

To Boldly Go: A Fool's Errand

A U.S.S. *Monarch* story

(with contributions from the crews of the starships *Providence* and *Trailblazer*)

By Cleve Johnson

Rob Stuart woke abruptly. His heart raced as he gasped for air.

Lieutenant Commander Alexandra Fuentes rushed over to Stuart's side. "Captain, can I help?"

Stuart waved her off with a forced grin. "Thank you, Commander, but I'll be alright." He propped himself up on one elbow as he started to roll off the uncomfortable bunk. "It was just a dream."

Fuentes nodded. "Understood, Sir. We all started getting those sorts of dreams within a few days of our arrival here, too."

Stuart noticed the genuine smile of the *Columbus*'s first officer. He wanted to reach out to her, but he quickly pushed that idea aside. He could not abandon his hope of seeing Jan again. He could still see his wife in his mind's eye and longed to hold her, to be with her, to see his children draw their first breath. "Once our rescuers arrive, we will all need some time in the company of the counselors."

"Rescuers? Don't you realize that we're not getting out of here?"

Stuart stood and faced the young ensign that brazenly approached.

"Anyone who would even attempt to rescue us from these aliens would have to be a fool!"

Fuentes stepped between the young man and Stuart. "You are addressing a superior officer, Cal. You will apologize this..."

Stuart raised his hand. "Thank you, Commander Fuentes, but I think Ensign Voorhies and I need to have some privacy."

Fuentes nodded and moved away. She motioned for all the other prisoners to give the two men a wide berth.

Stuart looked straight into the young man's eyes with determination and gentleness. He spoke with his full authority, yet in an almost imperceptible volume, but loud enough for the other man to hear. "My crew will get us out of this. If you choose to not believe that, then that is your choice...but you *will* keep your negative opinions to yourself, Mister Voorhies." Stuart let the gentleness slip away as fire nearly erupted from his eyes. "If you can't at least show some constructive optimism, Ensign, then keep your mouth shut. That is a direct order. And if you don't obey it, you will be facing a court martial once we do get out of here. Is that clear?"

Voorhies glared at Stuart, unable to stand defiantly very long in the shadow of the experienced captain. He looked down, his eyes began to glisten. "I...I'm sorry, Captain. I don't know..." A tear streamed down his cheek.

Stuart reached out, gently placed his hand on the young man's shoulder. "It's alright, Ensign...Cal." Stuart felt the man's tension lessen with the use of his first name. "We're all frightened, but I truly believe that we will get out of here."

Voorhies looked into Stuart's face and could see that the captain was being completely honest. He still had his doubts, but he felt a little better after the captain's assurances. Deep down, Voorhies knew that he could not continue to be a source of pessimism and low morale, regardless of the severity of the circumstances. "I'll keep quiet, Captain, unless I have something positive to say." He forced a smile, which gained him a cheery pat on his shoulder.

"Good man." Stuart waited until Voorhies moved away to his bunk, then the captain motioned for Fuentes to come back. "Once our deliverers show up, then everyone will need to stay focused on following their instructions so we can get out of here without casualties."

"I'll pass the word, Sir. Sir?"

"Yes, Commander?"

"I want to believe that your crew will come for us, but what about the ones who were taken away? We haven't heard about or seen them since the guards took them for other work details outside of the prison compound."

Stuart cocked his head to one side as he considered the woman's question. "I don't remember anyone being taken away, Commander. When did this happen?"

"No one has been taken since you arrived, Sir, but eight of our crew have been separated from the rest of us and I don't want to leave without getting them back...if they are still alive, that is."

"We need to see if the guards are willing to give us any information about them." Stuart looked toward the door, and then back to Fuentes. "Don't push too hard, but see if you can find anything out next time they come to feed us. I doubt that your shipmates are dead. Based on what I have observed, our captors seem to want us alive for...something. We're prisoners, but the guards haven't been cruel or abusive."

"I agree, Sir. The Enkara have never physically harmed us and they provide for our needs...except for our need to be free."

"Tell me, Commander..."

"Sir, please call me Alex."

Stuart smiled at the woman. "Alex. Did you notice anything different about those that were taken away? Anything they might have in common?"

"Three of them were on their first tour, younger and less experienced than most of the other crew."

"Like Ensign Voorhies?"

"Yes, Sir. Their morale was very low."

"Did it appear that their spirits were...broken?"

Lieutenant Commander Fuentes' eyebrows drew together as she thought back to the last time she saw her missing shipmates several weeks before. "I would say so, Captain...At least that is the case with the three youngest officers."

Stuart nodded. "That's what the Enkara want. They want to break us so that we'll be useful as good little slaves who will do whatever they want. Well, it's not going to work with the rest of us. Make sure that everyone complies with the Enkara until help arrives, but not lose heart. All of us need to stay positive and strong-willed."

"Of course, Sir. Captain?"

"Yes, Alex? Something else?"

"I didn't put it together before now, but I just realized that all of those taken were part of the engineering department."

Stuart stroked his chin. "Engineers, huh? That makes sense."

"What do you mean, Sir?"

Stuart's eyes lit up as he faced Lieutenant Commander Fuentes. He thought about a conversation that he had with his senior officers just a few weeks earlier:

The Monarch's senior officers sat around the conference table listening to Jovani address them. Prefect Golgath of Pesedon had provided Stuart and Jovani with information about the Enkara, a race bent on conquest of surrounding systems, and that they were the most likely suspects involved with the disappearance of the Columbus's crew. Jovani, the Welvan guide to this region of space, briefed the senior staff.

Commander Marcus Grey interrupted the Welvan's briefing. "What about Enkara technology? How do they compare with ours?"

"Based on what I have learned about Federation technology to date and what the S'Klopes have shared, I would say that the Enkara surpass you in weaponry and defense, but are approximately one hundred to one hundred fifty years behind you in other technological areas."

"What makes sense, Captain?"

"The Enkara have better weapons and defensive systems than we do, but our engineering, transporter, and other technologies are at least a hundred years ahead of them."

"Captain, I can't vouch for newest members of the engineering staff, but the other five have been with the *Columbus* since her launch and I'm sure that they will not cooperate with the Enkara."

Stuart nodded. "I hope those five can keep the other three from caving in."

“I’m sure they will keep the young ones under control. I better tell the rest of the crew to appear to cooperate with our...hosts.” Fuentes forced a smile as she turned and started toward the nearest huddled group of her crew.



