

To Boldly Go: Perceptions of Reality

A U.S.S. *Monarch* story

By Cleve Johnson

Doctor Janice Stuart's eyes scanned the main engineering monitor. Her fingers worked frantically, pushing buttons and flipping switches on the console in front of her. Still, the display showed the continued increase of antimatter flowing into the reaction chamber.

"Speed continues to increase at a rate of four point three six percent each minute," the feminine computer voice announced.

"Initiate shutdown of matter and antimatter injectors," Stuart said.

"Antimatter injector is damaged and unable to be shut down at this time."

"Initiate level one force field around the warp core, computer." The doctor tried to stay calm, tried to think clearly and quickly. "Ensign, close valves on all antimatter pods. Computer, begin auto shutdown procedure."

"Auto shutdown cannot commence until antimatter injector is repaired."

"The valves won't close, Commander," the young engineering ensign stated.

"Computer, prepare to eject the core," Stuart said.

"Ejection system is currently offline."

Sweat began to form on Jan Stuart's forehead, but she refused to give in to panic. She glanced away from the console and faced the young engineering officer. "Ensign, can the valves be shut off manually?"

"Yes, ma'am. But one of the EPS conduits in the antimatter pod compartment has ruptured, flooding it with radiation."

Stuart let out her breath, thinking how long a human could last when bombarded by that much radiation. She looked at the ensign, reluctant to say the words that were on the tip of her tongue. But the decision had to be made. It was one man or an entire crew of seven hundred fifty. The young ensign would die in any event, but the rest of the crew might be saved by his actions. "Ensign, get on a radiation suit and report to deck twenty-four."

The young officer, not more than twenty-three years old, nodded. "Yes, ma'am." He turned without hesitation and left the engine room.

Jan looked back down at the engineering readouts, hoping to find another way to shut down the injector or close the antimatter pod valves before the young engineer had to sacrifice his life. She tried to remember everything that she had read in the engineering manuals and searched her memory for any possibility of saving the ship without any loss of life, but there was no recollection of anything that would present the desired outcome.

The young officer reappeared from the side room wearing the radiation suit. He held a protective helmet under his arm. He glanced at the doctor and forced himself to smile. He started walking past her, toward the emergency turbolift that connected all decks of the engineering sections of the ship.

Jan reached out and grabbed the officer's arm, stopping him. "Just a minute, Ensign." She opened the medical pouch that was attached to the belt around her waist and pulled out a hypospray. She inserted a vile into it. "Hyronalin. This should help you last long enough to complete your task," she stated as she pressed the device against the young man's neck.

"Thanks, Doctor." He hurried to the turbolift, turned, and faced the doctor as the lift doors closed.

"End simulation," Commander Marcus Grey said as he entered the 'engineering room,' which began to dissolve into the yellow gridlines of the holodeck's walls, floor, and ceiling. "Well done, Doctor."

"You mean I passed?" Jan asked, surprised by the first officer's statement. "I failed to repair the ship."

"On the contrary, Doctor, you did save the ship," Grey replied. "You did everything that was possible from engineering, evaluated the situation, and made a command decision."

"And I sent a young man to his death," Jan added.

"Exactly," Grey said. "This test was not about how well you could perform your technical skills during an emergency, but it was a test of your ability to stay calm during a crisis and make decisions that would result in what would be best for the ship and its crew."

"In other words, Marcus, you wanted to find out if I could give an order that would send someone to his death." Jan's face did not show any emotion, but there was an accusatory edge to her voice.

"It's an unfortunate truth, but a command level officer has to be able to make that decision if...when necessary." When Marcus Grey saw Jan's face redden, he forced a hint of a smile. "You have passed all your other tests with more than adequate scores. There is just one more test, which I'm sure you will pass with excellence, and then I will make my recommendation to the Captain and to the promotion board."

Jan turned to walk toward the holodeck exit. "Thank you, Marcus. I appreciate your instruction and guidance."

The first officer followed the doctor into the corridor. "So where are you off to, now, Doctor?"

"I have a few reports of my own to work on," she replied. "Rob wants to make sure all of the crew records, including medical records, are up to date."

"Well, I shan't keep you then. I'm due on the bridge in a few minutes, but I will let you know when the last test is scheduled."

"Thanks again, Marcus," Jan said as the two senior officers parted company.



Sickbay was quiet, almost too quiet. The only activity that Jan Stuart had seen during the past hour was a slightly pulled pectoral muscle by one of the marines who had been overzealous during his physical fitness workout. Doctor M'Tan had already completed the reports, which irritated Jan who sat behind her desk with nothing to do other than review medical records of the crew for the second time in five days.

She considered the overly efficient Vulcan doctor and wondered if M'Tan was trying to take over as CMO, but then Jan remembered that Vulcans had a strong tendency to excel in everything. Still, Doctor M'Tan was Starfleet's original choice to be the *Monarch's* Chief Medical Officer until Rob agreed to accept command...with the provision that Jan would also be assigned as the ship's CMO. *Would a Vulcan be jealous...and act on that jealousy?*

Before she could ponder the question further, Jan felt the deck lurch beneath her. She grabbed the edge of her desk as it shook again. The alert klaxons blared and the light strips along the office walls began to flash red.

"Red alert," the calm, but intense voice of Rob Stuart came out of the com unit. "*We are under attack. All hands to battle stations.*"

Jan wondered who the attackers were as she moved swiftly from her office into the main diagnostic area of sickbay. "Nurse Ingalls, break out the emergency medkits. We may be filling up any moment."

