

Stardate 56597.3

The U.S.S. *Monarch* approached the large facility that hung in the blackness between the stars on the edge of an area of space that had recently been opened to exploration by the Federation. Starbase Gateway Alpha was located approximately twelve lightyears beyond the planet Pacifica, so civilization would not be too far away when the explorers wanted to breathe real air and walk under the sunlight of one of the most beautiful worlds in the Alpha Quadrant.

Newly promoted Fleet Captain Rob Stuart sat behind the desk of his ready room, and his wife, Doctor Janice Stuart, sat in one of the chairs on the other side. Rob took a sip of his favorite hot tea blend and sat the cup on the desk. "I hear this new starbase is equipped with many shops and eating establishments as well as a large recreation center, two gymnasiums, four full-size holodecks, and a couple dozen smaller holosuites. The crew will have a fine place to enjoy shore leave."

"You mean you're going to let the crew have time off?" Jan smiled at her husband. "I hear that the CO is an old friend of your uncle's."

"Yes, Commodore Sjögren." Rob touched a few touchpads on the desktop control panel, and a miniature hologram of the commodore appeared standing on the desktop. "He was Uncle Bob's first captain."

"He's got to be in his eighties if he was Bob's first CO."

"He will be eighty-five this year." Rob took any sip of tea. "He retired from Starfleet about twenty years ago, but Uncle Bob talked him into coming back during the Dominion War to serve as a senior strategist."

"He decided to stay on after the war ended?"

"I heard that he saw retirement as boring, and he felt like he still had a lot to offer. And with all the losses over the last few years, he wanted to help build the fleet back up by serving wherever he was needed." Rob turned the hologram off. "He remained at Starfleet Command until just recently when it was decided to put this station out here. The brass decided that he would be a good fit as Gateway Alpha's commander."

Jan leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "Have you met him? What's he like?"

"I met him once several years ago when I was a junior grade lieutenant. It was actually at his retirement party."

"How did you manage to go to his retirement party?" Jan was genuinely curious. "I would think that such an event would only be for those who knew him."

"I was on leave and my uncle dragged me along." Rob turned and looked out the window into the star-filled darkness. "I felt a connection with him right away as he talked about his first mission as captain of the U.S.S. *Starquest*."

Jan gave her husband a quizzical gaze. "How so?"

"Erik Sjögren was a true explorer who only had one ambition. He lived the quintessential ideals of the Federation and Starfleet."

"Was he the kind of captain that gave up family relationships for his career?"



“Well, he never married as far as I know. But Uncle Bob always described his time under Sjögren’s command as a time when he felt more at home than at any other time in his life.”

Rob reached across his desk and held his wife’s hand. “Are you sure that you want to transfer?”

“We talked about this, Rob, and I thought that we were on the same page,” Jan replied.

“We are, honey, but I don’t necessarily like the idea that our family will be apart.”

“I don’t like that part either, but we have to think of our children’s safety.” Jan gently squeezed her husband’s hand. “We’ll still be able to be together whenever the *Monarch* is in port.”

“As the commanding officer of the 3rd Exploratory Group, I will make sure that this ship is back in port often.” Rob leaned over the desk and raised Jan’s hand up to kiss the back of it.

A tone sounded, followed by Commander Marcus Grey’s voice, interrupting Stuart. “*Captain, we are preparing to dock, and Admiral Montoya is waiting to meet you as soon as possible.*”

Rob, with a slight grin appearing on his face, looked at his wife. “I was looking forward to a quiet evening, but apparently duty won’t wait.” He tapped his combadge. “Thank you, Exec. Please inform the admiral that I will be the first one out of the airlock.”

“*I’ll inform him, sir.*” The connection ended with another tap of the communicator/Starfleet logo on Stuart’s chest.

Rob Stuart rose from his padded chair and walked around to the other side of his desk. He offered his hand to his wife, who placed her hand in his, and gently lifted her to a standing position. “Care to join me?”

“It will be my pleasure, *Fleet Captain.*”

To Boldly Go: A New Frontier

A Starbase Gateway Alpha story

By Cleve Johnson

The Stuarts exited the gangway connecting the starship *Monarch* to the starbase. They walked up to the security desk and waited patiently as a young human male sat behind the desk adjusting controls on the monitor. He looked up and nodded. “Welcome to Starbase Gateway Alpha, Captain, Commander. Please place your hand on the scanner.”

Rob placed his palm on the scanning device located on the desktop and stated his name. “Stuart, Robert P. Commanding officer, U.S.S. *Monarch* and Commanding officer, 4th Fleet, 3rd Exploratory Group,” he stated in a neutral tone.

The security officer remained at attention. “Thank you, Captain.” The security officer turned his attention to Janice. “Commander, please place your hand on the scanner.”

Jan went through the same procedure as her husband had just done.