U.S.S. *Monarch*, Stardate 55823.5, 1735 Hours

“Now that you have met everyone, would you like to hear my report on what has happened so far?” Marcus Grey directed his question to Melanie Leeson.

“Thank you, Commander, but Jan filled us in the main points on our way to the bridge.” Leeson looked around the room. “Do any of you have any thoughts on what to do next?”

No one spoke for several moments. Grey looked at his fellow officers, and then back to Leeson. “Since our previous attempt utterly failed, I was hoping that you might have some suggestions. You’re the senior officer, Captain. What are your orders?” There was no contempt in the man’s voice, only genuine respect of the chain of command.

Leeson leaned back in her chair and looked at the man who sat to her right. “Actually, Starfleet Command has designated Commander Adams to command this rescue mission.” Melanie knew that it was Admiral Hathaway, Rob Stuart’s uncle, and *only* Admiral Hathaway that put Blake in charge of the rescue mission, but she chose not to share that with the *Monarch*’s senior staff. She turned her head to face Marcus, who sat to her left. “You are still in command of the *Monarch*, Commander Grey, until Captain Stuart returns.” Turning back to Adams, she said, “Tell everyone your plan, Blake.”

Adams slightly leaned forward in his chair and placed one forearm on the conference table as he began. “I understand that the Enkara defenses and weaponry are better than ours, so we need a way to get around that advantage.”

Lieutenant Mills faced Adams as she shifted in her seat. “How do we get around their defenses, Sir? We sent in a fighter wing and almost lost two ships and our wing commander in the process.”

“That was a frontal assault, Lieutenant. We’re going to do something they don’t expect.”

“What would that be, Commander?” Major Craddock, the Starfleet Marine CO and *Monarch*’s security chief, narrowed his eyes on Blake.

Blake stared back the Marine and forced himself to stay calm in what he perceived to be a challenge from the other man. The corners of his mouth rose just a little before he continued. “We’re going to hit ‘em head on again.”

“What!?” The shout came from the tactical officer. “With all due respect, Commander, we already found out that type of strategy is suicide.”

“They probably expect us to sneak in after they beat us in a frontal assault, so we will catch them off guard by doing what you did before.” Blake stood and started to walk around those seated at the table, all eyes following him as he did so. “We send the fighters in again as a distraction, but the *Monarch* will go in, too. Commander Grey, you will unload every quantum torpedo in your arsenal if you have to. You have to get Enkar’s shield grid down while I sneak in with a runabout filled with a Marine strike team and beam them down to wherever our people are

being held. Major Craddock will take his team to secure them and Captain Leeson and her crew will do the retrieval.”

Craddock glared at Adams as a cacophony of voices began to rise. The Major slapped his hand down on the table to quiet the various discussions that arose from all the officers’ reactions to Adams’ plan. Craddock slapped the table a second time before everyone finally fell silent. “Commander Adams, could you tell us how you plan to get a runabout into orbit and scan for our people’s life signs without the Enkara blowing us to bits before my team even has a chance to beam down?”

“Have you ever heard how Troy was defeated, Major?”

“Of course I have, Commander. Did you happen to bring a wooden horse along?” The Marine CO did not attempt to hide his disdain for Adams’ plan.

“Actually, Major, I did.” Blake returned to his seat after having circled the table twice and faced the Starfleet Marine sitting directly across the table. “I happen to know a thing or two about holographic programming and the Enkara just happen to live in a star system with more than its share of meteor activity. In fact, Captain Leeson’s science officer scanned a number of meteors that will cross Enkar’s orbital path within the next couple of days.”

“So what?” Craddock would not let up. He was determined to know exactly what Adams had in mind before he would risk any of his Marines.

Blake chuckled. “Sooo...we go in with all the other meteors. I just happened to bring along one of the *Providence*’s holocloak generators. Captain Leeson’s chief engineer has installed it in a runabout and is currently modifying its transporter to beam as many as fourteen people at one time. We won’t send in the assault team until our sensors have located Rob and the others.”

“Locating them shouldn’t be a problem, Blake,” Jan Stuart said. “As a precaution, our entire ship’s compliment was injected with a subcutaneous transponder in case of capture. I will give you Rob’s transponder frequency and you will be able to locate him and the others within a few seconds after entering orbit.”

Blake’s face lit up as he winked at the doctor. “I owe you a home-cooked meal for making my job easier, Jan.”

Grey, who had remained silent through Blake’s briefing, cut in. “What if our people are not located together? What if they are not with the captain? If I were the Enkara, I would spread them out.”

Elsen Rab, although a civilian, had been invited to the briefing. His telepathic abilities, as well as his experience as a first contact specialist, had proven to be an asset to the mission. “Don’t assume the Enkara will think like you...or like any of us, Commander Grey. I probed several of the Enkara minds during the assault that led to Captain Stuart’s capture and I can safely say that their strategies are based on the idea that they will be victorious in any armed conflict. They have an arrogant belief that they are superior to any race outside of their own. They believe in direct confrontation and assume that any potential adversaries think the same way that they do when it comes to military tactics.”

“So our earlier fighter assault should have reinforced that idea in their minds.” The comment came from Lieutenant Mills.

Rab nodded in reply. "I believe so."

"What if we find out the captain...and the entire *Columbus* crew are dead?" Major Craddock, playing the devil's advocate, did not try to show any sensitivity toward Rob Stuart's friends or even toward the CMO. He knew that he had a duty to rescue those that had been kidnapped, but he also wanted to make sure that the whole thing was not an Enkara trap.

"They are not dead, Major." Rab radiated confidence in his statement. "The Enkara may be warlike, but they value the lives of their enemies as a valuable resource. They want to expand to other worlds and build an empire. They use those who they have conquered as slave labor and will only kill if absolutely necessary."

Blake and Melanie both looked to see how Jan would react to the Betazoid's announcement. They both saw a gleam in their friend's eyes.

"How will the *Trailblazer* extricate the hostages once Major Craddock's team secures them?" Lieutenant Mills wanted to know every detail to determine if Adams' plan was tactically sound. She was the type of person who left nothing to chance...if *she* could help it.

