

Blake smiled. “We had a slight conflict of interest.” Blake saw the look of confusion on James’ face, so he continued. “He tried to pull rank on me.”

“Ah, I see,” James said. “Medical regs.”

“His version of the regs,” Blake said. “He wants me to submit to a physical that’s not due for another four months.”

“I see. So, why don’t you submit to it?”

Blake tilted his head to one side. “It’s a matter of principle,” he said.

James stared at his CO, his face deadpan. “Since when have you cared about principles?”

Both men laughed.

“*Bridge to Captain,*” Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot’s voice interrupted Blake and James’ reverie at Doctor Hogan’s expense.

Blake hit the communications control on his desk. “Go ahead, Jada.”

“*We’ve unlocked Captain Wynn’s logs, Sir.*”

Blake rose from his chair and started toward the door, followed by Counselor Goodman. “On our way,” he said.



Captain’s Log: Stardate 55371.4

The alien ship has been repaired and its crew is on their way home. I have had the opportunity to spend quite some time with them during their brief stay. We seem to have much in common with these people—the Kairn—despite their reptilian appearance. I look forward to getting to know them better on our next encounter.*

Captain’s Personal Log: Stardate 55373.2

I keep thinking about the Kairn. I dreamt about them last night. They told me to do something. I can’t quite remember what they told me, but the thought of it makes me uneasy.

Captain's Personal Log: Stardate 55376.4

I woke up sweating this morning. I had another dream about our guests from the other day. They called to me. I even hear them calling to me now in my waking hours. I feel like they want me to do a terrible thing, but my mind is blurry...and I can't remember. I feel that something terrible will happen.

Captain's Personal Log: Stardate 55379.1

I feel like I'm losing control. Last night, I dreamt about the aliens again. In my dream, they ordered me to change the command codes and lock out control of the ship to all but myself. Then they ordered me to shut down life support. It doesn't make sense. Why would the Kairn want me to kill my crew? I'm confused. Why am I dreaming these horrible things? I tried to tell Fritz about my dreams, but whenever I open my mouth I say something other than what I want to.

Captain's Personal Log: Supplemental

I can't control myself. My dream is becoming reality as I enter new command codes, known only to me, into the computer. I have erected a force field around the entrance to my ready room so the crew—my crew—cannot stop me from the horrible thing that I am about to do. God strike me down before I do this terrible deed. I cannot stop myself. What did they do to me? The Kairn have taken control and I can't stop myself.

The viewer went dark.

“That’s all we have to go on,” Jada Lightfoot said. “Commander T’Les has done a computer search on the Kairn, but there is no mention of them in our database. The *Artemis* must have been the first Federation starship to encounter them.”

“Great. A new hostile species to be on our guard against,” Blake said under his breath. “I understand that Doctor Hogan is conducting an autopsy on Captain Wynn. Maybe he can shed more light on what happened.”

As if knowing that he had been summoned, Doctor Neil Hogan entered the conference room and slowly walked toward the table. He sat down in the seat next to Commander Adams. “I have the autopsy report,” he stated.

“What did you find, Doc?” Adams asked.

“Jeremy...Captain Wynn was under alien influence. I found this embedded in the base of his brain stem,” Hogan said as he held up an old-fashioned pair of tweezers holding an alien microchip. It was small, only about half a millimeter square and thin as paper. “I suspect that it’s a mind control device. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Perhaps our science officer can figure it out,” Adams stated.

Doctor Hogan dropped the chip in a small plastic bag and handed it across the table to Lieutenant Commander T’Les. “I trust you’ll be able to figure it out, Commander,” he said as the container passed from his hand to hers.

“I’ll endeavor to do my best,” the Vulcan stated with almost human sarcasm. T’Les, being one-eighth Romulan and one-eighth human, tried to suppress the dislike that she held for the new CMO’s brash demeanor, but she found that her normal discipline was being stretched by the three species/cultures combined within her flesh that warred against one another. Fortunately, Vulcan discipline won out, but T’Les allowed a little sarcasm to enter the tone of her voice anyway. It was not due to lack of control. It was by choice.

Blake had known the Vulcan long enough to hear the slight vocal inflection and knew that the doctor had been an annoyance to T’Les as well. And Vulcans do not typically show annoyance unless they are *really* annoyed. He made a mental note to ask T’Les about her reasons for her apparent dislike of the new CMO later, but Vulcans also had a tendency to keep their reasoning to themselves. “Anything to add?”

Silence and heads shaking answered Blake’s question.

Blake looked at his science officer. “I look forward to your report, Commander,” he said. He stood and looked at each of the officers—those who participated in the away team—all sitting around the table and focusing on him. He fixed his eyes on the new first officer—his exec. “Well done, Jada, on commanding your first *real* away team.”

Jada blushed slightly. “Thank you, Sir. I wish the outcome had been different.”

Blake nodded. He understood. “I would like everyone else to get your mission reports to me by 1600. Dismissed.”

The officers stood and exited the conference room as Blake turned and walked toward the large windows that gave him a clear view of open space. What other changes were in store for him and his crew?

“Captain.”

Blake turned to face the owner of the voice that came from behind. “Yes, Doctor?”

“You still have an appointment in sickbay for your semi-annual exam,” Hogan stated. “I’ll see you tomorrow at 0800.”

Blake started to protest but decided to give in to the doctor’s request. “I’ll be there, Doc,” he said reluctantly. *Change isn’t going to be easy.*

***Note:** The Kairn is an alien race created by Peter J. Koester. The Kairn have appeared in the adventures of the starship *Dauntless* and appear in the *Providence/Dauntless* crossover story, “The More Things Change....”