“You have been assigned quarters on level thirteen, section twenty-three.”

“Thank you, ensign,” Jan said. “Is it a family suite?”

The ensign nodded his head. “Yes, Doctor, Commodore Sjögren himself made sure the request was put through.”

“Well, it likes like we are getting the VIP treatment.” Rob turned toward the waiting area and followed his wife, who had already started in that direction when she had seen her good friend. Rob spotted Captain Melanie Leeson, his friend and former XO standing next to an older flag officer—Commodore Erik Sjögren.

Rob quickened his pace and caught up with Jan just as she was hugging her old friend. He waited until the embrace ended and offered to shake Leeson’s hand. “Good to see you again, Mel.”

“Thank you, sir,” Leeson replied. “I know it hasn’t been long, but I have to admit that I miss serving on the same ship with both of you.”

The commodore had stood back a few feet while the friends reconnected, but he finally stepped forward and reached out his hand to Rob. “Welcome aboard Starbase Gateway Alpha, Captain. And you as well, Doctor.”

Shaking the commodore’s hand firmly, Rob warmly greeted the older officer. “We’re glad to be here, Commodore. It’s good to see you again, sir.”

Smiling, Sjögren stretched out his arm behind him toward the sliding glass doors that led to a corridor. “Captain, I would love to take you on a tour of the station, but Admiral Montoya asked me to show you to his office.”

“Of course. Lead the way, Commodore,” Rob stated.

Sjögren looked at Melanie and Janice. “If you will excuse us?”

“By all means, Commodore,” Melanie said. “We’ll just look around and get acquainted with the facilities.”

“We just went online three weeks ago, so we are not yet fully staffed, and many of the civilian shops and eating establishments aren’t open yet, but The Starview Café is up and running on level fourteen, section nine.”

“Thank you, sir,” Janice said. She winked at her husband. “Can you meet us there after your business with the admiral is over?”

“I’ll contact you when I’m done. Try to stay out of trouble,” Rob said as he smiled at his wife. “I’m ready, Commodore.”

The two officers exited the waiting area and strolled down the corridor.

Leeson looked at Jan and smiled. “Where are the twins?”

“They’re under the dutiful watch of the first officer’s son and his girlfriend,” Jan said. “The *Monarch* doesn’t have a lot of families, but there are a few teenagers and younger children that our babies have wrapped around their little fingers.”



“I’m surprised that a couple of teenagers are willing to babysit.” Melanie, joined by the Janice, started walking toward the corridor that led out of the waiting area.

“They’re good kids,” Jan said. “And they are very responsible for their age, but Ian is a little squeamish about changing diapers.”

Melanie let out a slight chuckle. “The idea of changing diapers makes *me* squeamish.”

The two friends continued down the corridor toward the nearest turbolift to start their adventure of discovering the new starbase.



Rob entered the outer office of his commanding officer, Rear Admiral Luis Montoya. He stopped at the reception desk and addressed the lieutenant that manned it. “Good afternoon, Lieutenant. The admiral is expecting me.”

The young officer activated the communication panel “Fleet Captain Stuart is here, Admiral.”

“Send him in, Richard.”

“Yes sir.” Lieutenant Baker deactivated the com unit and looked up. “Go right in, Captain Stuart.”

“Thank you.” Rob walked to the door and touched the control panel, which caused the door to slide within the wall. He entered and made his way to the admiral’s desk and stood at attention as he heard the familiar whoosh of the door slide closed behind him. “You wanted to see me, Admiral?”

Montoya stood and reached out to shake Rob’s hand. “Welcome, Fleet Captain Stuart.”

Stuart firmly shook his CO’s hand. “Thank you, sir.”

“Have a seat.” Admiral Montoya and Rob both sat in their chairs with only the desk separating them. “I hope that you don’t mind that I wanted to meet with you immediately before you had a chance to settle in.”

“No, sir. I’m ready to get started in my new position.”

Montoya nodded his head. “Good.” He leaned forward and stared at Stuart. “Are you ready for what awaits you in the unknown, Robert?”

“I don’t know if anyone is completely ready for the unknown, Admiral, but I know that I am prepared to meet it head on.”

“I like your attitude.” Montoya leaned back and took a more relaxed posture. “What is the status of your exploratory group?”

The *Trailblazer* is here, as you know since Captain Leeson gave you a ride. I’m expecting the *Alliance* and the *Raleigh* in a few hours. The other two ships are scheduled to arrive tomorrow.”



“Actually, only one will be arriving tomorrow. The *Balboa* arrived yesterday and has already left on a mission. I asked Commander Morgenstern to start mapping the next sector. I hope you don’t mind, Robert.”

Rob shook his head as he shifted to a relaxed position, crossing one leg over the opposite knee. “Not at all, Admiral. I plan to address all the commanding officers of each ship before we started our joint mission, but I can have Saul join the briefing by holocom.”

