

## Stardate 56996.1

Commodore Erik Sjögren smiled as he saw Fleet Captain Robert Stuart enter the café. He motioned the younger officer over as he took a sip from the steaming cup in his hand. “Good morning, Robert,” he said as he set his cup down.

“Good morning, Commodore.” Robert sat in the chair across the table from the starbase commanding officer. “You seem very chipper this morning.”

“Well, that’s because I have some good news.” Sjögren took another sip of his coffee. “And when are you going to start calling me by my first name?”

“You keep asking me that. I’m still trying to get used to the idea of being on a first-name basis with superior officers.” Rob saw a waiter coming toward the table with two cups, steam rising from each one.

The waiter set one cup, full of black coffee, in front of the commodore. The other he placed in front of Stuart, who inhaled the steam. “Your usual, Captain.”

“Thank you, Edward,” Stuart said. “You know just how I like it. The right amount of cinnamon and apple.”

The waiter nodded and continued to one of the other tables where other customers were waiting.

Stuart took a sip of the savory tea and set the cup down to allow the drink to cool a little. “So, what good news did you want to share, Commo..., sorry...Erik?”

Sjögren smiled. “You used my first name. Finally. Well, we are going to have some visitors.”

“Oh?” Stuart’s face gave away the fact that he already knew about the visitors.

“You knew?” Sjögren crossed his arms and feigned a look of disapproval, and then he softened his facial muscles and smirked. “Of course, you knew. You were probably in on the surprise from the beginning.”

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” Stuart replied. He smiled and took another sip of tea. “So, my uncle told you he was coming. Did he say anything else?”

“He’s bringing several people from my old crew, from the *Starquest*. I hadn’t seen most of them since my retirement except for Jake and Nori. And your uncle, of course.” Sjögren had fond memories of his former first officer Jacob Williams and Noriko Ito, his chief engineer and the person that he had known the longest since the commodore had served with her on the *Miranda*-class U.S.S. *Saratoga* a few years before they were brought together again when Sjögren was promoted and given command of the *Starquest*. “I heard my old helmsman is a rear admiral now.”

“Did Uncle Bob tell you who was coming with him?” Stuart knew but didn’t want to spoil the surprise if Sjögren had not been informed yet.

The commodore shrugged. “He said a few of the old crew was coming to have a little get together so we could all reminisce about our service together.” He thought he saw a twinkle in Stuart’s eye, something that told him that Stuart knew a lot more about the upcoming visit. “Out with it, Robert.”

Stuart gave the commodore a surprised look and tried to act as if he didn’t know any more than what was already said, but he realized that the commodore was onto him. He weighed the desire to tell Sjögren what he wanted to hear against the big surprise that his uncle wanted to give Sjögren and the impact that it would have. “I’m under orders from my uncle to stay quiet.” Rob Stuart was an honest man, but in this instance, he lied.”

“Don’t ever play poker,” Sjögren said as he smiled. “Anyway, your uncle and the rest are supposed to arrive later today.”

Stuart nodded. “I do know that much. And speaking of arrival, the *Monarch* is due to dock in about forty minutes. I’ll have to eat fast and meet Marcus when he arrives.”

As if on cue, Edward, the waiter returned with two plates of scrambled eggs and toast for the two senior officers. “Gentlemen, breakfast is served. Would you like more coffee, Commodore? More tea, Captain?”

“I’m already on my second cup, so I’m good,” Sjögren said.

Stuart held up his hand to signify he had enough. “Thank you, no, Edward. But this tea is wonderful.”

Edward smiled and left the two men to eat and continue their discussion. “Just wave me over if you want anything,” he said as he walked away.

“Your uncle decided to retire, I hear.”

Stuart nodded as he bit into a slice of toast. After chewing and swallowing, he said, “Within the next six months. He told the CnC that was how long he had to find a replacement.”

“I still think he’s too young to retire,” Sjögren said as he picked up his coffee cup. “You had told me he was tired of the politics, though.” He lifted his cup in the air. “To Vice Admiral Robert G. Hathaway. Best Chief of Starfleet Operations in the last hundred years...and a good friend.”

Stuart lifted his cup and touched the commodore’s. “To Uncle Bob.”

Sjögren nodded his head up and down and pursed his lips as he thought about the Bob Hathaway he met as a young ensign on the *Starquest* fifty years prior. Now he was an admiral and the Chief of Starfleet Operations. Now he was nearing retirement, and Sjögren thought Hathaway was making a mistake. Sjögren knew what retirement was and was grateful when he had the opportunity to come back to Starfleet and make a difference. He was eighty-five and still making a difference. Bob was only seventy-two and had a lot more to give, but only he could choose to stay. “Robert, your uncle is going to regret leaving Starfleet,” he finally said.

Stuart was a little shocked to hear Sjögren verbalize what Stuart himself had been thinking. “Agreed, Erik. But what can we do about it? It’s his decision, not ours.”

“I understand if he wants to get away from the politics at Starfleet Command, but there are plenty of assignments he could take, other jobs he could do. With his engineering background, he could command one of the Federation-operated shipyards. He could run the corps of engineers if he wanted, or he could...well, he has other options that he could explore...*and* stay in Starfleet.”

“Again, I agree with you,” Stuart said, “but convincing him will be the challenge. He thinks he wants out of Starfleet, but Starfleet has been his entire life. His parents were in Starfleet, so he grew up knowing and living the service.” He paused. “I think that he would be miserable as a civilian. I expect that after a few months to a year, he will try to come back.”

Commodore Sjögren’s mouth turned upward into what some might consider a wicked smile. “I guess I will have to force him down memory lane.”



## **To Boldly Go: Reunions, Regrets, Opportunities, and Threats**

*A Starbase Gateway Alpha story*

By Cleve Johnson

Rob Stuart entered the medical center and approached the woman sitting at the reception desk. “Good morning, Ensign Perkins.”

The young human officer smiled at Stuart. “Captain Stuart, how are you, sir?”

“I’m well, Ensign.” He turned his head to look toward the corridor that led to the offices and examination rooms. “Is my wife in?”

“In her office, sir.”

Stuart smiled and nodded. “Thank you.” He turned and started down the corridor. As he entered the CMO’s office, he smiled at his wife. “I wanted to stop by and ask if you had some time this afternoon.”

“It’s been slow around here, so I think I can make time for you,” Doctor Janice Stuart said as she rose from the chair behind her desk. She walked around and hugged her husband. “I bet you want me to be with you when your uncle arrives.”

“Of course, I do. He would hold it against me if you weren’t there to meet him.”

“And he is probably anxious to see his great-niece and nephew, too, I suppose.” Jan winked at her husband. “Want to show them off, don’t you?”

“I can’t deny that,” Rob said. “If it wasn’t against standard protocol, I would pick them up at the daycare center and take them to the docking port.”