"Mel...I mean Captain Leeson...will bring in her ship at high warp and go to sublight near the planet while the *Monarch* and the fighters keep the Enkara distracted. She will have already received the coordinates from my runabout, so transport will take place right away. Once our people are on board, *Trailblazer* will warp away and everyone else will disengage and do the same. All our ships will meet at a predetermined rendezvous point, and then we'll throw the best party that anyone here has ever been to."

Despite everyone's solemn mood, Blake's last remark paved the way for several of those present to feel better about what they would do very soon. A few even let themselves laugh.

Blake held up his hand to quiet the others as his facial expression became more serious. "I'm not going to pretend this will be easy, but I want you to know that I intend to do everything possible to get your captain...my friend...back in one piece. That goes for all the others, too." He paused, looking around at each person to peer into each one's eyes. "Starfleet is not just an organization, but it's a brotherhood...it's a family. And those who have chosen to serve, do so with a sense of loyalty and sacrifice not only to the Federation but also to one another."

The speech served as a rallying cry. Each man and woman in the room, stirred by Blake's words and by the images that those words created in each of their minds stood together.

Even Lieutenant Mills and Major Craddock appeared to put their doubts aside to join the others in support of the plan.



Blake took another bite of his cheeseburger as Jan sat back and filled Melanie in on everything that happened in the past several months since they had both taken new assignments. In turn, Mel had told Jan about her first adventure as captain of the *Trailblazer*. Of course, some details were left out due to the classified nature of the mission.

"What about you, Blake?" Janice Stuart surprised him as he tried to focus on the coming rescue attempt. "How does it feel to be the one in command?"

"I'm still getting used to it, but all in all it's not a bad gig."

The doctor smiled. “Rob knew that you were ready to sit in the big chair. He told Commodore Gardner that he wouldn’t accept another command unless you got the *Providence*.”

“I guess I better thank him the next time I see him.” Blake’s eyebrows narrowed, his mood became sullen. “If all goes well, I should see him tomorrow.”

Jan walked over and placed her hand on Blake’s shoulder. “Thank you.” She turned her head to look at Melanie. “Thank you both.”

Melanie placed her hand on Jan’s shoulder. “I’ve asked Commander Grey if you and Commander LaSalle can go with me since the *Trailblazer* is handling the extraction. I figured that LaSalle would want to be with his crew again as soon as possible, and I’m sure that you want to greet Rob right away.”

Jan placed her hand on her belly. “All three of us do. I’m sure that I will be needed to treat injuries on the *Monarch* once the shooting starts.”

Melanie and Blake both looked at Jan. “The *Trailblazer* will probably be in more need of another doctor than the *Monarch*,” Blake said. “We don’t know what condition the prisoners are in after months of captivity.”

Jan could not argue with her friends’ logic. “Okay, I see your point. I just hope that Rob won’t think I’m shirking my duties to this ship and crew.”

All three of them began to laugh when the door chime interrupted the trio. “Come in,” Jan said.

The two halves of the door slid apart, Major Craddock peered in from the corridor. “Sorry to bother you, Doctor, but I was wondering if I could have a word with Commander Adams.”

“Of course, Major. Please come in.”

“I don’t want to put you out of your own quarters, Doctor.” The security chief continued to wait in the corridor. “I thought that the commander and I could go to one of the conference rooms.”

“It’s quite all right, Major.” Jan forced herself to appear pleasant, although she still was smarting from the security chief’s earlier insensitivity and pessimistic outlook on Blake’s plan to rescue her husband and the other prisoners. “I was just about to take Captain Leeson on a tour of the ship. You and Commander Adams are welcome to use my quarters as long as you need them.”

Blake shot a look at the doctor. “What do you mean by that, Jan?”

Jan and Melanie chuckled as they exited the room.

Blake motioned for Craddock to come in and take a seat across the table from him. “What can I do for you, Major Craddock?”

“Commander, I...I just wanted to say that I didn’t intend to challenge your authority earlier.”

“You were just playing the devil’s advocate. I understand, Major.” Blake took a sip of his replicated vanilla coke. “It’s your duty to make sure that all of us make sure we know what we’re

getting into, but I have to admit that you sure don't impress me as someone who would have a nickname like *Charging Bull*."

Craddock frowned. "You know about my nickname? How?"

Blake shrugged. "Last time I was on shore leave, I bumped into a former shipmate of mine from when we served on the *Thomas Paine*. We were swapping stories about our adventures since those days, about the war. He told me that he was stationed on some little outpost planet near the Cardassian border when the Dominion forces attacked. He told me that a small group of Starfleet Marines was assigned there and how a tough-as-nails marine first lieutenant led a charge against a unit of ruthless Jem'Hedgar soldiers and saved the lives of all those that manned the outpost."

"Did your friend tell how this cocky first lieutenant got most of his unit killed or maimed in the process of that charge?" Craddock had tried to suppress the memories of that particular battle. His command had nearly been wiped out that day.

Blake searched the security chief's eyes, looking for anything that might reveal who the real Charging Bull Craddock was. "Is that why you're reluctant to support my rescue plan?"

"No, Commander. I simply don't want to put more lives in danger for a...a fool's errand."

Blake couldn't help but smile at that. "A fool's errand, huh? Well, Major, it's your lucky day."

"What do you mean, Commander?"

"Why do you think that Starfleet sent *me* to lead this mission?"

Major Craddock looked intently for any sign of weakness or uncertainty on Blake's face. "I hoped that I spoke figuratively, but...I guess I better get my team ready. When do we launch?"

"Tomorrow at 0700." Blake stood and raised his glass. "May fortune favor the foolish."

The marine officer forced a slight smile. "It really is a fool's errand." With that, Craddock turned and exited the room.

Blake watched the security chief walk out, and then he took another sip of the 20th Century beverage. As the door closed, Blake spoke to no one but himself. "Now there goes a man in need of a sense of humor."



Supreme Commander's Office, Binlad, Enkar

The door opened and a guard rigidly entered, stood at attention, and saluted.

The Supreme Commander regarded the soldier's attention to protocol. "Speak."

"Prisoner three-eight-seven-four-two continues to bring the hope of a rescue to the other prisoners, Zar-Bek." The guard's eyes focused straight ahead, as he delivered his report. "The prison's labor director reports that his efforts to neutralize the prisoners' wills have proved ineffective since that one's arrival. It is puzzling that one person's influence has undermined and reversed our ability to break the wills of the other prisoners."