Karen Ingalls, the head nurse, was already moving toward the secured cabinets to retrieve the needed equipment. "The rest of the staff is on their way, Doctor."

"Good. I just hope we won't get too overwhelmed."

Jan heard the door slide open and turned to see Doctor M'Tan and one of the orderlies supporting a bloodied crewman with plasma burns on his face enter the room. She rushed over to help guide the injured man to the diagnostic biobed in the center of sickbay. "Easy, now. You're going to be alright, crewman," she said as she helped M'Tan and the orderly lay down on the bed. She pulled the medical tricorder out of her lab coat pocket and scanned the man. "Karen." Jan directed her words to the head nurse. "I need two ccs of cordrazine and the dermaplast spray."

"Right away, doctor," Nurse Karen Ingalls said as she turned to retrieve the items from their storage cabinets.

The door to sickbay opened again and several more injured officers and crewmembers entered. Jan nodded to M'Tan, indicating that she should assist the new arrivals. "Where's Doctor Renquist?" Jan asked.

"He's on his way," Karen Ingalls stated as she injected the cordrazine into the first injured crewman.

The ship shook violently and Jan had to hold onto the edge of the biobed to stay on her feet. She took the dermaplast spray and administered it to the burned areas of the crewman.

Another blast rocked the deck.

"*Sickbay, this is the bridge,*" the harried voice of Commander Marcus Grey spilled out of the com unit. "*Medical emergency on the bridge.*"

Jan handed off the spray bottle to the head nurse and tapped her combadge. "I'm on my way," she said, already grabbing an emergency med kit. "Computer activate EMH mark one and mark two. Doctor M'Tan, you're in charge of sickbay until I get back." Jan rushed out the door before the Vulcan could acknowledge the order.



Jan entered the turbolift. “Bridge.” She was concerned that the emergency call came from the first officer instead of the captain—her husband. She tried to push her feelings aside so she could be professional and do her job. She was a doctor and her duty was to save lives. She only hoped that Rob was not the one who needed medical attention.

The ship shook violently and the turbolift came to a sudden halt. Jan grabbed the handrail with one hand and her belly with the other. “Hang on kids.” She tried not to move until the wave of nausea passed. “I’m sure your father is trying to get the shaking to stop.”

The turbolift began its ascent once more, this time slower than what it would normally move. That’s all that Jan needed—a slow turbolift.

The lift finally came to a stop and the doors opened. Jan quickly stepped out of the turbolift onto the bridge. Her eyes scanned the damage and the injured officers and crew, but her worst fears were realized when she saw her husband on the deck, not moving. She immediately rushed over to him, noticing a bloody cut on his forehead.

“Is he still alive, Doctor?” the first officer asked, concern etched in his voice.

Jan, already scanning her husband with her tricorder, shot a glance back at Marcus Grey sitting in the center seat. “Yes, but he’s unconscious. He has a severe concussion and has lost quite a bit of blood.” She pulled a hypospray out of her pocket and several vials of clear liquid. After reading the vial labels, she chose the one that she wanted and inserted it into the hypospray. Jan then pressed the device against Rob Stuart’s neck.

She looked back at Marcus. “Is the transporter still online?”

Marcus Grey shot a glance at the back of the OPS officer’s head. “Mister Petrov?”

“The transporter is still online, Sir,” Lieutenant Alexandr Petrov replied.

Jan nodded. “Computer, beam the captain directly to sickbay.” As soon as her husband had been whisked away by the transporter, Jan set her attention on one of the other injured members of the crew. Most had superficial cuts and minor electrical burns. Nothing too serious.

The ship rocked violently once again and the first officer was tossed out of the command chair. He hit his head hard on the floor and his body went limp.

Jan was at the first officer’s side and scanned his vital signs. She looked up at Lieutenant Jennifer Mills at the tactical station. “He’s dead.” The doctor’s voice quivered.

Mills stared blankly at the doctor. “You’re the senior officer on the bridge, Doctor.” Her voice was calm and professional. “What are your orders?”

Jan Stuart stood up and faced the tactical officer. “I’m not a command-level officer,” she shot back.

“What are your orders?” Mills repeated her previous question just as calmly as before.

Jan realized that she was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Sure, she had been studying and training for this, but now that the time had come—a real crisis—she felt...unprepared. She moved quickly to the center of the bridge and sit down in the captain’s chair—her husband’s chair. “Okay then. Give me a report. Who’s firing at us?”

“Unknown,” Mills replied. “They came out of warp and starting firing. We tried to hail them, but they wouldn’t answer.”

“What’s our operational status?”

“Shields are at fifty-seven percent. Phasers are at sixty percent and charging,” Mills stated. “Aft torpedo launcher is damaged beyond repair and the port impulse reactor is offline.”

“They’re coming around for another pass, Doctor,” Lieutenant D’Neskos said from the CONN station.

“Evasive action, Lieutenant,” Jan ordered. “Try to get behind them. Lieutenant Mills, arm quantum torpedoes and set for maximum power yield.”

“Aye, Captain,” both lieutenants said in unison.

“Bridge to shuttlebay two,” Jan said. “Prepare to launch all fighters.”

“Fighters won’t last long against that ship, Doctor,” Mills stated.

“They could be a distraction while we get in a better firing position,” Jan said. “Launch fighters.”