“I would like that, but I understand,” Jan said. If it was just the admiral arriving alone, a little breach in protocol would not upset Jan or Rob, but there were going to be several members of Starfleet and retirees who had served with Commodore Sjögren, and this was a reunion to honor him. Having the twins present when the guests arrive would take away from the Commodore’s reunion. “What time does the ship arrive?”

“If they are on time, it should be here at 1420 hours,” Rob said, “but knowing Uncle Bob, he will arrange to be earlier than expected.”

“I will plan on 1400 then,” Jan said as she squeezed her husband’s hand. “I’ll meet you at the main docking concourse a few minutes before.”

“That sounds good, dear,” Rob replied. “In the meantime, I need to prepare to greet Marcus.”

“The *Monarch* is back?”

“She should arrive within the next fifteen minutes.”

“*CnC to Fleet Captain Stuart.*”

Stuart smiled and said, “Or sooner.” He tapped his combadge. “Stuart here.”

“*The Monarch just arrived, sir. Captain Grey is wanting to know if you will be coming aboard or if you want him to meet you on the station.*”

“Let him know that I will beam to the ship in ten minutes. Stuart out.” He gently leaned toward his wife and kissed her. “I’ll see you this afternoon.”

“Give my best to Marcus and the crew.”

Rob exited his wife’s office and then, nodding to the ensign he had spoken with earlier, left the medical center to head for the nearest transporter room.



Fleet Captain Robert P. Stuart stepped off the transporter pad and reached out his hand to his XO, Captain Marcus Grey.

Grey, whose face showed the stress of recent events, shook his CO’s hand. “Welcome aboard, Captain. I wish that our return was under happier circumstances.”

“As do I, Marcus.” Stuart nodded to the chief petty officer at the transporter controls. “At ease, Chief. You got me here in one piece as usual.”

“Thank you, sir,” the chief replied as he turned his attention back to the console.

The two captains exited the transporter room and walked through the corridor. "I read your report as well as Powers' and Craddock's reports," Stuart said. "I've tried to record a message to Cohen's and Cartwright's parents, but... Marcus, I don't know what to say."

"I understand, Captain. I tried as well, but their deaths were senseless. How can you tell the parents that their child's death was for nothing?"

"I've lost a few people before, and it doesn't get easier, but I have never had to tell a family about a murder until now," Stuart said. "It turns my stomach. I never got the chance to get to know either one of them." Stuart's voice began to quiver. "I need to make a point of spending more time with the crew on a...personal level."

"I desire that as well, sir, but I do not know how to balance the professional relationship with a less formal one," Grey replied.

Stuart, after stopping in front of a turbolift, turned to face his XO. "It wasn't hard when I commanded the Providence. Small ship. Small crew. It came naturally, but on a ship of over seven hundred..."

"It's somewhat intimidating," Grey said, finishing Stuart's thought.

"Yes, it is, Marcus. Yes, it is." Stuart looked toward the turbolift doors as they slid apart. The two men entered and turned to face the now-closing doors. "Brig," Stuart ordered the computer.



Captains Stuart and Grey stood facing the alien, only a security force field separated the humans from the Fuval prisoner. The Fuval sat on the bunk and hung his head low as the Starfleet officers stood silently watching. Finally, the alien prisoner looked up.

"I'm Captain Robert Stuart. I want to know why you killed my officers and tried to sabotage my ship."

"I already told your interrogators. I had no choice."

"I heard that your family was threatened," Stuart said. "I have a family, too, but I cannot imagine any reason could justify murder."

"I never intended to harm your people, Captain Robert Stuart," the Fuval said. "They simply got in the way of what I had to do for Zar-Bek."

"Zar-Bek?" Stuart was surprised to hear that name. "Zar-Bek has no authority to..."

"He is the supreme leader of Enkar, and I must obey, or my family will suffer."

Stuart looked at his XO and back at the alien. "Zar-Bek was disgraced by being captured by...one of his prisoners. He isn't the supreme leader anymore."

"Zar-Bek is powerful. Even if he doesn't hold the title, he still rules. No one can thwart him."

Stuart stared at the distraught alien, wondering if his purple-colored skin and bulbous eyes were part of his natural appearance or if it was the form of another species. “What is your name?”

“My people are Fuval. We have no names. The Enkara give us numbers.”

“In my experience, the Enkar think that they are superior to other species and want to take away one’s personhood.” Stuart, although angry over the deaths of the two officers under his command, pitied the alien. “I...wish I could help your family.”

“A long as the Enkara own us, there is no help.”

Stuart tightened his jaw, turned, and left the brig.

Captain Grey began to feel sorry for the prisoner, but he could not forget what the Fuval had done. Could not forget the loss of two young men who had promising careers ahead of them. “You will be transferred to the security section of our starbase within the hour.” Grey turned and left the room.



Commodore Erik Sjögren sat in his office that was adjacent to the Starbase Command and Control operations center, also known simply as CnC. He sat behind his desk and smiled as he perused the files of his former shipmates. Most went on to have distinguished careers when the *Starquest* was decommissioned, and a few were still serving in Starfleet while others retired and went on to enjoy lives outside of Starfleet, including productive civilian careers. Sjögren wiped a tear running down his cheek as he remembered the few that lost their lives while under his command and those who lost their lives after leaving to serve on other starships or starbases. Some were lost at Wolf 359 in the defense against the Borg.

He missed his time on the *Starquest* and the time he had with his crew. A few, especially his friend and former chief engineer, Noriko Ito, and his first executive officer, Jacob Williams, were still in occasional contact with him. Sjögren had also been able to meet up once or twice with the young man who served as his senior helmsman when the ship had first launched—Greg Hanson. Erik had known that Hanson would go far, and he did. Hanson had passed up the opportunity to command his own ship twice in order to stay with Sjögren until he retired and the *Starquest* was decommissioned. Shortly after, Hanson was promoted to the rank of captain and given a command of his own. Erik Sjögren was very proud of Greg Hanson’s accomplishments. The last time Erik heard from Hanson, about two years ago, the younger man was up for promotion to rear admiral with a plush assignment as the sector commander stationed at Starbase 74. He smiled as he had the thought, *all the kids have grown up*.

Erik thought about the young engineering officer on his first assignment, Ensign Robert G. Hathaway, when the *Starquest* was first launched. That young ensign grew up as well and now was the Chief of Starfleet Operations. Erik was proud of Hathaway and had followed the man’s career closely after he rose through the ranks and transferred to other ships. Erik was always happy to learn when Hathaway became a first officer and eventually went on to

command three different starships before heading up Starfleet Engineering and eventually rising to his current position. And now, Bob Hathaway was planning to retire soon. Sjögren had been retired, but it was Hathaway who talked him into returning to Starfleet years later. Erik knew that retirement, although it had several enjoyable moments, was not as fulfilling as he thought it would be, so he knew that he would do all he could to convince the CSO that he should reconsider his decision to leave Starfleet.