“When did you schedule the briefing?”

“I’ve planned a reception for tomorrow evening aboard the *Monarch* for the senior officers of each ship. I want everyone to get to know one another. Afterward, I’m going to meet with the CO’s and their execs to brief them.” Rob, realizing that he had not previously invited Montoya, paused. “Of course, you’re invited to the reception *and* the briefing, Admiral.”

Montoya nodded in agreement. “Thank you, Robert. I would like to the address the commanding officers as well, and I never turn down food.” He smiled.

Robert also smiled. “You’re in for a treat then, sir. My chef is going out of his way to prepare dishes from every planet represented by the officers that will be attending.”

“In that case, I definitely won’t be late,” the admiral said. “I want you to know that my presence here is not to watch over your shoulder, but I did want to be here as you start your new responsibilities. I hope that you don’t mind that I took over your office while I’m here.”

“My office?”

“I figured that you would need an office since there probably will be times that you will need to be on station coordinating your group and when your ship is sent out under your first officer’s command.”

“I had not thought of that, Admiral.” Rob’s face was neutral, but he was a little apprehensive about the idea that he would not always be leading a mission from his bridge.

“And Lieutenant Baker, the young man who let you in, will be here as your aide.”

“Thank you, Admiral.” Rob appreciated the benefits of his new position but had expected to have an office off ship or an aide.

Montoya stood and faced a digital map display on the large monitor that took up most of the wall space behind his desk. He pointed to the location of Starbase 214. “The 7th Exploratory Group’s home port is at my HQ along with the 23rd Starfighter Group. The 4th Tactical Group is based at Starbase 211 and is primarily responsible for patrolling the old DMZ between Federation and Cardassian space in case there are any rogue elements holding a grudge about the war. Some of the ships from both groups are currently aiding the Cardassians in their efforts to rebuild.”

Rob shook his head. “What a mess that war created.”

“We were lucky to survive it.” The admiral turned and lowered his head. “I hope we never have to go through anything like that again, but I probably shouldn’t hold my breath.”

Rob agreed. “We can always hope, Admiral.”

“Without hope, what would be the point?” Montoya said. “Oh, speaking of hope, I know that you put in a request for an additional starship to be assigned to your exploratory group. I was



able to pull some strings, so the *Icarus*, under the command of Captain Franklin Jeffers, has been assigned to you and should arrive next week.”

Rob was thrilled at the news of gaining another resource. “I appreciate that, Admiral. I’ve heard that Jeffers is a fine captain. The *Icarus* is an *Intrepid*-class, isn’t it?”

“Yes, she is,” Montoya replied. “She has been outfitted with the latest scientific labs and equipment.”

Rob smiled. “Good. I need all the assets I can get.”

Luis Montoya walked to the other side of his desk and offered his hand to Stuart. “Well, Robert, I know that you probably want to tour the station and get to know your base of operations. Just so you know, through that door,” the admiral pointed to his left, “is a designated conference room for your group’s use, and you have a few stations in CnC dedicated specifically to the 3rd Exploratory Group. You might want to check it out to see what resources you have at your disposal.”

Stuart stood and reciprocated the handshake. “Thank you, sir.” He started to turn to exit the admiral’s office when he remembered that he had not provided all the information about the next day’s festivities. He turned back to face Montoya. “By the way, the reception will be in the officer’s lounge on deck 10 beginning at 1730 hours.”

“I’ll be there, and thank you again, Robert.”

“My pleasure, Admiral.” As he exited his CO’s office, Rob’s excitement about exploring unknown territory once again started to build.



Stuart was on his way to the turbolift when he saw Commodore Sjögren waiting for him near the turbolift. Rob smiled and nodded. “Commodore.”

“Captain Stuart, I’m glad your meeting didn’t last long,” Erik Sjögren replied. “I would like to give you the grand tour if you’re up for it.”

“I’m at your service, sir,” Stuart said as the two men started walking at a leisurely pace.

“As I mentioned earlier, this starbase is new, and we still have several positions to fill. I’m grateful that your wife agreed to fill the CMO position.”

“I might be a little biased, but she’s an excellent doctor, Commodore. We might be able to provide you with a nurse and some medical lab technicians as well.”

“Thank you, Captain. I was hoping that she would bring some of her staff if possible. Starfleet has promised more medical staff, but they won’t say when they’re coming.”

“I’m surprised that Starfleet ordered this station to go online without all the key positions filled, sir.”

“The key command positions and operations staff are in place, but medical, sciences, and security still have several unassigned slots, and I hope that it doesn’t take too long to get people sent out here.”



“I’m sure that the captains of each of our ships can help augment your crew on a temporary basis when in port,” Rob said. “My ship will be here for at least a week before I take my crew to our first assignment.”