“I must protest, Doctor,” Mills stated. “You’re putting the lives of the entire squadron on the line against a superior force.”

“We might lose the lives of a few, but if we don’t get in behind that ship and fire torpedoes where they’re most vulnerable, we could lose the *Monarch* and all hands with her.” Jan stared down the tactical officer. “Now launch those fighters.”

Lieutenant Mills stared at the doctor for a moment. “Aye, Captain,” she finally said. She pressed a button on her console. “Shuttlebay two, launch all fighters. CAG, commence a diversionary attack on the alien vessel.”

“And be careful, CAG,” Jan whispered.

The ship shook after a glancing blast from the alien starship.

“Engineering reports that warp drive is out. Estimated repair time is four to five hours,” the OPS manager said. “We have a hull breach on decks seventeen and eighteen, engineering section.”

“Mister D’Neskos, move us into position for a clear shot,”

Jan fixed her gaze on the main viewer’s image of the alien ship. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the ready room door slide open.

“Computer, freeze program,” Commander Marcus Grey said as he entered the bridge.

Everything stopped. Jan’s mouth opened, but nothing came out as she switched her focus back and forth from the first officer’s ‘dead’ body on the deck and the quite living first officer approaching her.

“Congratulations, Doctor Stuart,” Marcus said with a smile. “You have passed the final test.”

Jan, realizing that she had never left the holodeck after the engineering test earlier, felt a jumble of emotions pull at her. Relief. Anger. Joy. “You tricked me,” she said accusingly.

Marcus’ smile broadened. “I prefer to consider it an unannounced exam.”

“Do you know what you put me through?” Anger filled Jan’s voice. “I thought Rob was seriously hurt. I thought you were dead. I thought this whole battle...”

“...Was real?” Marcus finished for her. “You have to admit that the test results are more accurate this way.”

Jan clenched her fists, but then her anger subsided as she thought about the logic of the first officer’s reasoning. She understood why he put her in a ‘real’ situation to see how she would hold up under the pressure of command during a crisis.

“You should be proud of yourself, Doctor,” Marcus said. “You stayed calm and made the necessary decisions to save the ship. You have what it takes to be a bridge officer.”

Jan crossed her arms, but after a short pause, relaxed and allowed herself to smile. “Thank you, Marcus.”

“I’ll submit your test results and my recommendation for promotion to the captain. He’ll forward it along with his recommendation to Starfleet Command for review,” Marcus said. “With your scores, I’m sure the board will approve your promotion in short order.”



Captain Rob Stuart exited the turbolift and strolled toward sickbay. After walking only a few meters through the curved corridor, He noticed Elsen Rab walking toward him, a stern look plastered on the other man’s face. Rob hoped that the Betazoid man was going to keep on walking, but he somehow knew that he was not that lucky.

Rab stopped directly in front of Stuart, forcing the captain to halt as well. “Captain, I am deeply disturbed that you have done nothing about the Welvan.” There was a sharp edge to his voice. “You have not taken him into custody, nor have you put him under surveillance.”

Rob refrained from lashing out at the man, although it proved to be somewhat difficult to restrain his anger. “I have no reason to arrest Mister Jovani.” The captain’s determination equaled Rab’s. “And I won’t authorize covert surveillance unless I have cause to do so.”

“I have given you cause, Captain,” Rab countered.

Rob’s eyes narrowed as he stared at Elsen Rab. “You have given me nothing, except your paranoid perception of Jovani. So I suggest you drop it, Mister Rab.”

Rab, even under the influence of the neural tranquilizer that Doctor Stuart had given him to block out the thoughts of every being aboard, felt the powerful rush of anger that the captain directed toward him. “Please, Captain. I am only concerned about the safety of the ship and crew. I believe that Jovani is a threat to us.”

Rob sighed heavily. “Mister Rab, I believe that you are sincere in your concern, but I think that you are grossly overreacting in this case. When you came to me last week about Jovani, I had my wife run every test and brain scan that she knew of to determine why his mind was closed to your...telepathic ability. She determined that the design of his brain was different from most other humanoids’ and that would explain why you can’t sense his thoughts.”

“Not just his thoughts, Captain. His feelings, too. I can’t sense his presence at all,” Rab replied. “It’s eerie to see him, yet not feel his presence at all. To me...he doesn’t exist.”

Rob forced a smile and patted Rab's shoulder. "Welvani are different. That doesn't make them a threat. Now I suggest that you put your prejudice behind you and leave Jovani alone. And if you can't look beyond your suspicions, you might try to get to know him and find some commonality that might help you see him as he is instead of how you have decided to see him."

Rob, without saying another word, walked around Rab and continued toward sickbay. He shook his head, hoping to shake off the frustration that Elsen Rab instilled.

Moments later, Rob entered sickbay. Nurse Ingalls smiled at him, which he acknowledged with a nod. "I'm just visiting," he said.

"Doctor Stuart's in her office, Sir."

"Thank you." Rob strolled through the short corridor that led to his wife's domain. He quietly poked his head around the doorframe, seeing Janice's attention focused on a PADD that she held in her hand.

Rob cleared his throat and smiled as his wife looked up. He stepped into the office and sat down in one of the chairs in front of her desk. "Commander Grey tells me that you've completed the bridge officer's course. Congratulations."

Jan's face was unreadable by her husband. "Thanks." There was no emotion in her voice.