As he reminisced about the people he had served with over the years and about the ship that he had the privilege of commanding, he wondered when his former shipmates would arrive.

As if his thoughts had been read, the intercom chirped. "*CnC to Commodore Sjögren .*"

"Sjögren here. Go ahead," he replied in anticipation.

*"Admiral Hathaway's ship will be arriving in a few minutes. He requested that you monitor the ship's arrival on the large viewscreen in CnC."*

"I'm on my way," Sjögren said as he stood and was already moving toward the door that separated his office from the operations center.

He entered CnC and made his way to the center of the circular command center and faced the large main viewer. He noticed that all the officers and crew that were on duty followed their CO's lead and focused on the viewscreen.

The starbase executive officer, Captain Uri Ivanov, left his station and came up to stand to Sjögren 's right. "This must be exciting for you, sir," he said with a slight Russian accent, "being reunited with your former crew."

"That would be an understatement, Uri," Sjögren replied.

Uri Ivanov suppressed an outward expression of the happiness he felt about the expected expression on the commodore's face that he was about to witness. "Would you look at that," Ivanov said as the starship exited warp and approached the starbase.

Erik Sjögren's mouth dropped open. His eyes lit up as he focused on the viewscreen and saw a sight that he never thought he would see again. It was his old ship, the U.S.S. *Starquest*. But she was decommissioned years ago," he whispered.

Ivanov displayed a wide toothy grin. He had known of what had awaited his commanding officer and seeing Sjögren 's reaction provided great satisfaction. "Are you surprised, sir?"

Sjögren turned away from the image on the viewer and smiled at his XO. "You knew about this?"

Ivanov just stood facing the commodore and smiled.

"Yes, Uri, I'm..."

"Sir," the ensign at the communications station said. "The *Starquest* is requesting to dock."

“Permission granted. Docking Port 3,” Sjögren said as he nodded to his XO and started toward the exit.



Rob and Jan Stuart stood side by side facing the approaching commodore, who had just entered the waiting area for the docking port. Both Stuarts smiled although Rob’s was forced.

“Robert, don’t tell me that you didn’t know about this,” Sjögren said.

Rob Stuart cocked his head to the side and shrugged his shoulders. “What was that you said to me this morning about not playing poker?” He teasingly looked at Sjögren.

Sjögren, with a wry smile, said, “I guess I was wrong.” He looked toward the airlock and saw the doors part. There, two men—Admiral Robert Hathaway and a middle-aged officer that Sjögren did not recognize—shook hands and checked in at the security desk. Sjögren watched as they left the desk and started to approach.

Hathaway smiled as he reached out his hand toward Sjögren. “Erik, it’s good to see you again.”

“Welcome aboard, Bob,” Sjögren replied.

Hathaway turned to his nephew and shook his hand vigorously. “How are you, Robby?”

“Fine, Uncle,” Rob Stuart said, but he was not fine. The murder that took place aboard his ship had shaken him. He berated himself for not being on the *Monarch* when it happened.

Hathaway knew his nephew well and sensed that something wasn’t right, but he knew this was not the time or place to address the issue, so he turned to Rob’s wife. “And it’s good to see you again, too, Janice.” The admiral leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. “I’m looking forward to seeing those babies.”

Jan smiled. “I think you will like them. They’re growing so fast that I can’t keep up with them.”

“Walking yet?”

“Not yet. I will be another couple of months before we face that challenge,” Jan said.

Hathaway smiled and took a step back. He turned his face toward the man standing beside him. “I want you all to meet Captain Jackson Andrews, the sector JAG out of Pacifica.”

Sjögren reached over to shake the man’s hand. “Welcome aboard, Captain. I understand that you are going to set up a legal detachment here at Gateway Alpha.”

“Yes, sir,” Andrews stated. “I wanted to meet Mister Powers and brief him on his new role...and personally pin a new pip on his uniform.”

“I think he will do a fine job,” Rob Stuart said.



“Well, I don’t want to hold the commodore up from reuniting with his former crew, so I will check in at CnC and see if I can track down Mister Powers.”

“I had my people assign guest quarters for you on deck seven as well as office space on deck twelve,” Sjögren said.

“Thank you, sir.” With that, Captain Andrews nodded and went toward the exit.

Admiral Hathaway smiled and said, “Well, Erik, I thought that you might want to see your ship again, so some people are waiting on the bridge for your inspection.”

“How did you manage to get the old girl out of mothballs? I figured that she had been scrapped years ago,” Erik said.

“I got curious about whatever happened to the ship after it was decommissioned and did some searching. She was scheduled to go to Qualor II, but somebody...I don’t know who it was...realized that the ship was in too good of condition to be scrapped and arranged for it to be sent to Harrell Shipyards where it has been in drydock all these years,” Hathaway said. He smiled. “And maybe I’m a little nostalgic, but I took advantage of my position as CSO this once. I ordered that it be refitted and put back into service. I’ll tell you the details later, but right now, you have some people waiting on the bridge that want to see you.”

“And I want to see them,” Erik said as he smiled at the thought of stepping back onto his old ship. He had that privilege a few months back when he went aboard his ship that had come from fifty years in the past, but he only allowed himself to be in the ready room since he did not want to pollute the timeline by interacting with his crew during that encounter. He turned toward the Stuarts. “Will I see the two of you later?”

“Uri and I have put together a reception for 1800 in the main observatory,” Rob said.

Sjögren nodded and wiped his eyes. “I don’t know what to say. A ‘thank you’ doesn’t seem enough.”

“Shall we go, Erik?” Hathaway asked.

Sjögren nodded. “Lead the way, Bob.”

Both flag officers turned toward the airlock that led to the gangway connecting the starbase with the *Starquest* and quickly walked toward it.



Erik Sjögren’s eyes were puffy and red as he exited the turbolift and entered the bridge. He looked around and smiled as a flood of memories rushed into his mind. The memories of more than thirty years that he had commanded this vessel came to the surface and made him feel young again. He looked around and saw several familiar faces, his senior officers all at their stations just as they were on the day the U.S.S. *Starquest* launched over fifty years before. He noticed that the science station was empty. That was Inirii’s station. The Deltan senior science

officer had been lost to the Borg at Wolf 359. Erik also noticed that the tactical station was empty. “Where is Captain S’nor?”

“He wanted me to express his condolences,” Bob Hathaway said, standing behind Sjögren. “Starfleet Security is on high alert due to the recent incident with the *Enterprise* mission to Romulus. He didn’t think that he should be too far from Headquarters until the Romulan government was in less disarray.”

“Ah, I see, Erik said. “Well, my good friends, it is good to see all of you. I look forward to catching up.”

“Captain Williams, please come forward,” Hathaway said.