“I appreciate that, Captain Stuart” The commodore gave Stuart a pat on the back. “During your stay, I have some stories about your uncle that you might like to hear,” Sjögren said. “Does your schedule allow for breakfast later in the week?”

Stuart nodded. “How about the day after tomorrow? I’d love to hear about what he was like as a young ensign.”

The commodore’s lips turned slightly upward. “Day after tomorrow. How is 0700?”

“I look forward to it, Commodore.” Rob nodded and followed Sjögren into a turbolift.



Starview Café, 1800 Hours

Rob entered the eating establishment and looked around the large dining area. Since the starbase was not fully manned, the restaurant did not have many patrons. Less than half of the tables were in use, so it was not hard for Rob to spot his wife and their friend. He approached and joined them at their table. “Is this seat taken?”

“We’re just saving it for you, sailor.” Janice smirked as she handed her husband a menu. “You are as punctual as always.”

Rob shrugged his shoulders. “Rarely early but never late. So, what did the two of you do while I was taking care of business?”

Melanie Leeson, who had been drinking something with a green hue, sat her glass on the table. “We took a walk through the consumer and recreation levels. Not many shops are open yet.”

“Commodore Sjögren said that there are still positions to be filled,” Rob said. “I suspect that the civilian establishments will pick up in the next few weeks as more Starfleet personnel are assigned. In fact, Jan, he is looking forward to you taking charge of the medical sections.”

Jan nodded her head. “He probably doesn’t want all of the medical sections operating with only emergency medical holograms.”

“Probably not,” Rob replied. “I let him know that the *Monarch* could spare a nurse if you wanted to recruit one.”

“I was going to ask if Lieutenant Yenula would be willing to transfer with me. She would make a wonderful head nurse.”

Melanie Leeson listened to her two friends, but she could not imagine the couple serving apart. Melanie took another sip of her drink. “Isn’t it going to be hard with one on a ship and one on this starbase with who knows how many light years between you?”

“It will be, Mel,” Jan said, “but we’re concerned about entering an unexplored area of space with our kids. Life on a starship has its risks but going to where none have gone before has even more, and we have to consider our children.”



Rob nodded his head in agreement. “As much as I want my family to stay with me, I think that the children would be safer here than on the *Monarch* if we encountered a hostile species or some unknown anomaly.”

“Admiral Montoya suggested that there will be times that I would be expected to let the ship go out under Marcus’s command while I stay here to coordinate operations for the group, so we won’t be apart all the time.” Rob placed his hand on Jan’s. “Besides, there is a saying that distance makes the heart grow fonder.”

Melanie looked from Janice and then to Robert. “You two are cute in how you communicate with each other.”

Both Rob and Jan smiled as they held hands.

Mel gave a hint of a smile. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starved. Can we order now?”

Rob nodded. “Best suggestion yet.” He looked over his shoulder and waved at the nearest waitress to get her attention.



U.S.S. *Monarch*, 2130 hours

Rob and Janice Stuart entered their quarters. As they entered, Ian Grey and Carrie Nelson were seated on the couch watching a vid of a classic 23rd Century Klingon version of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. The teenagers had been holding hands, but they immediately pulled away from each other as the Stuarts entered. Ian stood to his feet and spoke. “Welcome back Captain, Doctor.”

Carrie also stood. “The babies have been asleep for a couple hours.”

“Were they any trouble?” Janice asked.

“Not at all,” Carrie responded. “Well, Ian did have a little incident with Kevin.”

“Oh?” Rob raised an eyebrow as he gave a curious look in Ian’s direction. “What happened, Ian?”

“He peed on you, didn’t he?” Janice tried to suppress a laugh by covering her mouth, but her eyes revealed how funny she thought the incident was. “It’s one of those things with baby boys that will happen from time to time, Ian. You probably did the same to your dad or mom.” She instantly regretted making that comment when she saw Ian’s face turn red.

Rob, noticing how his wife’s statement affected the boy, made a confession to help Ian feel better. “Kevin has peed on me on several occasions, too, and I haven’t learned to get out of the way in time.”

Ian’s facial hue started to return to its natural color. “I won’t take it as a personal attack then, Captain.”

Carrie just smiled at Ian and took his hand. She faced the doctor and captain. “We really liked watching them for you and hope we can do it again.”

Janice returned the smile. “Thank you for watching them, and I’m sure that you can watch them again very soon.”



Ian and Carrie moved toward the door and exited the Stuarts' quarters.

Jan watched the kids until the door slid shut behind them and turned her attention to her husband. "They're great kids."

Rob nodded in agreement. "Yes, they are. I think that they will miss watching Kevin and Kelly when the *Monarch* is away from the station."