Rob did not have to be Betazoid to see that something bothered his wife. "He said that your scores were in the high nineties for almost every test."

"He told me that, too," Jan replied, deadpan.

Rob leaned slightly forward in his chair, resting his arms on the edge of the desk. "I think you would be a little happier about that, Jan. What's wrong?"

Jan stared at her husband. "Did you know that he was going to trick me?"

"Trick you? In what way did he trick you?"

"He made me think that you were seriously injured. He made me think that he was...dead." Jan closed her eyes. Her face turned pinkish-red. "I thought it was all real, Rob," she said angrily. "It was just a test, Rob. Why did he make me think it was real?"

Rob leaned back. "How someone performs under 'real' stress is more revealing than any hypothetical test. He could better measure your responses that way."

Jan glared at her husband. "Did you know? Did you tell him he could put me through that?"

Rob took a deep breath. "I didn't have any input into your testing. That would not have been appropriate since I'm your husband. I left it all in Marcus's hands."

Rob saw Jan begin to relax a little. She stood up and started around the desk. "I see the logic in what he did. I might even...agree with it." She reached out her hand to Rob, who took it and stood to face her. "I just...well, it's one thing to understand why he put me in that situation..."

"And it's an entirely different matter to actually be put into that situation," Rob said to finish Jan's thought. "Will you forgive Marcus for what he did?"

Jan smiled at her husband. “Of course I’ll forgive him. But he better be glad that he isn’t due for a physical anytime soon.”

Rob chuckled at that and drew Jan close to him. “So now that you’re done with the course, we should be able to spend more time together. Dinner at 1730 hours?”

A mischievous gleam appeared in Jan’s eyes. “My place or yours?”

Rob smiled. “Ours.”



The U.S.S. *Monarch* sped toward parts unknown. The mission of its crew should have been to explore where the Federation had not yet traveled, but this was a search and rescue mission. Weeks had passed since the *Sovereign*-class starship left Earth orbit in search of the missing crew. No one knew if the crew would ever be found, or at least found alive. Regardless, Captain Stuart and those under his command would not give up the search until they found what happened to the *Columbus*’s crew, or until Starfleet Command ordered them to stop searching.

Ensign Alexandr Petrov looked up from the OPS station, turning his head toward the center seat behind him. “Commander Grey, long-range sensors indicate several thousand small objects ahead of us. Dey do not appear to be naturally occurring, Sir.”

“Why do you say that, Ensign?”

“Dey are spaced at equidistant points to each other, Sir. Dey appear to form a large sphere with a diameter of more than three light years.”

“What is our current distance to the nearest objects, Ensign?” the first officer asked.

The young Russian turned back to his console. “Four point seven light years, Sir.”

Commander Marcus Grey activated the communications touchpad on the arm of the command chair. “Bridge to Captain Stuart.”

“Stuart here. What is it, Exec?”

“We’re approaching Commander LaSalle’s sphere of satellites, Captain.”

“Have Mister LaSalle and Mister Jovani meet me on the bridge in ten minutes, Exec.”

“Very good, Captain,” Grey replied. “Mister D’Neskos, maintain course and speed.”

“Maintaining course and speed, Sir,” the Veloran CONN officer stated.

A few minutes later, Captain Stuart exited the turbolift. He started for the center seat, which Commander Grey quickly relinquished. “Report.”

“Sensors detect energy buildup in the satellites as we approach, Captain,” Grey replied. “No weapons detected, at least not any that we recognize.”

Stuart sat down and faced the main viewer at the front of the bridge. “Lieutenant, prepare to raise shields on a moment’s notice. Charge weapons, but keep them on standby for now.”

“Aye Captain,” Lieutenant Jennifer Mills replied.

“What’s your assessment, Exec?”

Commander Grey remained standing beside his CO. “Difficult to make any judgment at this time, Captain, but I would guess that the satellite network is a shield grid.”

“Shield grid.” Stuart looked up at his first officer. “What makes you think it’s a shield grid?”

“Long range sensors detected a star system enclosed within the orbit of the satellites. There are seven planets, two of which are class M.” Commander Grey reached down to turn the console in front of his chair to show his CO the star system’s schematic. “One of them could be home to whoever built the grid.”

“I imagine that you’re right, Exec. Care to guess which one?”

Before Commander Marcus Grey could answer, the turbolift doors slid apart, revealing LaSalle and Jovani.

“You wanted to see us, Captain?” LaSalle asked.

“Join me, gentleman.” Stuart motioned the two men to the command area of the bridge. “Take a look, Commander. Look familiar?”

Commander Joel LaSalle gazed at the main viewer. “Yes, Captain. The *Columbus* passed this way just days before...”

Stuart saw the confusion on LaSalle’s face. “Commander?”

LaSalle shook his head. “Sorry, Captain. I can’t remember. I want to, but...”

“Captain, sensors have detected an energy beam coming from the fourth planet of the star system,” Lieutenant Commander V’Len stated.

Stuart spun his chair around to face the science officer. “Is it a weapon?”

“Negative, Captain. It appears that we are being probed.”

“I recommend raising shields, Sir,” Commander Grey stated.

“No, Commander, I think we’ll wait.” Stuart looked toward the tactical station. “Lieutenant Mills, raise shields only if there are signs of aggressive behavior.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Captain.” Jovani took a step toward Stuart. “I have some information about this star system that may be helpful.”

“I’m listening, Mister Jovani.”