Jacob Williams, the first executive officer of the *Starquest*, stepped forward to face his former CO. Jake had been promoted a few years before Sjögren had retired and went on to command his own ship until he, too, retired from Starfleet. A civilian for the past twelve years, Jake had enjoyed raising horses in his native Kentucky, but he would not miss the chance to get into space once again to reunite with his former shipmates, especially Sjögren. “Attention to orders,” he said. “At the request of Admiral Hathaway and on behalf of the former crew of the U.S.S. *Starquest*, it is my honor to present you with this starship to command once again.”

Erik Sjögren ’s mouth dropped open. “W...what?”

“The U.S.S. *Starquest*, NCC-6382, has been recommissioned to serve as an active-duty starship assigned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group; however, she is on detached duty to Starbase *Gateway Alpha* and under your temporary command for the next thirty days,” Williams said.

“And that isn’t all, Erik,” Hathaway said as he walked to face his friend. He lifted a PADD and began to read from it. “Per Starfleet order 59862-Alpha-4-Tango, I hereby promote you to the rank of rear admiral effective this stardate.” Hathaway handed the PADD to Williams as Williams gave the appropriate rank insignia to Hathaway. He stepped closer to Sjögren and replaced the insignia on Sjögren ’s uniform. Reaching out his hand, he said, “Congratulations *Admiral Sjögren*.”

Sjögren shook Hathaway’s hand vigorously. “I don’t know what to say. This is unexpected.”

“You deserve it, Erik.”

The people on the bridge, former senior officers who had served with Sjögren, erupted in cheers and applause. Even Captain Solev, who was the *Starquest*’s communications officer when he was a junior-grade lieutenant, applauded. A Vulcan rarely would resort to participating in what his culture considered an outburst of emotion. Solev merely thought that to engage in the congratulatory act was in accordance with the IDIC principle; therefore, it was logical.

Erik held up his hand to quiet his friends. “Thank you. Thank you all. I...look forward to taking the ship out when my duties allow. Perhaps before you all head home in a few days, we can take a short cruise together.”

“It will be like old times,” Rear Admiral Gregory Hanson said.

“Still know how to pilot a starship, Greg?” Sjögren teased his old helm officer.

“It’s been a while, but I’m not that rusty, Admiral.”

The old crew came and surrounded their former CO. Each one shook his hand or patted him on the back. It seemed like the years they had been apart seemed only like a few days.

Hathaway backed away from the Sjögren and the others as Noriko Ito, the former chief engineer of the *Starquest*, pulled him aside. “Robert, I have seriously thought about your request, and I weighed the pros and cons.”

Hathaway put his hands behind his back and cocked his head toward his mentor. “I think I hear a ‘but’ in there,” he said.

Noriko grinned. “Actually, I find the idea appealing. I also have to consider how much I’m enjoying retirement.”

“I understand, Noriko,” Hathaway said. “I’m getting ready to retire in the next few months, so I do understand.”

“You? Retire?” Noriko shook her head. “No, I can’t see *you* retiring.” She pursed her lips and tightly and crossed her arms. “Who could take your place?”

“Admiral Horace Montanus is on the shortlist.”

“I’m not familiar with him,” Noriko said flatly. Without allowing Hathaway the chance to divert the attention to his potential replacement, she said, “You should reconsider.”

“If I could find some out-of-the-way outpost to get away from HQ and the bureaucrat civilians that like to stick their nose into everything, I might.” Hathaway’s sad eyes turned away momentarily. He found solace in watching Erik engage his former crew in conversation. Turning back to Noriko, he said, “I’m going to miss Starfleet.”

“I still miss it after almost seventeen years, but I have plenty of hobbies to keep me busy,” the former chief engineer said. “But, Bob, I think that you need to stay in and find a way to serve because you wouldn’t know what to do, otherwise.”

Hathaway gave a half-hearted smile. “I’ll think about it, Nori.” He placed his hand on her shoulder. “Right now, I’m going to quietly slip away and spend some time with my family.”

Noriko nodded as she decided not to push her friend any further about his, in her view, wrong decision to retire. “See you later at the reception?”

“Of course,” Hathaway said as he turned and started for the turbolift.



“Could you get that, dear?” Janice Stuart asked her husband when the chime alerted the couple that someone was at the door to their quarters. Jan was in the adjacent room of their suite feeding one of the twins while the other still slept soundly.

Rob had already got out of his chair and was heading toward the door. “Got it,” he replied. “Enter.”

The door parted. Rob smiled widely as he said, “Uncle! I didn’t expect to see you until the reception.”

“I was anxious to see my great-nephew and niece, Bob Hathaway said, grinning. “Is this a good time?”

“Anytime is a good time for you, Uncle Bob,” Jan said as she came out of the bedroom with a baby in each arm, one of them crying. She met the older man halfway as he entered and looked at the twins. “I was feeding Kelly when Kevin woke and decided that he was hungry, too. Want to hold Kelly while I change Kevin?”

“It would be a pleasure,” Hathaway said as he reached for the baby girl. “Come here, precious.” He took Kelly in his arms and gently rocked her back and forth.

“Would you like to sit in the rocker?” Rob asked as Jan took Kevin back to the bedroom.

Bob turned around and spied what appeared to be an antique wooden rocking chair in one corner of the room. He made his way to the chair and sat down as his face expressed the joy of holding his great-niece. “She looks a lot like your mother,” he said.

Rob smiled as the image of his mother came to mind. She, like her older brothers, had served in Starfleet, but she had the misfortune of serving on one of the forty starships that engaged the Borg at Wolf 359 thirteen years ago. Rob shoved the thought of how his mother died out of his mind and focused on the sight of his uncle holding and smiling at his little girl. “She does look like her.”

“Sometimes I wonder what my life would have been like if I married and had children,” Hathaway said. He momentarily felt remorse but quickly set it aside to relish in the joy he felt at that moment as he held Rob’s and Jan’s child. “I suppose that I never felt I could be in Starfleet and be a family man, too. But I’m glad that it’s working for you, Robby.”

Rob shrugged. “It’s not always easy, but Jan and I have been able to find a good balance. She won’t admit it, but I know that it’s rough on her when I’m off station and she’s left behind.” He sat down on the couch and crossed his legs. “Even if it has its challenges, there’s little I would change.”

Bob Hathaway nodded as Kelly reached for his beard and wrapped her fingers in it. He was glad that he kept his facial hair trimmed fairly short; otherwise, the baby might be able to get a good hold and pull, which would not be at all pleasant. “So, tell me, Robby, how is your command? Anything exciting?”

“The *Monarch* had some trouble recently.”

“Oh?” Hathaway’s eyebrows creased close together.

“An alien shapeshifter infiltrated the ship recently and tried to sabotage it. The alien killed two young officers.” Rob shook his head. “Both of them had great potential.”

“I take it the alien was abducted.”