Jan sat down and tugged on Rob's arm for him to join her on the couch. "It's only for a season, Rob, but it's the best thing for our children at least until they are a little older."

"You're right, of course, but any time I'm away from you and our babies will be difficult." Rob leaned over and kissed his wife. "Marcus has my full confidence to be in command when I stay behind, but I'll still spend time leading from the bridge, too." Rob turned his head toward the nursery when he heard one of the babies crying followed by the other one. He looked at the chrono display on the wall monitor. "Time to eat again."

Jan got up and pulled Rob up from the couch. "At least they're consistent."



The next day, Jan got up early and left her sleeping children in her husband's care. He was not on the standard watch rotation on the bridge since the ship was docked. In fact, most of the ship was operating with a skeleton crew made up primarily of junior officers who wanted to get cross-trained on various stations. Sickbay was not very busy except for the occasional injuries suffered on the holodecks by off-duty personnel. Jan entered the medical section and nodded to the duty nurse.

The Deltan nurse, Lieutenant Yenula, smiled at her department head. "I thought that you were off duty today, Doctor Stuart."

"I am, but I wanted to talk with Doctor M'Tan." Jan looked around. "Do you know where she is?"

"She is in her office, I believe."

"Thank you, Yenula." Jan moved down the access corridor toward her colleague's office. She pressed the com panel next to the office door. "Doctor M'Tan?"

The door slid open and Jan entered as the Vulcan medical officer stood from behind her desk. "Doctor Stuart, I did not expect to see you today," M'Tan stated as she placed her hands behind her back.

"I wanted to see if you had a few minutes to talk."

"Certainly, Doctor."

Jan smiled. "I wanted to let you know that I am confident that you are more than prepared to be the *Monarch*'s CMO." Jan wanted to congratulate her assistant with a handshake, but she knew that most Vulcans preferred not to make physical contact with others, especially members of other species since many Vulcans were touch telepaths.

"I am pleased to serve; thank you for the opportunity." M'Tan didn't smile, but her eyes seemed to brighten.



“I have one parting request. Would you mind if I asked Lieutenant Yenula to come with me to be my head nurse?”

“It would be an opportunity for her to advance her career,” M’Tan stated unemotionally. “If she chooses to request a transfer, I will approve it, and I would include a letter of recommendation.”

“Thank you,” Jan replied.

M’Tan cocked her head slightly to one side. “Would it be appropriate to ask why you chose to transfer?”

“Not at all. Commodore Sjögren needed someone to head up the medical facilities, but I guess the most important reason is a little selfish. I don’t want to risk the lives of my children on board the ship when it goes to an uncharted area of space.”

Doctor M’Tan allowed herself to show a subtle grin. “There is nothing selfish about prioritizing family above other obligations. On Vulcan, duty to one’s family takes precedence over most others.”

“Thank you for that, Doctor.” Jan started to turn to leave the office but looked over her shoulder, stopped walking, and smiled. “If it wasn’t for my children, I would have recommended you for the assignment.”

“Thank you, Doctor Stuart. I appreciate your confidence in me.”

Jan turned around to face M’Tan. “To be honest, I wasn’t sure how we would get along when we first met.” Jan slowly walked toward the other doctor as she spoke. “I was concerned that you would resent me because you would have been the chief medical officer if I had not been assigned because of my husband’s position as captain. And frankly, I didn’t expect a Vulcan physician to have a very good bedside manner with humans and other species who tend to need emotional support when they are sick or injured. I was wrong.”

M’Tan raised an eyebrow but did not respond. She suspected that Doctor Stuart had not finished what she wanted to say. And she was correct.

Jan took a deep breath as she considered her next words. “Humans like to think that we have grown beyond our racial prejudices, but we haven’t. Not completely. I want you to know that you are the best doctor that I have ever had the privilege of working with. And your bedside manner has proven to be exemplary.”

M’Tan, lowered her head in acknowledgement. After she looked up, she locked her gaze on Jan’s eyes, and in a very uncharacteristic Vulcan gesture, thrust her arm across the table with her hand outstretched. “Thank you, Doctor. I am pleased to be your colleague...and your friend.”

Janice took the other’s hand and shook it firmly. “I’m going to miss working with you, M’Tan.”

“And I with you, Janice.”



Rob Stuart exited the turbolift and entered the bridge. He acknowledged the junior engineering officer and the technicians that assisted him with performing maintenance at several consoles.



Commander Marcus Grey rose from the center command chair and faced his CO. “Can I help you, Captain?”

“Please join me in my ready room, Exec.” Stuart headed straight for the entrance to his office and entered after the door parted.

The first officer followed closely behind his captain. It seemed to him that the captain was upset or anxious about something, which Grey knew was unusual for Stuart, who typically maintained a calm demeanor most of the time. Once the door halves slid together, Grey stood with his hands behind his back as Stuart walked around his desk and sat down. “Is something wrong, Captain?”