“The fourth planet is called Pesedon. It is home to a race called the S’Klopes.”

“How do you know this?” Elsen Rab exited the turbolift and entered the bridge’s inner circle.

Jovani did not turn toward the Betazoid advisor but answered his question while still facing Captain Stuart. “During my test flight, my warp ship’s engines malfunctioned near this system. The S’Klopes aided in repairs so that I could return home.”

“I find that hard to believe Mister Jovani.”

“And why do you not believe my words, Mister Rab?” Jovani turned toward the Betazoid.

Rab’s entire body stiffened as he tried to make himself taller beside the Welvan, who in fact stood nearly twelve centimeters above the Betazoid. “You’re hiding something, Welvan. You have blocked me from reading your mind, and I can only assume that you have done so to hide your real intentions. I say that you are a spy.”

Stuart punched the com touchpad on his armrest console. “Security to the bridge.”

“Finally.” Elsen Rab, with a smirk, glared at Jovani. “The captain has realized that I have been right about you all along.”

“Don’t be so sure, Mister Rab,” Stuart said as he slowly stood to face the Betazoid. “I told you to set aside your prejudice. I want you off my bridge....And take your accusations with you.”

The turbolift doors opened, revealing two marines with phaser rifles at the ready. “Sir?”

“Corporal Tyree, please escort Mister Rab to his quarters and confine him there until further notice.”

“Yes suh,” the marine replied. “Come this way, Mister Rab.”

“Listen to me, Captain,” Rab said. “These...S’Klopes...they hate us. Specifically, they hate humans. The Welvan is in league with them.”

Stuart faced the Betazoid first contact specialist. “Go to your quarters and remain there or I’ll have you thrown in the brig.”

Rab glared at Stuart. “Starfleet Command will hear of this, Captain.”

“You can be sure of that, Mister Rab. Now get off my bridge.”

Stuart’s eyes followed Tyree and the other marine as they led the Betazoid into the turbolift. Once the doors slid shut, Stuart turned his attention back to the main viewer. “CONN, take us out of warp.”

Lieutenant D’Neskos adjusted his console and the image of streaking stars transformed into stationary points of light on the viewer. “We are now at full Impulse, Sir.”

Stuart sat down and faced the viewer. He turned to face Jovani. “Mister Jovani, can you tell me anything about the S’Klopes that might be helpful?”

“Well, Captain, they were helpful to me, but they seemed reluctant in the beginning. They told me that they had once explored much of this part of the galaxy thousands of years ago, but they adopted the practice of isolationism since that time.”

“Isolationists, hmm?” Commander Grey sat down beside the captain. “Why do you suppose they keep to themselves, Mister Jovani?”

“The S’Klopes encountered several races among their travels that did not treat them...with hospitality.”

Stuart turned back toward the viewer, his eyes intent on the area of space ahead. “They were attacked by the primitives out of fear, I imagine.”

“Yes, Captain.” Jovani also faced the viewer. “Fear can affect a person’s view of reality. It is not only what brought the primitive races to attack the S’Klopes, but it also caused the S’Klopes to abandon the rest of the galaxy and retreat to their homeworld.”

“But they helped you.” The first officer leaned forward, resting his arms on his knees and clasping his hands together. “If they are so fearful of outsiders, why would they help you?”

“As I said, Commander Grey, they were reluctant in the beginning. I can only guess that they realized that I was no threat to them.” Jovani smiled at the captain and first officer. “I was only one being...in a primitive warp ship with no weapons.”

“Well, I suppose we should show them we are not a threat.” Stuart shot a glance toward the tactical station. “Lieutenant, power down the weapons and hail the S’Klopes.”

“Aye, Captain.”

The first officer frowned. “Captain Stuart, is that wise?”

Stuart nodded but said nothing.

Commander Joel LaSalle stepped toward the captain. “We hailed them, too, but no one answered. We waited for several hours before moving on.”

“Are we still being probed, Commander?” Stuart looked toward the science station.

“Affirmative, Sir.”

“Very well. Full stop, Mister D’Neskos.”

The Veloran CONN officer, his four hands working the controls, disengaged the dual Impulse drives’ forward thrust. “Impulse engines at station keeping, Sir. Reverse thrusters firing. All forward momentum will cease in approximately twelve seconds.”

Several moments passed without a reply. Rob Stuart looked to his first officer. “Not very accommodating, are they, Exec?”

“It appears not, Captain.”

“Lieutenant Mills, hail them again.”

The chief of security played with the communication controls for several moments before looking at Stuart. “Still no reply, Captain, but the channel is open.”

“Put me on, Lieutenant.” Stuart stood up to face the viewer. “This is Captain Robert P. Stuart of the United Federation starship *Monarch*. Please respond.”

The bridge remained silent as the captain started to pace, looking first at the floor, then back to the image of one of the satellites that made up the shield grid orbiting the S’Klopes’ star system. “Please respond. We are on a peaceful mission. We need your help in locating a missing crew from one of our scout vessels that passed here several weeks ago.”

Another moment of silence.

“Captain Stuart, alien scans have intensified,” the Vulcan science officer stated. “There is a heavy concentration of energy building here on the bridge.”

“Should I raise shields, Sir?” Lieutenant Mills’ voice elevated as she struggled to keep the edge out of it.

“Negative, Lieutenant. I don’t want to give them a reason not to trust us.”