“I know all about the situation, Per-Vel. I have read the director’s report on the prisoner.” Zar-Bek rose from his chair and walked around his desk. He looked out the window, watched the orange-colored clouds pass by. Without turning his gaze from the window, Zar-Bek spoke to the guard again. “Have prisoner three-eight-seven-four-two brought to me at first light tomorrow. I will interrogate him myself and determine what kind of people these prisoners are to be so swayed to still have hope that they will ever leave their service to Enkar.”

“Zar-Bek has spoken. Your word is law.” The guard saluted and backed out of the commander’s office.



U.S.S. *Monarch*, Stardate 55825.9, 0653 Hours

Blake and Jan entered the shuttlebay. “I want you to know that I appreciate all you’re doing to get Rob back,” Jan said.

“You don’t have to say that, Jan. You know that I’d do anything to help him.”

“I know that, Blake. Just be careful and make sure you come back, too.” The doctor stopped and turned toward Blake, pulling his arm to stop his forward momentum and forcing him to turn to face her. “I mean it, Blake. Rob couldn’t live with himself if he came back and you didn’t.”

Blake smiled. “I’m like a bad penny, Jan. Besides, I can’t resist the look on his face when he realizes that I am the one to save *his* butt for a change.”

A male Trill turned away from the console that he monitored and approached Jan and Blake. “Doctor, Commander Adams, the runabout is powered up and ready for launch.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant...uh...”

“...Lieutenant Haran Tamar,” Jan finished. “Blake, this is the flight deck officer for this shuttlebay.”

“Glad to meet you, Lieutenant.” Blake nodded to the Trill. “I’ve never met anyone with a worm in his belly before.”

Haran Tamar’s spots darkened. “I’m...not joined, Commander.”

“Not joined?”

Jan tried to relieve the confusion. “Lieutenant Tamar doesn’t have a symbiont, Blake.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

“No problem, Commander.” Tamar forced a slight smile. “I’ve realized that many humans assume that most Trills have a...worm.”

Blake actually blushed, which is something that he rarely did. “Well, are the marines on board?”

“Yes, Sir. Major Craddock and his team report ready. I’ve assigned Lieutenant Little Bear to be your relief pilot, Sir.”

“Lieutenant Jaxx can handle that.” Blake started to walk toward the runabout. “The *Thames* does belong to the *Trailblazer*, after all.”

“Lieutenant Jaxx is an OPS officer, Commander. I thought that a qualified CONN officer would be better equipped to...”

“I appreciate your foresight, Lieutenant, but Jaxx is a qualified shuttle pilot.” Blake stopped and turned, changed his mind on the matter. “Actually, I’d appreciate Lieutenant Little Bear coming along. This is a joint mission and the crews of both ships working together will be a boost to morale.”

“He’s already on board, Sir.”

“Good.” Blake started to turn, but he saw Jan still standing several meters away, smiling. He smiled back and gave a “thumbs up” sign to reassure her. Blake turned and walked straight toward the runabout.



U.S.S. *Trailblazer*, 0700 Hours

Captain Melanie Leeson entered the bridge and made her way to the center of the room. She took her seat and looked at the main viewer. “Report, Mister Shrev.”

Commander Shrev, the *Trailblazer*’s Andorian first officer, checked the readouts on his monitor and turned his head toward his captain. “The runabout has just cleared the *Monarch*’s shuttlebay and is preparing to go to warp, Captain.”

“Open hailing frequencies.”

“Open, Captain.”

“*Trailblazer* to *Thames*.”

Blake’s image appeared on the viewscreen. His image smiled, but Melanie Leeson could see the determination etched on his face, behind the jovial facade. “*Are you ready for this, Mel?*”

“Are you? There’s a lot at stake here, Blake.” Leeson wore a stern look that would not betray her concern for the outcome of this mission. This was not just any rescue mission, but one that had a profound personal risk involved.

Blake’s image nodded, his smile faded. “*I know what’s at stake, Mel. We’ll get him back...and in one piece.*”

“You be careful.” Melanie let her demeanor soften as she stared at her friend’s image.

Blake peered back at Melanie through the looking glass. His eyes focused on hers and something unspoken, yet with complete understanding for both of them, passed between them through the distance. “*I’ll see you at the rendezvous.*”

Just as Blake’s image was replaced by the image of the runabout jumping to warp, Jan Stuart and Commander Joel LaSalle entered the bridge. Melanie Leeson turned when she heard the swoosh of the doors to her left slide shut. “Welcome aboard. Blake and the rescue team are on their way.”

Jan gazed at the star field image and focused on the hope that everything would go smoothly.



Supreme Commander's Office, Binlad, Enkar

The door opened and Rob, flanked by two Enkara guards entered the spacious office. He quickly observed his surroundings—the blood-red paint on the walls that clashed with the dark green Enkara flesh, the life-size picture of the room's occupant that hung on the wall, and the large window that allowed a clear view of the entire capital city. Rob looked at the person that sat behind the metal desk and at the symbol of that man's vanity that hung on the wall at one end of the room. Rob smiled and motioned with his head toward the picture. "Nice likeness." Suddenly, he felt the vice-like grip of the guard to his left clamp down on his shoulder.

"You will not address the Supreme Commander unless he gives you permission to do so." The guard was matter-of-fact in his stated command.

The Supreme Commander held up his hand to motion the guard to release his grip on Stuart. "It is alright, Per-Taleb. The prisoner is not accustomed to our protocols."

"I ask permission to take the prisoner and instruct him in proper protocol." The guard stood at attention, motionless, void of emotion or desire.

"That will not be necessary, Per-Taleb. You may go while I discuss our ways with the prisoner."

Rob noticed the guard hesitate before he saluted and exited the room along with the other guard. The door closed behind them.

The Supreme Commander pointed to the chair that was positioned across from his desk. "Please sit, prisoner three-eight-seven-four-two."

Rob did as the Enkara leader requested.

"I hope you don't mind, but I will call you seven-four-two." The commander leaned back in his chair, a slight grin on his face.

"I'd prefer you call me Captain Robert P. Stuart since that is my name."

The commander bared his teeth in an arrogant grin. "That may have been your name in your previous life, but you should accept the fact that your previous life is over. You are now a subject to Enkar...and to me."

Rob leaned forward to stare directly into his adversary's eyes. "I am a citizen of the United Federation of Planets and a Starfleet officer. It is only a matter of time before my people come to rescue me and the other Federation citizens that you have *illegally* abducted."