Stuart pointed to the chair on the other side of the desk, which Grey quickly occupied. “There are changes in the wind, Marcus. I wanted to let you know that you are one fine officer.”

“Thank you, sir.” Marcus Grey’s eyes widened as he raised his eyebrows. He thought the captain’s mood was loftier than it had been lately since Doctor Stuart was about to transfer from the ship to serve aboard Starbase Gateway Alpha. He knew that the Stuarts made the difficult decision reluctantly, but he believed that they were doing the best thing for the children. Marcus would have requested a transfer, under similar circumstances, as well if Ian was as young as the Stuart twins.

“I’m surprised you haven’t made captain yet,” Stuart said. “How long has it been since your last promotion?”

Wondering why Stuart brought up the question, Marcus thought back to when he was named second officer of the starship *Morrow*, and his captain insisted that he take the bridge officer’s test. He studied hard and took the test. Within three days after passing, he was a full commander. “That was almost six years ago, Captain.”

Stuart stoically looked at his first officer. “I believe that you are going to have your own ship someday, Mister Grey, but in the meantime, I think it has been too long since you had a change in rank.” Stuart reached behind him and picked up a small black box from the bookshelf that was against the wall behind him. He opened it and pulled out a gold pip and placed it on the desk in front Marcus Grey. “Add this to the other three,” he said. “I hereby promote you to the field rank of captain.”

Marcus’s mouth opened, but he had trouble finding the words. “Sir, thank you,” he finally said in a soft-spoken voice.

“Officially, you will still be my first officer, but you will have more responsibilities on the *Monarch* since I now am responsible for a group of ships.” Stuart reached out to shake his executive officer’s hand. “There will be times that you will command the ship out there for weeks at a time while I sit behind a desk or keep an eye on things from one of the consoles in Gateway Alpha’s command center. Are you up for that?”

“Yes, sir. I won’t let you down, Captain.”

“I know you won’t, *Captain* Grey. Depending on how you perform throughout the next year or so, I expect that I will be putting in a request to make the promotion permanent,” Stuart said. “And after that, there’s a good chance that you will get a command of your own.”



Grey, who was stereotypically British, did not show excitement to the degree that people from other regions on Earth did. He outwardly maintained his usual formality, but his thoughts pointed him to look forward to celebrating privately when his duty shift ended.

Stuart grinned as his first officer pinned the fourth pip on his collar. “It looks good on you. Now that you have more responsibilities, I am going to take time to help Janice pack up most of her belongings and some of mine to move to our quarters on the starbase.”

“I will assign a couple of crewmen to move your belongings when you are ready, sir”

“Thank you, Marcus. We should be ready by 1400, so just have them report to my quarters then.”

“Aye, Captain.” The newly promoted captain started to stand. “Will there be anything else, sir?”

“Not at this time, Exec. Just don’t be late to the reception. A man with your rank should make sure to be punctual since you have an example to set.” Stuart turned to his monitor to activate it but looked back toward his XO. “Thank you again.”

“Absolutely, sir.” Marcus nodded and turned to exit the ready room.



U.S.S. *Monarch*, 1730 Hours

The Stuarts and Melanie Leeson entered the officer’s lounge. They looked around at several officers from the *Monarch* as well as the other ships that were part of the 3rd Exploratory Group. Rob spotted Admiral Montoya talking with a woman, whom he recognized as an old friend from his Academy days, Captain Constance Thorpe of the U.S.S. *Sonak*, and a male lieutenant commander that Stuart assumed was one of her officers. “We should go greet the admiral,” Rob said. The trio of friends started toward Montoya, Thorpe, and the other officer when an Andorian approached and stopped in front of them.

“Captain Stuart, thank you for serving authentic Andorian cuisine,” the Andorian said.

“I wish I could take the credit, Commander Thel, but my chef is the one who suggested a buffet of dishes from several of the Federation member worlds.”

“Regardless of who gets the credit, sir, I am in your debt. It has been nearly two years since I had authentic food from my home world.”

“It’s my pleasure, Commander,” Rob said. “Have you met my wife, Doctor Janice Stuart, or Captain Leeson?”

Thel bowed to the other two officers. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Captain Leeson, I understand that your first officer is one of my people. Will he be attending?”

Leeson nodded. “Commander Shrev should be here soon. I’m sure that he will be happy to meet you.”

“And I look forward to meeting him.” Thel turned his attention back to Rob Stuart. “Thank you again for your hospitality, Captain Stuart. I look forward to serving with you.”

“And I, you, Commander.”



As Commander Thel, the CO of the starship *Raleigh*, went on his way, the Stuarts and Melanie Leeson resumed walking toward the admiral and the other officers that he was mingling with. Rob Stuart stepped up next to them and gracefully interrupted their conversation. “Admiral Montoya, I’m glad that you made it. Are you enjoying yourself?”