Commander Grey stood up to face his CO. “With all respect, Captain, would it not be wise to take a defensive position?”

“Maybe, Exec, but I think in this case...”

Stuart was interrupted by a booming voice coming through the com system. *“We are the S’Klopes. You have approached our space without invitation. We wish you to leave immediately.”*

Stuart stood staring at the viewer with determination etched on his face. He crossed his arms as he contemplated how to respond to the alien’s demand. “We mean you no harm. We only want to find our missing people. Can you help us?”

“Why should we help those who ruthlessly attacked one of our people?”

Stuart looked at his first officer with a questioning stare. He turned back to the screen at the front of the bridge. “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, Mister...”

“Does your history not tell of our visit to your world long ago? We were once explorers of other worlds, yet your people treated us as enemies rather than as guests.”

“Sir, I do not know about any visit to my world by your people.” Stuart took a step forward. “I’m sure that whatever my people have done to yours was a misunderstanding based on their fear of you...of what your people represented to them. Please, let us strive to put the past behind us to enter into...a new age of cooperation and peaceful understanding.”

“We understand you and your kind all too well, Captain Stuart. We do not want any association with your world. Leave our space.”

Jovani placed his hand on Stuart’s shoulder. “If I may, Captain?”

Stuart nodded to the Welvan.

Jovani stepped beside the captain. “My name is Jovani from the planet Welva. Many years ago, your people helped me when my disabled spaceship drifted into your space.”

The image of space on the forward screen was replaced by the owner of the voice that had been speaking. Stuart and most of the human bridge crew could not believe what they were seeing. The alien was larger than most races, humanoid in appearance with the exception of a single eye in the middle of his forehead. Stuart turned toward Commander Grey. “S’Klopes—Cyclops.”

“Wasn’t the Cyclops a son of the god Poseidon?”

“He certainly was, Commander.” Stuart smiled at his first officer. “Sounds very similar to the name of their homeworld, doesn’t it?”

“Many myths have their basis in truth, gentleman,” the Vulcan science officer stated.

The S’Klopes stared through the viewer at the Welvan. *“Jovani, my old friend. You speak for these people?”*

“Yes, Prefect Golgath. I am their guide.” The Welvan took another step forward and knelt with his arms crossing his chest. “I do not know the source of your hatred for these people,

but I am convinced that they are not the same as they once were. Much has changed since ancient times.”

The image of the alien frowned. *“Some things do not change, Jovani.”*

“Will you allow me to negotiate a peace between the S’Klopes and the humans? Or at least a level of cooperation between your two peoples in this matter?”

Prefect Golgath rose from his chair and took a few steps around his desk. His image grew to fill most of the *Monarch*’s view screen. *“My people do not want to cooperate with the barbarians.”*

Jovani stepped closer to the image of the S’Klopes. “Please, Prefect. They only want to find their comrades.”

The image of the alien’s eyes narrowed. *“Let us talk alone, Jovani.”* Golgath looked to his right, apparently to someone off screen, and nodded. Jovani’s body began to glow momentarily, then disappeared. The image of the prefect’s office went blank at the same time.

Stuart, Grey, and several others on the *Monarch*’s bridge jumped up from their chairs. “What happened?” the captain demanded.

“Transporter, Sir.” V’Len scanned the area of space ahead of the ship. “Evidently, S’Klopes technology is more advanced than ours.”

Stuart turned toward the tactical station. “Put the ship on yellow alert, but keep the shields and weapons on standby, Lieutenant.”

“Yes Sir,” Lieutenant Mills replied.

“Commander V’Len, use long-range sensors to try to locate Mister Jovani. His bio-signs should be very different from the S’Klopes.”

“Aye, Captain.”

Stuart turned toward Commander Grey. “Any recommendations, Exec?”

“I have one, but I doubt that you will like it.”

Stuart, whose face had been like stone, began to relax. “I don’t need a first officer who’s going to be a ‘yes man.’ Let me know what you think.”

The edges of Grey’s mouth turned slightly upward. “Well, Sir, I think that you should consult with our first contact specialist.” Grey noticed Stuart’s face turn hard again, but the first officer pressed forward. “I know you don’t like the man, but he is a Betazoid. And I believe that he has the best chance of determining the intentions of the S’Klopes.”

Stuart turned away for a moment but turned back to face Commander Grey. “Are you implying that I allowed my personal feelings to dictate the way I treated Mister Rab?”

“Not at all, Captain. He was out of line and needed to be removed from the bridge. I just think that you should give him a chance to redeem himself by doing what he came on board to do.”

“And what of his prejudice against Jovani?”

“You can dictate Rab’s behavior, but not his opinions, Captain. If he can learn to be cordial toward Jovani, I see no reason to keep him confined or to not utilize his talents.”

Stuart nodded. “Thank you, Marcus. I’ll talk with him.” Stuart turned and started for the turbolift. “You have the bridge, Exec. Keep me informed of any developments.”



Captain Rob Stuart strolled through the curved corridor toward the quarters assigned to Elsen Rab. He stopped in front of the marine corporal that stood at attention in front of the door. “At ease, Corporal Tyree.”

Tyree relaxed and stepped aside.

“Any trouble from our guest?”

“No Suh. Mister Rab mumbled a few words about you on the way here, but he has been quiet since bein’ sent to his room without suppuh.”

Stuart tried not to laugh. Tyree’s dialect and use of “down-home” colloquialism had a calming effect on the captain’s mood. “Thank you, Corporal. You can report back to your squad.”