Rob's statement incited a roar of laughter from the alien. "Illegal? Understand four-seven-two that I am the only legal authority here. The other prisoners' ship entered our space illegally to spy on us, and they were taken prisoner as all spies and invaders should. You came with another ship to spy on us as well. Be assured that any others who invade my territory will be captured and forced to serve Enkar just as you have."

"For the record, my people are explorers. We're neither spies nor invaders. We travel to parts of the galaxy to seek out other life and establish peaceful relations with them, to understand, to learn." Rob tried to make his captor understand Starfleet's purpose. "The crew of the first ship was on a simple survey mission and they did not know anything about you or your

claimed space. They were not invaders and neither am I. I and my crew were sent to look for them.”

“And you found them.”

Rob saw something in his captor’s eyes, an expression on his face that revealed to the Starfleet officer the alien’s intent. “Why did you send the *Columbus* and Commander LaSalle back to Federation space? You were baiting us, weren’t you?”

Zar-Bek said nothing, but his face betrayed him.

“You thought you found a way to draw more people to enslave for the purpose of…” Rob paused.

“…For the purpose of building my empire,” the alien finished. “And here you are. Here you will stay.”

Rob sat back in his chair and shook his head. “Don’t delude yourself. You’re nothing but a petty thug who wants to make a big splash in the pond.”

Zar-Bek almost laughed again at his prisoner’s naivety. “I don’t understand your reference, four-seven-two, but I think I understand what you are trying to say. You believe that I am a small creature who wants power. I assure that I am not small, but I do have power. I have power over you, the crew of your other ship, and all the planets that I have claimed for my ancestors.”

“Power over others is an illusion.”

“You will find out how wrong you are, four-seven-two, when I capture those who would come for you and enslave them as well.”

Rob immediately hoped that Commander Grey took the *Monarch* back to Federation space, but deep down he knew that didn’t happen. Rob knew that a rescue attempt would come soon. “My people will resist you and never give in to your oppression.”

Zar-Bek’s face turned a darker shade of green as his smile disappeared. “It is no good to resist. Go back to your cell and tell your people to give up and accept that they are servants of Enkar. Tell them that there is no hope of escape or rescue.”

Rob rose from his chair and moved toward the door, which opened to reveal two waiting guards. Before exiting Zar-Bek’s office, Rob turned and stared at the Enkar’s leader. “Have you ever wondered what captivity is like? One day soon, you might have the opportunity to get a taste of it.” With that, Rob gave himself over to the Enkara guards that would transport him back to the prison.



U.S.S. *Thames*, 0915 Hours

Major Craddock sat at the science station directly behind Lieutenant Heron Jaxx at OPS. The science station had been reconfigured for tactical mode since the current mission was most definitely not scientific in nature. The marine officer turned away from his instruments and peered out the forward windows. “How much longer, Commander?”

Blake Adams swiveled around in his chair at the CONN position. “Getting bored, Major?”

“It’s not boredom. I’m just tired of sitting.”

“We’re almost to the outer edge of the system, so not much longer.” Blake rose from his seat and faced young officer behind seated behind him. “Mister Little Bear, please take the CONN.”

“Aye Sir.” The junior grade lieutenant took Blake’s place and strapped himself in place. “Awaiting your orders, Commander.”

“Come out of warp near one of the outer gas giants and use the planet to shield us from any possible sensing devices they may have between there and their homeworld.” Blake sat down at the engineering station, which had been vacated by Roger Little Bear. “You don’t look like an Indian, Lieutenant.”

“Sir?”

“What I mean is that your name is Native American, but you don’t have the physical features.”

“My great-grandfather was full-blooded Lakota, but my great grandmother was German. My grandfather and my father both married Euro-Americans, so that’s why I don’t look like my Sioux ancestors.”

Adams continued to check the engineering instruments. “I see. So what race do you claim as your heritage?”

The lieutenant smiled. “I embrace all of my ancestries, Commander. I prefer to be seen as a member of the human race.”

“Me too, Lieutenant.”

Little Bear ran his fingers across his instrument panel. “Coming up on the outermost planet now, Commander.”

“Reduce speed to full impulse. Mister Jaxx, engage holocloak program Adams One.”

The runabout exited space warp and immediately transformed its image from a small Starfleet craft into a meteor. It passed the gas giant and made way for the asteroid belt that separated Enkar from the outer planets.

Blake rose from his seat and motioned for Major Craddock to follow him to the rear of the cockpit. The marine unstrapped himself and joined Blake. The two men stood and faced each other, contemplating their next actions.

Blake spoke first. “Major, we’ll be in Enkar’s orbit within forty minutes. Are you ready?”

“I’m ready. My marines are ready.” His face showed confidence and maybe just a little arrogance. “I still say this plan...”

“...Is foolish?” Blake’s brow raised as he finished the major’s sentence.

“Lacks wisdom,” Craddock corrected. “My team and I will do our best to free the prisoners. All I ask is that you keep a transporter lock on us just in case something goes wrong.”

“Jaxx will keep the lock on us at all times.”

“Excuse me? What do you mean Jaxx will keep a lock on *us*?” The marine CO clearly showed his objection to Blake’s statement. “*You’re* not going.”

“Don’t worry, Major. I’ll stay out of your way.”

“Commander Adams, I strongly protest. You are not a marine. My troops cannot be expected to perform as well under the command of someone who has not trained with them or for a...”

“...Non-marine. So noted, Major, but you don’t need to worry. I’m the mission commander, so I will go, but you retain command of your team.” Blake would not back down from his position and would not let Major Craddock overrule him.

“This isn’t a good idea, Sir, but I will obey your orders.” The marine started to turn toward the door that led out of the cockpit. “I better suit up and give the troops their final briefing.” He left without waiting for a reply from Blake.



U.S.S. *Monarch*, 0935 Hours

Lieutenant Ricardo Hernandez stood vigilantly over Lieutenant Commander Kimberly Thomas as she lay sleeping in sickbay. He felt guilty about what had happened to his flight leader during the attack, although he could not think of anything else that he could have done to prevent her injuries during the failed attack on Enkar’s defenses. He covered her and her wingman during the entire engagement, but the Enkara station’s weapons still got a clean shot at Thomas’s fighter...and she almost lost her life.