“The buffet table looks well stocked, but I suspect that the food will start to disappear soon.” He turned to the officers that he had been conversing with. “I want to introduce Captain Constance Thorpe and her chief medical officer, Lieutenant Commander Johnston.”

“Oh, Captain Stuart and I go way back,” Thorpe said as her face lit up. “How have you been, Robert?”

Stuart smiled back and put his hand on Thorpe’s shoulder. “Everything is going well, Connie.” He turned to the other officer. “It’s nice to meet you, Doctor.”

“Thank you, Captain Stuart,” Johnston said. “It seems like I should know you with all the stories that Captain Thorpe has told me.”

“You didn’t tell him about the Sadie Hawkins Dance, did you?”

Jan and Melanie stood off to the side observing the conversation, and Jan started to wonder what happened at the traditional social event that the Academy still practiced. She wasn’t jealous; however, her curiosity started to get the best of her. “Rob, what happened at the Sadie Hawkins Dance?”

Rob smiled at his wife. “Nothing special, but let’s just say that dancing was a challenge for me back then. It wasn’t my best moment.” He turned his attention back to Thorpe. “Connie, this is my wife, Janice, and Melanie Leeson.”

“Good to meet both of you,” Thorpe said. “Janice, you are fortunate to have Robert as your husband.”

“I like to think so.” Janice reached toward Rob and grasped his hand. “He’s a wonderful father as well.”

“I heard that you have fraternal twins. I hope that I have a chance to see them.”

Janice’s pride in her kids welled up inside her. “I’m sure that we can arrange that, Connie.”

“And Captain Leeson, I understand that you’re the lucky one to command the fastest ship in Starfleet.”

“Please, call me Melanie,” Leeson said. She had mixed feelings about her first impression of Constance Thorpe. Thorpe seemed friendly and sincere, but Melanie had the feeling that the other captain was either hiding something or...well, something just didn’t seem right. Mel decided to keep her thoughts to herself but keep a discreet eye on the *Sonak*’s skipper. “I don’t know that the Trailblazer is the fastest, but it certainly can maintain the upper reaches of warp a lot longer than anything else the fleet has.”

“Do you think I can get a tour?” Connie had no problem making requests of her fellow officers.

“I’d be happy to show you around.”



Robert smirked. “Mel, you will find out that Connie loves to drool over the newest starships and other gadgets that she comes across. You need to make sure that you don’t let her have the keys.”

Connie, Melanie, and Janice all laughed.



1900 Hours

The ship commanders and executive officers had left the rest of the senior officers at the reception while they convened in Holodeck One, which had been configured into a large conference room. The main conference room on deck one would have been sufficient, but the command officers of the *Balboa* were not physically present since they had already started mapping the next sector, and Stuart wanted to make sure that they could attend the briefing via the holocom unit. Commander Saul Morgenstern and his first officer, Lieutenant Commander Tessa Narban, would be visible to all in the holographic conference room as if they were actually there. In turn, the other CO’s and XO’s would be visible on the *Balboa*’s holodeck as well.

Stuart invited all his colleagues to take seats around the conference table as he stood behind the chair at one end of the table with Admiral Luis Montoya standing at his side. “I hope that you all had plenty to eat and enjoyed the meal,” Stuart said.

Everyone nodded or complimented the fleet captain for the success of the reception. One officer, the Trill captain of the starship *Alliance*, started applauding, which was followed by all others in the room.

Stuart raised his hand to quiet the applause. “I cannot take the credit, my friends. My chef did it all.”

“I may just have to steal your chef, Robert,” the admiral said as he shot a mischievous grin at Stuart, which elicited a round of laughter from the others.

“I’ll need to put my entire security team around him to make sure that he stays in my galley,” Stuart replied in a good-natured tone. He looked around the room at each person. I don’t want to take too much of your time this evening, but Admiral Montoya would like to say a few words before the assignments are passed out.”

The admiral took a step forward as Stuart stepped back. “Thank you, Fleet Captain Stuart. I want to welcome all of you to the Federation 4th Fleet. You have the responsibility and the privilege of opening 9 new sectors that are outside of Federation space. As you all know, Captain Stuart has already contacted one race that has proven to be hostile; however, there is another race that is currently being considered for Federation membership. I’m sure that there are many planets where you will make first contact with new and interesting species. I wish you all well as you take on this challenge.” Montoya paused and gazed into the eyes of each officer in the room. “Space is dangerous, ladies and gentlemen, so be careful out there as you remain diligent in your duty and in the fulfillment of your mission.” The admiral, taking a step backward, turned his head toward Stuart and nodded. “Captain, it’s your briefing.”