Tyree snapped to attention. “Thank you, Suh.” The marine turned and made his way toward the nearest turbolift.

Stuart sighed and started to hit the call button on the door control panel, but the door slid open, revealing Elsen Rab standing just half a meter in front of the captain. Rab’s eyes bore into the captain, but he remained silent.

“Mister Rab, I am willing to let you have free reign of the ship again...if you promise to leave your hatred for Jovani in your quarters.” Stuart refused to back away as the two men stared at one another.

Rab’s face turned red. “I’m not a member of your crew, Captain. What gives you the right to...”

“You may be a civilian, Mister Rab, but you have been assigned to this ship as a first contact specialist. That makes you a part of this crew. And even if you were not holding an official position, you still are subject to my orders as long as you are on board this ship.” Stuart took a step toward the Betazoid, forcing him to step back. “Is that understood?”

Elsen Rab lost his resolve and turned his face away, looking anywhere except at Stuart. He quickly made his way back into the relative safety of his quarters. He stared out one of the windows. “Understood...*Captain.*”

Stuart stepped inside the quarters, allowing the doors to slide shut. “Are you ready to do the job that you’re here for, Mister Rab?”

The Betazoid slowly turned around to face Stuart. “What are your orders, *Sir?*”

“Has the neural inhibitor worn off enough for you to clearly read another’s thoughts?”

“The thoughts of the people on this ship can be easily read if I wanted to, but the effects of the medication still prevent everyone’s random thoughts from flowing into my mind.” Rab

began to pace. “I am aware of people’s emotional presence, but I have to make a conscious effort to read their thoughts.”

“Could you read the mind of the S’Klopes that we talked with earlier?”

“Not at this distance; at least not yet. There’s still too much of the neural inhibitor in my system.”

“Will you come with me to sickbay, then? Maybe Jan has something to counteract what she gave you.”

“Of course, Captain.” Rab started past Stuart to head for the door but stopped to face Stuart. “Captain, I want to apologize for my behavior. I’m not sure why I’ve been acting so...so disrespectful.”

Stuart regarded Elsen Rab’s face, especially his eyes. Stuart could usually see when someone was lying or trying to mislead him. He was a good judge of people, or at least of their motives. His anger toward the Betazoid man began to fall away. “I accept your apology, Mister Rab. I am curious, however, about your behavior toward Jovani. As a first contact specialist, I would think that you would be more...accepting of someone from a race previously unknown to us.”

“You’re right, Captain. I don’t know what got into me.”

Stuart’s previous anger toward Rab was replaced by a sense of compassion and, to a small degree, pity. “Come on Mister Rab. Let’s get to sickbay. Maybe Jan can find a reason for your behavior.”



Doctor Janice Stuart turned off the medical scanner. “Well, Mister Rab, the good news is that you are perfectly healthy.”

“And the bad news?”

“Well, there really isn’t any bad news, except I don’t think we can use the neural inhibitor anymore. You seem to be allergic to that particular medication. It created a chemical imbalance in the area of your brain that controls judgment and reasoning.”

“And that is why I have been acting so arrogant and...”

“...paranoid,” the captain finished.

Jan smiled at her husband, then turned back toward her patient. “I would say so.”

“Can you give him something to counteract the inhibitor?” Rob asked.

Jan shook her head. “Sorry. It will wear off completely within another three or four days. I can give you something to improve your mood, though, Elsen.” Jan took the hypospray that she had already been preparing and pressed it against Rab’s neck. “There. That should give you a better disposition.”

“But the headaches will return once the inhibitor is completely out of my system and every random thought on this ship rushes into my head.”

“I’ll see if I can find an alternative,” Jan said.

“I appreciate anything that you can do, Doctor Stuart.”

“*Captain Stuart, please report to the bridge,*” the first officer’s voice rang out from the intercom.

Stuart kissed his wife on her cheek as he started toward the door. “Duty calls, dear.” He tapped his combadge as he exited sickbay. “On my way, Exec.”



“What is it, Exec?” Captain Stuart asked as he stepped out of the turbolift.

“The S’Klopes have requested that you join them to discuss...their grievances concerning humans.”

“At least they are willing to talk.” Stuart rubbed his chin. “Hail them. Tell them I agree.”

Commander Grey nodded. “Aye, Captain.” The first officer turned toward the tactical station. “Lieutenant.”

Lieutenant Mills opened the channel and relayed the captain’s message. After a moment she looked at Stuart and Grey. “Message acknowledged, Sir.”

Stuart slapped the first officer’s back lightly. “The ship is yo....”

Before he could complete his sentence, Rob Stuart vanished in the same manner that Jovani had previously done.



Stuart found himself in the prefect’s office, facing a viewing screen similar to the one on the bridge of the *Monarch*. An image of the Federation vessel hung in open space. He spun around when he heard the door open. The S’Klopes that appeared in the image seen earlier on the bridge viewer entered the room, followed by Jovani.

“I am Prefect Golgath of the Pesedon Stellar Authority.” The one-eyed alien stood at least a meter above the Welvan Jovani, who was also taller than most humans.

“I am Captain Robert Stuart, representing the United Feder...”

“Jovani has already explained who you are and where you come from, Captain.” The S’Klopes prefect sneered at Stuart. “He has also told me why you are here. I must tell you, Captain, that my people have no love for yours. I have even more reason to hate you...and no desire to help you.”