“He was transferred to the station’s brig this morning shortly after the *Monarch* docked. He has been cooperative since his capture, at least cooperative enough to let us know who he works for.” Rob felt himself getting tense as he thought about the incident but tried to relax as he realized the emotional stress that was starting to build at the thought of what almost happened to his ship and crew. “He comes from a planet that is controlled by the Enkara.”

“I had a feeling that the Enkara would not abide by the non-aggression agreement,” Bob said. “Time after time, I have seen alien aggressors say they will abide by a peace treaty, but then renege and continue to do whatever they want to undermine that peace.”

“Didn’t you have a run-in with a group like that several years ago?”

“Yes. The leader of the planet Zarab tried to sabotage my ship, the *Majestic*,” Bob said. “Fortunately, the Zarabians were not advanced enough to take on Starfleet and realized that they had tried to bully the wrong people.”

“With you being the ‘wrong people’ in that situation.” Rob noticed his uncle’s wry grin. “That’s what I thought.”

“Unfortunately, the Enkara have more teeth than the Zarabians did.” Bob Hathaway contemplated the situation for a moment before continuing. “Other than the Enkara, are there other threats in the area?”

“The starship *Alliance* was attacked on Stardate 56894 by a ship from a planet called Idarus in Sector Gateway 02,” Rob said. “Like your Zarabians, the Idarus ship lacked teeth, but I told Captain Jans to do what he could to diffuse the situation. His latest report indicated that the Idarus captain said that he would not attack any of our ships as long as they kept a respectable distance from their ships and planet.”

“Respectable distance,” Hathaway echoed. “And what is a respectable distance?”

“Captain Jans is still waiting on an answer to that question.” Rob rolled his eyes but grinned mischievously. “Some of the positive results have been the establishment of a research outpost, an archeological discovery and expedition, friendly first contact with five warp-capable species, and one of them, the Nazar Alliance, has even asked for Captain Thorpe to negotiate a trade agreement between Nazar and a planet near their space called Oshanis IV, which opens the door for another first contact.”

“Impressive,” Hathaway said. “And all in less than six months.” He added.

Jan came out of the bedroom with Kevin, no longer crying since his diaper had been changed and his belly made full. “Talking shop?” She handed Kevin to Hathaway, who had to

adjust to hold Kelly in one arm in order to take Kevin in the other. “Can’t we leave Starfleet at the door for an hour or two?”

“Please forgive me,” Hathaway said. “After fifty-one years in Starfleet, it’s hard to think of anything else.”

Jan couldn’t help but smile at the older man who had become an important member of her family since she had married Rob. She felt a close connection to the admiral as if he was of her bloodline and not just a relative by marriage. “Apology accepted. But I mean it when I say that these quarters are to be for living, not for work.”

“That was the promise I made to you, dear,” Rob said. “I will try harder to remember.”

Jan lightly punched her husband in the arm. “I’m holding you to that.” She moved closer and kissed him on the cheek. Turning her attention back to the admiral, Jan smiled and walked over to sit on the couch and faced him as he continued to rock the babies. “I’m glad you were able to finally come for a visit and see the kids...and us, of course.”

Hathaway looked into the faces of both cherubs on his lap, watching them start to doze off. He looked up to face Janice. “I wished I could have got away and got here sooner, but...” He stopped himself as soon as he was going to mention something work-related. “Maybe I can visit more often since my schedule will lighten up soon.”

“We would like that, Uncle,” Rob said.

Hathaway cocked his head to one side. “What? You’re not going to try to talk me out of retirement? Like everyone else?”

Rob smiled. “Not at all. I think that you know what is best for you. And if you think retiring is the best thing for you to do at this time, then I support you completely.”

Hathaway nodded and smiled. “Thank you, Robby. I wish Erik and Noriko would see it that way.”

“You still have a lot of years left,” Jan said. “What do you plan to do with your time?”

“Well, I thought that I would travel to some of the more pleasant planets in the Federation,” Hathaway said. “After about a year or so of traveling, I thought that I might do some consulting work in the area of engineering. I’ve heard rumors from some close friends that Yoyodyne’s Propulsion Division might like to have me.”

“I could also see you working in the Federation Diplomatic Corps, Uncle Bob,” Janice said. “You certainly have the experience.”

“I’m trying to get away from politics, Janice, but I appreciate the vote of confidence.” Bob Hathaway smiled. “I have some ideas for several possible hobbies that will keep me busy.”

“Whatever you decide to do,” Rob said, “I’m sure that you will be very good at it.”

The chirping sound of Rob's combadge interrupted the conversation. "*CnC to Fleet Captain Stuart.*"

Rob tapped the delta-shaped communicator on his chest. "Stuart. Go ahead."

*"There is a priority message from the Trailblazer, sir. Captain Leeson would like to speak to you as soon as possible."*

"I'll take it in my office in five minutes."

*"Aye, sir."*

Rob looked at his wife and uncle. "Duty calls. I'll try not to be too long."

Hathaway raised an eyebrow. "Problem?"

"I hope not," Rob said. Captain Leeson is on a diplomatic mission to the planet Ruhl, which is just a few light-years outside of Enkara space. Her last report indicated that the Ruhl might want our help in their defense against the Enkara." He kissed his wife, got off the couch, and headed for the door. As the doors slid apart, Rob turned and smiled at his uncle and pointed his finger at his children. "Be careful, Uncle Bob. Those two can take your heart captive."

Hathaway smiled and said, "They already have."

With that, Rob Stuart was all business and left his quarters.



Stuart entered the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group's outer office and was greeted by his aide, Lieutenant Richard Baker. "Sir, Captain Leeson is waiting on the priority channel and Captain Thorpe would like to see you before she leaves tomorrow."

Stuart nodded as he kept walking toward the door that led to his private sanctum. "Thank you, Richard. Have Captain Thorpe meet me here at 0830 tomorrow." The door parted for him and closed moments after he entered his office.

Stuart sat down behind his desk and turned the desk monitor to give him a clear view of Melanie Leeson. "Mel, what can I do for you?"

*"Sir, we have a situation building with the Enkara."*

Stuart frowned as the mere mention of the Enkara started his heart to race. "They're starting to get on my last nerve," he said. "Don't sugarcoat it."

Leeson's image on the monitor appeared grim. She reached up and moved a strand of hair out from in front of her eyes. "*They attacked Ruhl about an hour ago. It was more than a little disruptive while the planetary council and I were meeting.*"

"Was your ship damaged badly?"

*"They didn't attack the Trailblazer,"* Leeson replied. "*By the terms of the non-aggression pact, they didn't actually violate it.*"

“No, but they put your diplomatic mission in jeopardy,” Stuart said. “Do the Ruhl have any explanation of why the Enkara would attack them?”