Thomas stirred and opened her eyes. She blinked a couple of times to clear her vision and then turned her head toward her XO. “What are you doing here?”

Hernandez, although concerned for his CO, forced himself to show an upbeat attitude. “I was just wondering when you were going to get off your butt and back into your fighter, CAG. We have a mission to fly.”

Thomas smiled slightly. “I guess you’ll have to fly this one without me, Aztec.”

The two pilots looked at each other for several moments in silence. Thomas sensed from the expression on her friend and XO’s face that he blamed himself for her injuries. “You didn’t mess up, Aztec. This isn’t your fault.”

“Part of me knows that, CAG, but the other part...” Hernandez turned away so that his CO could not see the tears forming in his eyes. “I’m just glad that you’re alive...and in one piece.” Hernandez referred to the CAG’s injured arm that was almost too damaged to be of any use, or worse; however, Doctor M’Tan’s medical experience dealing with similar injuries during the Dominion War led her to save CAG’s arm.

The tactical officer’s voice on the intercom interrupted Hernandez’ thoughts. “*All hands to battle stations. Attack will commence in fifteen minutes. Raptor Fighter Wing, prepare to launch in ten minutes.*”

Hernandez wiped his eyes and slowly turned to face Thomas. “I have to go, CAG. I’ll do the best I can to pay the Enkara back for what they did to you.”

Thomas frowned at her exec's statement. "Don't seek revenge, Aztec. You do this to rescue the captain and that other ship's crew. Understood?"

Hernandez nodded and smiled. "Understood, CAG."

Kimberly Thomas smiled at her trusted subordinate. "Take care of the Raptors. It's your command now, Aztec."

Hernandez returned CAG's smile. "I'll make sure they come home." He turned and left the medical ward.



U.S.S. *Thames*, 0942 Hours

Commander Blake Adams, now sitting at the science station, continuously monitored his panel for any sign of human life on Enkar's surface. Every once in awhile, a blip would indicate the possibility of human life, but he did not know how similar or different the Enkara readings compared to humans. Blake reset the sensors to scan for Rob's transponder frequency, although he did not think the *Thames* was in range to pick the frequency up yet. To his surprise, the transponder signal came through weakly.

"I'm getting Captain Stuart's transponder signal. Jaxx, I'm transferring the coordinates to your console." Blake's fingers quickly entered the transfer protocols. "Contact the *Monarch* on a coded channel and tell them to come in firing."

"Aye, Commander." Jaxx did as Blake directed.

"Mister Little Bear, take us within transporter range as soon as the *Monarch* and the fighter wing brings the defense grid down. I'll be in the aft compartment with the jarheads."

Roger Little Bear almost laughed at Adams's use of an archaic reference for the marines. "Aye Sir."

Blake unbuckled, rose from the chair, and quickly moved toward the hatch that led to the rear of the runabout. He entered the aft section and stopped in front of Major Craddock, who had just finished giving his troops their final briefing. "Are you ready, Major?"

"We're ready."



Enkar orbit, 0957 Hours

Seven *Peregrine*-class fighters came out of warp and immediately cut loose their phaser cannons on the Enkara defense satellites. Enkara attack ships broke orbit and began to fire back at the small Federation ships within seconds of the attack. Fortunately, the *Peregrines* were more maneuverable and could dodge the Enkara weapons fire with little difficulty.

Lieutenant Hernandez led the fighter wing through the oncoming gauntlet of enemy ships so that they could not fire at the Federation fighters without hitting each other. "Raptor leader to Raptor squadron. Target their engines and weapons, and keep your shields at maximum."

"*We're right with you, Aztec.*"

Hernandez continued to fire at the enemy vessels. He guided his fighter between the ships and squeezed off several short energy bursts that wore down the enemy's shields. One of the

Enkara ships released an energy beam that barely glanced off the port wing of Hernandez' fighter; he almost lost control, but his experienced training had taught him how to handle his ship.

One of the other *Peregrines* swooped into the gauntlet and began firing rapidly at one of the attack ship's engines. The pilot misjudged his distance when the enemy ship's engines exploded, and his fighter was caught in the blast. The pilot lost control of his ship and collided with another Enkara vessel and both ships created an eruption of energy that illuminated the entire area.

Hernandez saw the explosion and closed his eyes to mourn for his comrade as much as to protect his eyes from the brilliant flash caused by the explosion. "Madre de Dios," he whispered. "Whitaker." He forced his grief away in order to stay focused on the mission. "Raptor leader to *Monarch*. Start your attack."

The *Sovereign*-class starship came out of warp with phasers and photon torpedoes firing at full strength. One by one, Enkara ships took hit after hit before they had a chance to retaliate.

On the bridge, Commander Marcus Grey sat on the edge of the center seat. "Keep pouring it on, Lieutenant."

"Aye, Commander," Jennifer Mills replied from the tactical station. "One of their attack ships is breaking formation and going after Lieutenant Hernandez."

Grey kept his eyes focused on the main viewer. "Can you get phaser lock on that ship, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Try to disable engines and weapons."

"I'll try, Sir, but the ship is flying erratically. I'm not sure I can be that precise at this distance."

The XO sat back and stroked his chin. "Very well, Lieutenant. Do whatever is necessary to protect our fighter."

Lieutenant Hernandez's *Peregrine* fighter tried to evade the Enkara ship's disruptor beams. Although he was a skilled pilot, Aztec realized that he might have met his match against the aliens piloting the other ship. His fighter continued to weave in and around debris and damaged Enkara vessels when he saw a bright flash out of the side window of his cockpit. He realized that the flash came from the exploding Enkara attack ship that had been doggedly chasing him.

"*You're clear, Aztec.*" The calm voice of Lieutenant Mills came none too soon for the fighter pilot.

"Gracias, Lieutenant Mills. I'll buy you a drink in Eleven Forward when this is over."

"*I'll hold you to it. Monarch, out.*"



Binlad Prison Compound, Enkar, 1003 Hours

Several shafts of energy coalesced outside the perimeter of the Enkara prison camp where Stuart and *Columbus*'s crew were housed. As soon as the transporter beams faded, Commander Blake Adams, Major Craddock, and the members of the marine rescue team crouched low to avoid detection. Craddock motioned toward two of his team members to move off toward the nearest building. The major moved close to Adams and began whispering in his ear. "As soon as they knock out the generators, we will cut through the fence and get inside."