“Captain, I have told Prefect Golgath about your missing crew and despite his feelings about humans, he has agreed to provide what little information that has concerning the *Columbus’s* crew.” Jovani’s eyes seemed to plead with Stuart across the few meters that separated them. “He does have one condition that must be met before he shares what he knows. The prefect requests that...”

“I request nothing,” Golgath bellowed. “It is a demand. You will publicly admit your guilt for the way our people were brutally treated on a peaceful mission to your world.”

“Prefect, I regretfully acknowledge that the ancient people of my world may have attacked your people out of fear. But that incident, if it happened, took place thousands of years ago. Civilization was in its infancy, the people were primitive.” Stuart held his open hands out

toward the S’Klopes official. “How can you blame me or my people for the atrocities of our forbearers?”

“Maybe your people do not have a collective memory of the past as mine do, Captain, but that is no reason not to admit your guilt.”

“Prefect, I will apologize and offer my regrets for the attack upon your ancestors’ expedition, but I cannot in good conscience accept responsibility for crimes that others long dead *might* have committed. My culture judges a person by his own accomplishments and failings, not on those of his forefathers.”

Golgath’s eye widened as he took a menacing step toward Stuart and leaned forward, his face coming within a few centimeters of Stuart’s. “My culture does, Captain.”

Jovani quickly stepped in between Golgath and Stuart. “Prefect Golgath, may I speak privately to Captain Stuart? He is unaware of your customs and laws. I think that I may be able to convince him to see your position more clearly.”

Golgath backed away from Stuart and stared at Jovani. “Because of your friendship, Jovani, I will allow you to speak privately with this...*human*.” The prefect practically spat the word out as if it was a vulgarity. “I shall return shortly.” Golgath turned and exited his office.

Jovani placed his hand on Stuart’s shoulder and faced him with sympathetic eyes. “Captain Stuart, please try to understand Golgath’s view. The S’Klopes do not see the universe as others do. They have one eye, unlike most sentient beings, and they only have one point of view.”

Stuart faked a slight smile. “Their single vision affects their perception of reality.”

“Yes, Captain.” Jovani turned his head toward the viewer image. “Golgath sees a ship from Earth approach his world and he sees the beginnings of an invasion when in reality your people are merely exploring unknown regions of space. His perception of reality is based on his people’s past experience with humans; therefore, all humans are barbaric killers to him.”

“Where does he get the idea that all humans are guilty of whatever a group of my people did thousands of years ago?” Stuart shook his head. “The Klingons take that view, but they don’t even hold someone’s guilt against his family past a few generations.”

“I know that is an alien concept to you, Captain, but the S’Klopes believe that an entire race shares the guilt for the crimes of any one of its people.” Jovani walked a few steps, stopped, and turned back to face Stuart. The Welvan’s eyes were like laser beams. “The S’Klopes that was attacked and blinded by your people long ago was one of Golgath’s direct ancestors. He feels that he has more than enough reason to hold all humans accountable. This is a personal matter to him.”

“I still don’t think that I should make any kind of confession on behalf of all humanity, Jovani.”

“No disrespect intended, Captain, but I think that you fear potential reprisals against you or your crew should you accept responsibility for what your people are accused of.”

Stuart nodded and stopped himself from laughing. “That’s pretty forward of you, Jovani, but I must admit that the thought had occurred to me.”

Jovani's mood lightened. "You need not fear, Captain Stuart. The S'Klopes view your entire race as guilty but only seek to punish those directly involved in the crimes against them. Since those who attacked his ancestor are dead, no punishment will be given. They may demand some sort of reparation once you admit guilt, however."

"You are assuming that I will admit guilt, Mister Jovani."

"Can you afford not to, Captain?" Jovani frowned. "If it is clear that a group of humans did indeed commit atrocities against a S'Klopes..."

"I'm not sure that something out of an ancient Greek myth is clear evidence to prove what Golgath claims, but I need any information that he can provide about the whereabouts of the *Columbus's* crew."

"You will admit guilt then?"

Stuart sighed heavily. "I will admit guilt on behalf of the human race...providing I know what, if any, reparations need to be made ahead of time. And providing those reparations are reasonable."

Jovani started toward the door. "I will inform the prefect and return momentarily, Captain."

Stuart waited. It seemed like an hour or more but was in fact only several minutes that had passed before the door opened again. His concern over what Jovani and Golgath had talked about on the other side of the door, Stuart ironically realized, had skewed his perception of time. He made a mental note of that.

Golgath and Jovani reentered the prefect's office and faced Stuart once again.



Rob Stuart and Jovani reappeared on the *Monarch's* bridge in a flash of light. Hours had gone by since the captain's sudden departure and Commander Grey's face now showed great relief because of the captain's return. "You look like you've seen a ghost, Exec."

"You had me worried, Captain. I was thinking of sending out the marines to track you down. What happened over there?"

"I'll let you read my report to Starfleet, Exec, but right now we need to go find Commander LaSalle's crew." Stuart strode to the center of the bridge and sat down in the center seat. "Mister D'Neskos, set course zero seven one mark four eight and engage at warp nine."

"Aye, Captain," the Veloran replied.

"Where will that course take us, Sir?" Lieutenant Mills asked.

Stuart frowned as he looked back toward the tactical station. "A planet called Enkar...and I'm told that it's a rather inhospitable place."

To be continued...