*“This isn’t the first time, Rob. Enkara ships have been periodically engaging Ruhl ships for the last couple of decades, and they have attacked the planet directly once before, a few months ago.”* The stress of the situation was evident on Leeson’s face. *“Fortunately, the Ruhl have energy shields covering all their major cities that can stand up to the Enkara weapons, but villages and rural areas aren’t so fortunate.”*

Stuart pondered the situation, not wanting to get the Federation in the middle of someone else’s war, but he didn’t like bullies, and the Enkara was one of the most dangerous bullies that he had encountered during his career. “One of the people you rescued a few weeks ago was a shapeshifter from a planet in Enkara space. He must have posed as one of the escapees that you transported to *Monarch*. He pretended to be one of the crew and tried to sabotage the *Monarch* and murdered two of my crew.” He paused. “What I’m saying is to be extremely careful. Some people may not be what they appear.”

Leeson lowered her eyes and looked up again. “Rob, I...”

Stuart held up his hand to stop Leeson from saying anything else. “It’s not your fault, Mel. Transmit your full report, and I will review it tomorrow morning,” he said. “In the meantime, be careful, and don’t make any promises to the Ruhl without authorization.” He forced himself to smile, but it was weak. “Let’s take things slowly.”

*“Understood, sir. Leeson out.”* Captain Melanie Leeson’s image was replaced by the Federation emblem.

Stuart leaned back in his chair and rubbed his forehead.



Janice Stuart was sitting at a table in the large conference room talking to an older woman as Robert entered the room. He spotted his wife and started toward her. As he approached the two women, Jan noticed him in her peripheral vision and turned her head, smiling as he got closer and stopped by the table. “Rob, this is Doctor Shanti Patel. She was the CMO on the *Starquest* for more than twenty years, and then she came to Starfleet Medical Academy in my second year.”

Rob reached his hand over the table and shook the doctor’s hand. “Glad to meet you, Doctor Patel.”

“I was reminiscing with your wife, Captain.” Patel smiled. “She was my top student in Exobiology.”

“Thank you, Doctor, but I struggled in your classes.” Jan tried to keep from blushing.

“Everyone struggled in my classes, but you struggled the least. And you never stopped pushing yourself to learn and to excel.”



“I was only able to push myself because you inspired me.”

Rob looked from the older woman to his wife. “You taught her well, Doctor. Jan has been an asset as a ship’s doctor, and her knowledge of medicine for various species has been invaluable.” He took his wife’s hand and gently squeezed. “I’ll let you two continue catching up. I need to update Admiral Sjögren on some information.”

“Problem?” Jan could sense the minute look of concern on Rob’s face that most people would not notice.

“A little glitch in the Ruhl mission, but Melanie is on top of it.”

Jan knew that Rob’s ‘little glitch’ was probably not so little, but it was not the time to discuss the situation, and she would find out about the situation later when they were alone.

He looked around and noticed Sjögren across the room talking with a group of former members of the *Starquest* crew. He nodded to Patel and smiled at his wife, letting go of her hand. “If you will excuse me.” He left the two doctors and made his way toward Sjögren.

Jan’s eyes followed her husband for a few seconds before turning her attention back to her former instructor. “He’s a wonderful husband, Shanti. After I divorced Paul, I never thought I would be interested in getting married again, but I can’t imagine life without Rob...or my kids.”

Patel smiled at her one-time student. “That is one of my regrets, Janice. Not having a family.”

“It’s not easy juggling a career in Starfleet with having a family. It was easier before the twins were born, and leaving the ship was a difficult decision, but I was a little afraid for the kids while living on a starship.” Jan seemed distant for a moment before recovering her demeanor. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Patel said, smiling. “Never apologize for being honest.”

“I remember you giving me and the other students that advice in Advanced Exobiology.”

“It’s still good advice,” Patel said.

“So, what are you doing these days?” Jan asked.

“I’m in private practice in New Delhi. I’ve thought about retiring a few times, but I don’t know what I would do with my spare time.”

“The Flora colony is only a little over a dozen light-years from here, and I know they are looking for another experienced doctor,” Jan said. “The colony was established less than two years ago, and they could use more help, especially at the medical center.”

Doctor Patel’s head bobbed from one side to the other a few times as she considered the possibility. “I might consider that. Frontier medicine has always appealed to me.”

“I would gladly keep in contact and maybe even come for a visit every few months,” Jan said.



Rob approached Admiral Sjögren and three of his former shipmates. “Sharing memories?”

“Robert,” Sjögren said as he turned toward Stuart. “I want you to meet some of my former senior officers. This is my first XO, Jake Williams, senior navigator, Pelinius Jaren, and the best CONN officer of all time, Greg Hanson.”

Stuart smiled and shook each person’s hand. “I’ve heard great things about each of you from the admiral. I’m glad to meet you.”

“Everything he told you is an exaggeration,” Hanson said. “Except for the part about me being the best CONN officer.” He smiled as his friends rolled their eyes.

Stuart cocked his head to one side and quickly back again. “My best friend claims that he’s the best at piloting a starship, too.”

“Oh? What’s his name?”

“Commander Blake Adams. He’s now the CO of my former command, the *Providence*.” Stuart felt a rush of regret that he and Blake no longer served together. He could use Blake’s input with the current situation.

Hanson’s response was a boisterous *harrumph* as he shook his head, smiling. “Figures he would claim that. I was his flight instructor at the Academy.”

“I guess he learned to both fly and inflate his ego from you, Greg,” Williams said as everyone in the small group laughed.

“He turned into a fine officer, Admiral Hanson,” Stuart said.

“I knew he would,” Hanson replied. “I’d like to hear more about him if you have some time in the next few days.”

“I’d be glad to tell you,” Stuart said, “but right now I would like to borrow Admiral Sjögren for a few minutes if you wouldn’t mind.”

Sjögren nodded to his former crew and said, “Gentlemen, I will catch up with you a little later.” He turned to face Stuart and started walking with him away from the others. After finding a somewhat quiet corner away from the groups of people that he had once served with, he took Stuart’s arm. “What’s wrong Robert?”

“While Captain Leeson was visiting the Ruhl governing council, the Enkara attacked the planet.”

“Is Captain Leeson alright? Her ship and crew?”

“She’s fine, Erik,” Stuart replied. “The Enkara were careful to not attack the *Trailblazer*, but I guess they bombarded the planet from orbit. Fortunately, the Ruhl have force fields protecting their major cities. This has happened before.”

“What do you need from me?” Sjögren’s wrinkled face pulled tight.

“I just wanted you to be aware of the situation,” Stuart said, “but you might want to put in a request for a *Defiant*-class ship since the station was intended to have one assigned for defense.”

“I was told months ago that we would have one assigned, but you know that other priorities sometimes take precedence.” Sjögren patted Stuart’s shoulder. “I’ll see if I can make the message clearer about how much we need one.”

“I appreciate it, sir. One of the reasons that I keep the *Monarch* fairly close is that we don’t have other ships with enough power to defend this place if the Enkara tried to come here.”