Stuart stepped closer to the chair behind the table. “Thank you, Admiral. I want to echo the admiral’s encouragement to be careful. All of you have been sent reports on the Enkara incident that took place last year. The Federation Council was able to send an ambassador to Enkar space a few months ago to negotiate a hostage trade of their leader and the last eight



members of the *Columbus*'s crew that were still being held. As a benefit of that trade, the Federation signed a non-aggression pact with Enkar, which states that we must not enter their space, which is a sixteen-light year diameter sphere centered on their star system. Coordinates have been made available to you in a report that was transmitted to each of you last week." Stuart paused to let what he said resonate with the other officers. "Under no circumstances is their space to be breached. In fact, I prefer that you stay at least two light years outside of that sphere. The Enkara can freely travel outside of their space, but they have agreed not to engage in any hostile actions against any habitable planets or against Federation vessels."

"Captain?" It was the *Sonak*'s CO who spoke.

"Go ahead, Connie."

After reading your report and the reports of the others that were involved in that incident, it appears that we cannot trust the Enkara. They seem like a devious people."

"Well, from my personal experience, I cannot speak about their people as a whole, but their supreme leader, Zar-Bek, should not be trusted. He and his troops were the only Enkara that I had contact with."

The Andorian CO of the starship *Raleigh* spoke next. "Are the Enkara ships as powerful as they appear in the reports, Captain?"

"I'll defer to my first officer. Captain Grey?"

Captain Marcus Grey cleared his throat. "From what we experienced, their ships have weapons that are superior to ours; however, their ships do not have the same level of warp capabilities as ours. Neither speed nor distance capabilities offer a major threat to the Federation."

"Although it may go against our principles as Starfleet officers, don't be ashamed to run from a fight with the Enkara if they attack. They didn't play fair when they attacked the *Monarch*, which should have been able to defend against them well if it would have been a one-on-one or even a two-on-one fight. They sent a battle group against us and did a lot of damage."

"Just remember that you are not to be the aggressor if you encounter them," Montoya interjected. "Give them a wide berth."

"An analysis of their weapons and shields gave my chief engineer information to help us boost our defensive and offensive systems. I'll have him make that information available to your engineering departments so that they can enhance your ship systems as well." Stuart looked around the room. "Now let me be clear that there is a lot of space out there that does not include the Enkara. We are at a point where we can put the Dominion War behind us and get back to exploration. That is our primary mission. Much of what we will be doing is mapping the nine sectors assigned to us, but we also want to survey uninhabited planets and moons to see what we can discover. We want to visit new worlds and meet new species...within the confines of the Prime Directive, of course."

"When do we get started, sir?" Captain Kazed Jans, the CO of the U.S.S. *Alliance*, asked.

"Captain Grey will transmit each of your assignments by 0900 tomorrow," Stuart said. "There is one other species to avoid. They are known as the S'Klopses and they call their planet Pesedon. The S'Klopses are technologically advanced, but they are isolationists. The S'Klopses



traveled much of the galaxy thousands of years ago, but an incident with primitive humans led them to return to their home and stay there. I will make sure that you have the information on their star system and what little we know about them. Just remember, they are not hostile toward us, but neither are they friendly, so please respect their desire to be left alone.” Stuart paused to look around the room once again. “My friends, we are about to embark on a new frontier. Are there any other questions?” After a few seconds of silence and head shakes, he smiled and nodded to each one. “If not, please feel free to return to the reception and continue to enjoy yourselves or explore the facilities that Gateway Alpha has to offer.”

As the command officers of the 4th Fleet, 3rd Exploratory Group began to exit the holodeck, Stuart walked to the holograms of the CO and XO of the starship *Balboa* that remained sitting. The image of Commander Saul Morgenstern whispered to his first officer and stood up as his XO’s image faded away. “Saul, before you sign off, I wanted to just say that I look forward to working with you. I’m sorry that you couldn’t be here in person,” Stuart said.

The other man let the edges of his lips lift ever so slightly. “You can owe me a top-notch meal prepared by your chef. Does he prepare kosher foods?”

“I’ll check with him, but I would be surprised if he doesn’t. Listen, can you drop a subspace communications buoy when you get about thirty light years away from the station?”

“I’d be glad to, Captain.”

“Good. I want to make sure that our communication with our home port has the least amount of delay as possible. “Keep in touch, Saul.”

“Always.” The transmission ended, and the image of Commander Morgenstern disappeared.

Stuart turned around and faced Admiral Montoya, who had been lingering behind after everyone else left the room. “Admiral, how did I do?”

“Let me just say that I recruited the right person to lead this group.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Montoya smiled. “Let’s go see if there is any dessert left.”

Stuart patted his superior on the shoulder. “Yes, let’s do that. Computer, end program and exit,” he said as the two men started toward the opening hatch.



To be continued....