"Wouldn't it be easier to do a site-to-site transport once the shield is down?" Adams wondered why he needed to point out the obvious solution to an experienced marine officer.

Craddock looked hard at Blake, smugness plastered to his face. "Do you think the Enkara will have the force field surrounding the main prisoner complex running off the same generators that supply the rest of the power. Come on, Commander, you should have that figured out."

Blake smiled. "I'll bet you a steak dinner that the force field goes with the rest of the electricity."

Craddock rolled his eyes. "You can't be that naïve." After a brief pause, "You've got a bet."

The hum of the electrified fence ceased just as Blake pulled out his tricorder. He activated the device, scanned the area, and smiled as he handed the tricorder to Major Craddock. "Take a look at these readings."

Craddock took a quick glance at the readings and handed the tricorder back to Blake. "How did you know?"

Blake put the scanning device back into the pouch attached to his belt. "I like my steak medium well." He tapped his combadge. "Adams to *Thames*. Prepare for a site-to-site transport. Major Craddock will give the coordinates."



The rescue team materialized inside the corridor of the wing where the Federation hostages were housed. Each of the marines held their phaser rifles at the ready as they proceeded through the corridor.

Craddock led the way, holding up his hand to signal his team to stop as they approached a crossroad in the hallway. He motioned for Sergeant Vigo Mikovich to come forward. "Gunny, take two of the men and check around the corner for any guards."

The platoon sergeant called the two men forward and they started toward the corridor junction when two Enkara soldiers came from the left hallway. Gunny and his men fired before the aliens had a chance to take aim.

The three marines carefully rounded the corner but jumped back as several energy beams nearly missed them. Mikovich motioned for his CO to come forward. "There's four Enkara about twelve or thirteen meters down that hall, Major," he said with a slight Russian accent.

"How's your throwing arm, Gunny?"

The Russian platoon sergeant grinned sheepishly. "Good enough to throw twelve or thirteen meters, Sair." He pulled a stun grenade from his belt and then activated his personal

shield armor. The shield was good for about forty seconds, or seven or eight phaser hits at force ten, whichever came first. Of course, the sergeant did not know how the Enkara energy weapons compared to Federation phasers, so he had to be quick just in case.

Gunny activated the grenade, which had a five-second delay, and jumped into the junction. He took aim as several Enkara beams struck his shield armor. He threw the grenade down the hall and dove back into the other corridor. A bright flash accompanied the sound of a small explosion. One of the marines moved to where the corridors joined and peeked around the corner. He saw all four of the Enkara soldiers on the floor. None of them moved.

Major Craddock helped Mikovich off the floor, patting him on the shoulder. “Good work, Gunny.”

“My pleasure, Sair.”

“Let’s go.” Craddock led Blake and the troops down the corridor to where the fallen Enkara lay stunned. “Secure their weapons.” One of the marines grabbed each of the alien energy weapons as the others took point positions around the door next to the fallen Enkara.

Commander Adams pulled out his tricorder and scanned the area, specifically the door in front of him. “Several dozen life signs are in that room, Major. Human, Andorian, Bolian, Vulcan, Trill, Betazoid.”

“You don’t have to name them all, Commander.” Craddock appeared slightly annoyed. “They’re our people, but are there any Enkara with them?”

Blake shook his head. “Just ours.”

“It looks like the lock needs a security code.” Craddock pointed his hand phaser at the lock. “I’ve got the security code right here. Everyone stand back.” As soon as Blake and the marines backed away, the major fired at the control panel on the wall. The door slid open and Craddock and Adams entered the room.

Captain Rob Stuart, surrounded by the other Starfleet personnel, all stepped forward. “Nice of you to drop by, Major.” He turned his head, noticed Commander Adams, and smiled. “What are you doing here, Blake?”

“Is that any way to greet your best friend?” He smiled as he tapped his communicator. “Adams to *Monarch*. We have our people. Tell Captain Leeson to get her ship here ASAP.”

“Acknowledged, Mister Adams. Three minutes until extraction.”

“Good. How are you doing up there, Commander Grey?”

“We have taken some damage, but not as much as the Enkara have. We seem to have caught them off guard.”

“Get out of orbit as soon as the *Trailblazer* picks us up.”

“Understood. Monarch out.”

Blake grabbed Stuart by the arms and gave him a bear hug. “This sort of makes up for all those times you pulled my butt out of the fire, huh?”

“I don’t remember this area of space being part of your survey area, Blake. I hope you didn’t go UA to come and get me.”

“Who me?” Blake tried to look disappointed that his former CO would think such a thing. “Actually, I’m here with the blessings of Commodore Gardner and Admiral Hathaway.”

“At least you got permission before...”

Gunnery Sergeant Mikovich rushed into the cell, interrupting Captain Stuart. “Keptin, Major, ve have company coming.”

Major Craddock immediately went into action. “Everyone stay calm. We only need to hold ‘em off for a minute or two until we beam outa here. Gunny, deploy the troops in the corridor.”

“Done, Major, but there’s not much cover out there.”

Stuart pulled Craddock aside. “Major, you should know that this isn’t the entire *Columbus* crew. There are eight members of the engineering staff that are held somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“That’s the problem, Major. We don’t know where.”

Craddock didn’t like what he heard. “I don’t like leaving people behind, Captain.”

“Nor do I, Major.” Stuart turned and looked at the other former hostages. He turned back to face Blake Adams. “If I could get to the capital city, I think I can convince the Enkara to turn them over to us.”

Adams's mouth turned into a wide grin. “I’m with you, Skipper. Our runabout can do a site-to-site from here to the capital.”

“We’ll need to beam directly into the capital building, as close to Zar-Bek’s office as possible without detection.”

“I’ll handle that, Skipper.” Blake tapped his communicator as he stepped away.”

“Major, I’ll need a phaser.”

“Gunny, your sidearm please.” Craddock’s face revealed concern and disapproval as Mikovich handed Stuart the phaser. “Captain, I think you should beam up with the other hostages. My marines and I can...”

“I understand your objection, Major, but I need to do this myself. You take charge of these people and get them out of here. Blake and I can take care of Zar-Bek.”

“I want you to take some of my men, Captain.”

Stuart considered Craddock’s suggestion and saw the wisdom of it. “I don’t think a full assault is necessary, Major. I’ll take two marines with us.”