“Or some other hostile race that we haven’t encountered yet,” Sjögren added.

“I thought you were more optimistic,” Stuart said as he tried to make light of the possibility.

“I am, but I’ve also lived long enough to have my optimism tempered by reality.”

Both men smiled.

“I can’t argue with that,” Stuart said. “I don’t want to keep you from your guests, Erik. I just wanted you to be aware of the situation.” Sighing, Stuart said, “I’ll keep you informed,” as he turned and walked away.



The next morning, Fleet Captain Rob Stuart sat behind his desk looking at the desk monitor. He was focused to point of being startled when the chime sounded, indicating that he had a visitor. “Come,” he said.

The two halves of the doors parted and slid into the wall on each side of the door frame. Captain Constance Thorpe, CO of the U.S.S. *Sonak*, entered and smiled. She immediately went to the chair in front of Stuart’s desk opposite him and sat down. “Good morning, Rob.”

Stuart glanced at the chronometer embedded in his desktop. “0830. Punctual as ever.” He half-smiled as he turned the monitor off. “Well, Connie, did you and your crew get some R and R?”

“Not as much as we probably needed, but I plan on taking the crew to Pacifica for a week’s shore leave after this mission.”

“I’m sure they will appreciate it,” Stuart said. He leaned back in his chair. “What time do you leave?”

“Departure is scheduled for 1120 if we get all the supplies loaded,” Thorpe said. She noticed that Stuart looked tired. “We’ll be ready...and on time.”

“I’m sure you will. I understand that you are taking medical supplies to the Mira colony before your rendezvous with the Nazar diplomatic team.”

“That’s the plan. I have a second cousin that recently moved to Mira, so I hope to at least have an hour or so to catch up with her before we continue to Nazar space. I’m looking forward to helping the Nazar and Oshi work out the details of their trade alliance.” Thorpe sensed that Stuart was only half listening. “Rob, is anything wrong?”

Stuart reluctantly started to open his mouth, but then he shook his head. “I’m just tired,” he said as he tried to bluff his long-time friend. “You were saying?”

“Rob, you look like you did right before taking the astrophysics exam your third year. Remember?”

“I was up all night before taking that one.” Stuart looked at Thorpe, knowing that she was not going to drop the subject. “It’s the Enkara. I don’t have much to go on, but I think that they are up to something.”

“Not abiding by the non-aggression pact?”

“Technically, they have not violated it, but...you heard about the murder of two of my officers?”

“Yes,” Thorpe said as she lowered her head a little. “My operations officer knew Lieutenant Cohen. They met at the Academy.”

“Well, the murderer is from a planet deep within Enkara space and has admitted that he was under orders from...Zar-Bek.”

“I thought he was no longer in charge. That he lost his position because he had been captured.”

“Captured by me,” Stuart said emphatically. “He may still have some pull or he might be working on his own. I don’t know.” Stuart stood up and started around his desk and sat on the edge of the smooth desktop, looking at the painting of a forested alien landscape. “If Zar-bek is working on his own, he might be out for revenge against me and will get to me by first getting to those around me.”

“What are you going to do about it?” Connie stayed calm to try to help Rob think clearly through the situation.

“I’m preparing to send a communique to all our ships to be on the alert for Enkara ships and to take extra precautions,” Rob said. “I have starbase security trying to get more information from the prisoner, and Captain Leeson is looking into a recent attack on Ruhl.”

“Rob, it’s obvious that this has shaken you, and I can understand why it would with your history with the Enkara.”

“Are you suggesting I see a counselor?”

Connie let out a little laugh. “Do you think you need one?”

Rob smiled. “I’m not opposed to it, but I think right now, I need to make sure we’re prepared for what might be coming.”

“What you need is some rest, Rob,” Connie said. “How much sleep did you get last night.”

Rob smiled half-heartedly. “Not enough.”

“When did you last take leave? A vacation?”

“I had some time off before taking command of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group.”

“And how much of that time was in preparation for this mission...or lecturing at the Academy...or sitting in briefings?” Connie Thorpe knew Stuart well enough to know that he tended to push himself to the limit at times and not allow himself to have enough downtime. “Well?”

Stuart got off the desktop and returned to his chair. “Point taken, Connie. I’ll...consider your advice.”

Connie stood and nodded. “I think that is the cue that the meeting is over,” she said, her jaw tightening as she forced the words out of her mouth. She realized that she was getting angry at her long-time friend because the one thing she hated was to have her advice dismissed without at least some consideration. “With your permission, I need to make sure my ship will be ready to depart on time.”

Stuart, oblivious to Thorpe’s change in tone, nodded. “Good luck on your mission, Captain Thorpe.”

Thorpe turned and started toward the exit. She stopped and turned to face Stuart when he called her name.

“Connie,” Rob said. “Thank you for your concern. I will take some time off.”

“Soon?”

“Soon,” he echoed.

She smiled as she held up her index finger as a mother scolding a young child would. “I’m going to hold you to it, *Captain*.” And she turned and left as the doors made way for her exit.

As the doors closed, Rob let his face fall into the palms of his hands, supported by his elbows resting on the desk. He knew that his friend was right. He did need some time off, but he also knew that he had responsibilities beyond the command of a single starship. He had responsibilities for each of the COs and ships of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group. And some

responsibilities for Starbase Gateway Alpha even if Admiral Sjögren was in charge of the station.

The chime sounded again, breaking Stuart's thoughts. "Enter," he said as he looked toward the door to see his uncle walking through. "Come in, Uncle," Rob said as he rose from his chair and took several steps to grasp his uncle's hand.

"Good morning, Robby," Bob Hathaway said. "I, uh, saw you from a distance at the reception last night. You seemed...distracted."

"You mean worried," Rob answered.

"That's probably a better word. Want to talk about it?"

Rob shook his head. "I just spent fifteen minutes talking about it, so I'm not really in the mood, but I will fill you in before you head back to Earth."

"Which will be in two days," Hathaway said.

"I thought you would be here longer," Stuart said, the disappointment not trying to disguise itself.

"I need to take care of some things back at HQ, and the *Enterprise* will be ready to get underway again shortly after I get back," Hathaway said. "The CSO should be there when the Federation flagship re-launches."

Rob studied his uncle's face but said nothing. He knew that if he stayed silent, his uncle would open up, and he did not have to wait long.

Hathaway walked to the couch a few feet away and sat down. Stuart followed him and sat on an upholstered chair in the corner of the office. The chair was perpendicular to the couch, arranged so that the occupant could make eye contact with any person or persons that might be seated on the couch.

"Robby, I appreciate that you haven't offered your 'two cents' about my retirement, but..." the admiral paused and looked at the floor. He looked back up to face his nephew. "I would like your honest opinion. What do you think I should do?"

Stuart had an opinion, but he didn't think it was his place to express it voluntarily. Now, his uncle provided an open door. "Well, Uncle Bob, I respect your decision to retire if you think it's time to do that, but...are you sure that it's the right time?"