Craddock still did not like what Captain Stuart was about to do, but he had his orders. He turned to face Mikovich. “Gunny, get Lance Corporal Tyree and Private Cook.”

“Tyree, Cook, front and center.”

The two marines rushed from the corridor into the cell and stood at attention in front of Mikovich and Craddock

“I’m assigning you to the Captain and Commander Adams,” Craddock said. “Keep ‘em safe.”

In unison, both marines yelled, “Sir, yes Sir.”

Adams came back into the circle. “Mister Jaxx has found a nice storage closet just a few meters from Zar-Bek’s office that we can beam to. Scans indicate that Zar-Bek is alone in his office, but there are two guards outside his door.”

Stuart turned toward the door when he heard weapons fire in the corridor. He quickly turned back to face Craddock. “Keep them safe, Major.” Stuart turned to Blake. “Let’s do it.”

Blake tapped his combadge. “Energize, Mister Jaxx.”

As Stuart, Adams, Tyree, and Cook disappeared in the transporter beam, Major Craddock’s communicator chirped. He tapped it to open the frequency. “Craddock here.”

Captain Leeson’s voice came through loud and clear. “*Trailblazer to away team. We’re in orbit and ready to beam you out.*”

“Just in the nick of time, Captain. We’re taking fire.” Craddock looked at Mikovich. “Get the troops in here and block the door.”

Gunny rushed to the cell door and called the other marines in. They kept firing down the corridor as each one quickly entered the cell. After the last man entered, they forced the door closed; however, they could not lock it from the inside. Even if they could, the locking mechanism was destroyed when the marines entered the cell earlier.

A dozen Enkara soldiers rushed through the prison hall toward the cell door. One placed an explosive charge on the cell door and quickly moved a few meters away. As soon as the door exploded, the Enkara guards ran into the cell. It was empty.



The starship *Trailblazer* zoomed out of orbit. Once clear of the gravitational pull, the sleek vessel warped away. The *Peregrine* fighters and the U.S.S. *Monarch* disengaged from battle with the Enkara ships and followed *Trailblazer*’s lead.



Supreme Commander’s Office building, Binlad, Enkar, 1024 Hours

Lance Corporal Tyree was the first to exit the storage closet. He stunned the first Enkara guard before the alien knew what hit him. The other whirled and aimed his weapon at Tyree, but the marine was faster and stunned the second guard before he could get off a shot. Tyree motioned for the others to come out of their hiding place. “It is my pleasure to inform the captain that the guards have been dispatched, suh.”

“Good work, Tyree. Now, let’s pay Zar-Bek a visit.”

Stuart let the two marines rush the door and break it down. He and Blake followed them in to face a very surprised dictator.

“What is the meaning of this?” Zar-Bek started to move from the window that he had been gazing out of toward his desk.

Stuart held up his hand. "I wouldn't make any moves toward the alarm if I were you, Zar-Bek, or my friends might not like it."

The marines both pointed their phaser rifles at the Enkara ruler.

"Where are you keeping the others?"

Zar-Bek's eyes narrowed. "What others, seven-four-two?"

Stuart walked straight toward Zar-Bek and shoved the beam emitter of his phaser into the alien's throat. "The engineers from the *Columbus*. I want them, and I want them now."

"Or you will kill me, seven-four-two? I doubt that."

Stuart took a step back. He smiled, though it was not a smile of amusement. He did something very out of character for him. Without warning, Stuart struck Zar-Bek with the back of his hand. Even Blake, who had known the captain for years, was surprised at what just happened. "First of all, Zar-Bek, my name is Captain Robert P. Stuart. Secondly, I am in no mood for your arrogant lies. I want my people, and I will get them back or..."

"Skipper," Blake interrupted, "someone is coming this way."

Stuart grabbed the alien leader by his jacket. "Now you will find what it is like to be a guest of the Federation." He looked at Blake. "Have Mister Jaxx beam us up."



U.S.S. *Trailblazer*, 1140 Hours

The runabout U.S.S. *Thames* touched down inside the *Trailblazer*'s shuttle bay. Once the hatch slid open, Captain Stuart, followed by Blake Adams, exited the craft. Jan Stuart rushed toward her husband and began to kiss him, but something did not seem right. She let go of him and peered into his eyes. "What's wrong, Rob?"

"There's eight more still unaccounted for, Jan. We have to go back."

Major Craddock and Captain Leeson approached. "Rob, I'm glad you're safe," Leeson said. "Starfleet has been apprised of the situation. We're waiting for orders."

"Thanks, Mel. I have a prisoner."

Leeson and Craddock turned toward the runabout hatch as Tyree and Cook escorted Enkar's leader onto the deck.

Craddock smiled. "Is that the big fish, Captain?"

"That's him."

"With your permission, Captain Leeson, may I throw him in your brig until we rendezvous with the *Monarch*?"

"Absolutely, Major." After Craddock and his two marines led the prisoner away, Leeson looked at her former CO, realizing that something was different about Stuart. There was a look of hatred etched on his face that she had never seen before. "Would you like to get cleaned up, Rob? You look like you could use a fresh uniform."

Stuart forced a smile, but could not get those eight engineers out of his mind. "I'm sure I have looked better."

“Come on, dear,” Jan said. “We need to get you checked out by sickbay, and then we can go to guest quarters to relax.”

Stuart looked hard at his wife. “I don’t know if I can relax, Jan. I don’t think that I will relax until the rest of LaSalle’s crew is rescued.”

Blake had remained silent up until now, but he felt that he should find out his friend’s plans for the prisoner. “What do you plan to do with Zar-Bek, Skipper?”

Stuart considered his options. He remembered the time that he had met Jack McCall. Rob recalled what Jack had said about his imprisonment by the Glazyalans, and what he had planned to do with the prison camp commander. Rob also remembered what Jack had said about doing things that he normally wouldn’t consider doing because of that situation, and that he would do it again under similar circumstances. Rob knew that what he was thinking would violate several Starfleet regulations, including the Prime Directive. Some admirals might consider that he had already done that, but he was determined that he would get those engineers away from the Enkara. “I plan to trade him for the rest of our people.”

“What if they’re dead?”

“They’re too valuable to the Enkara.” Stuart’s jaw tightened. “But if they are dead...so is Zar-Bek.”

Melanie, Jan, and Blake all stared at Rob, not knowing what to say or think. His ordeal had deeply affected him more than they could have imagined.

To be continued...