"More than 50 years in Starfleet is a lot, Robby."

"Yes, but you're only seventy-two. Humans have an average lifespan of almost one hundred thirty, so..." Rob paused and shrugged his shoulders. "What are you going to do for the next sixty years? I mean to say that I think that within six months after retiring, you'll wish you hadn't."

“You might have a point, but I’m tired of the bureaucracy. The self-serving politicians keep sticking their noses in Starfleet business. Always making it hard to do our jobs.” Hathaway leaned back and shook his head. “I just don’t see how I can stay.”

“Starfleet does serve at the pleasure of the civilian authorities, Uncle,” Rob said, “and you still have a lot to give. Maybe you can find another position that you’re suited for away from the bureaucrats. Have you talked with Admiral James?”

“Only to tell him my intention to retire soon.”

“You wanted my opinion, Uncle, so my opinion is that you talk to Admiral James about it.” Rob smiled. “Ask him if there’s a place to serve where you can exercise your various talents.”

Hathaway smiled and gave his nephew a light slap on the shoulder. “Thank you, Robby. I’ll talk to him. I’ve made a lot of friends over the years. I’ve made some enemies, too,” he said. “But Bart James is one of my friends, and I know that I can talk straight with him. Thanks for the advice.”

“My pleasure,” Rob replied. “So, have you had breakfast?”

“Right before I came here,” Hathaway said. “I figured you would have eaten earlier.”

“Normally, I do, but I might have a situation brewing, and I had to fill in Admiral Montoya,” Rob said. “And I had a short meeting with Captain Thorpe right before you arrived.”

“She was leaving as I got here,” Hathaway said. His nephew said moments earlier that he was not in the mood, but Hathaway entered the door that his nephew opened. “So tell me about this situation.”

“It may be nothing. I just want to make sure we’re not caught off guard.”

“The Enkara?”

“Why do you think it’s the Enkara?”

Hathaway placed his hand on Stuart’s shoulder. “Because, my dear boy, I had breakfast with Erik and some of the old crew, and…”

“And Erik told you about what I shared with him last night.” Rob got out of the chair and took a few steps away from his uncle. Without turning to face the older man, he said, “We’re meeting new races and making alliances out here. I’m afraid that the Enkara are planning something to destroy what we’re building despite the agreement that was signed.”

Hathaway felt his nephew’s pain, knowing that he could not help the younger man through it. It reminded him of how he watched Rob’s pain when his mother Elizabeth, Hathaway’s sister, lost her life at Wolf 359 thirteen years prior. Hathaway was too engulfed in his own grief at the time and was in no shape to be supportive of Rob’s, and his brother Sean’s, grief. “Don’t doubt yourself, Robby. Or the people under your command.”

Rob turned around and faced Hathaway, knowing the wisdom that the man in front of him possessed. “Thanks, Uncle. You’ve always encouraged me to be confident in myself.”

“And I’ve always been right about you, yes?”

Rob gave a half-hearted grin. “Yes.”



### **Two days later...**

“Enter,” Rob said in response to the door chime.

The door halves slid aside with a familiar woosh to reveal Admiral Hathaway. The older officer’s eyes brightened as he smiled. “I hope I’m not disturbing you too early.”

“Not at all,” Rob said. “Come in, Uncle.”

Janice came out of the bedroom and smiled as she approached and gave him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. “Good morning, Uncle Bob.”

“I wanted to stop by and see you before I leave.”

“I didn’t think you were leaving until this afternoon,” Rob said.

“Change of plans,” Hathaway replied. “The U.S.S. *Kiev* is due to leave Pacifica tomorrow at 1030 hours, so I need to make the rendezvous before then. Admiral Sjögren wants an excuse to take the *Starquest* out for a spin, so he offered to take me to Pacifica and promised to get me there with time to spare.”

“I hate goodbyes,” Jan said. “When do you think you’ll get back this way?”

“Well, it might be awhile. I talked to Admiral James, and he offered me a new opportunity in lieu of retirement.”

“And what opportunity is that, Uncle?” Rob was pleased that his uncle decided to forgo his retirement plans.

“I’m going to take command of Harrell Shipyards as soon as my replacement as CSO is chosen and confirmed.”

“Glad to hear it, Uncle Bob,” Rob exclaimed. “How long do you think it will take until they choose a replacement?”

“Probably just a few weeks. He’s narrowed the candidates to Horace Montanus, S’talk, and Gavin O’Dell, but I suspect Admiral Montanus will be the one.”

Rob smiled and placed his hand on his uncle’s shoulder. “I’m glad that you’re staying in Starfleet and found a place where you will enjoy serving.”

“It feels right, Robby. I’m glad to get an opportunity where I can use my engineering background and leadership experience.”



Jan started toward the bedroom when she heard the babies cry. “That wasn’t a long nap,” she said. “At least you have a chance to hold them before you leave.”

Hathaway’s eyes lit up and he started to say something when the computer informed Rob that he had a page.

“Stuart here, go ahead.”

*“Captain Stuart, the prisoner is requesting to see you. He says he has information that you should know”*

Stuart frowned, thinking that if the prisoner—the person who murdered two of his young officers—wanted to volunteer information, he should be cautious about the validity of that information. “I will be there in a few minutes.”

*“Yes sir.”*

Stuart looked at his uncle and forced a smile. “I wanted to walk with you to the docking area, but...”

“...duty calls,” Hathaway finished his nephew’s sentence as he stepped close and hugged the younger man. “I’ll be in touch.”

“I wish we had more time.” Rob stepped back and smiled.

“Maybe you can come to see me next time,” Hathaway said.

Rob nodded. He turned and went toward the bedroom as his wife came out with a child in each arm. Rob kissed each of the babies on the head and his wife on the cheek. “The prisoner claims to be ready to talk, so I’ll be in the brig.”

“I hope he’s cooperative,” Jan said. “See you for dinner?”

“That new restaurant—The Rising Star—opened a couple of days ago, and I hear the chef is adept in cuisine from a dozen worlds. Want to get a babysitter for a couple hours so we can just relax and forget about work for a while?”

“Sounds wonderful, hon,” Jan said. “I saw Carrie Nelson yesterday, and she said she would love to watch the kids again.”

“Let’s plan on meeting at the restaurant at 1700, okay?”

“I’ll be there.”

Rob turned and started toward the door, stopped to shake his uncle’s hand, and exited his quarters.

Hathaway approached Jan and reached out his hand. “May I hold one of them?”

Jan nodded as she smiled. “Certainly,” She offered Kelly to the older man, who willingly accepted the little girl.



Rob entered the brig and stepped up to the security guard. “Has he said anything?”

“No sir. Not since he requested you.”

Rob glanced toward the cell and saw the prisoner sitting on the bunk, looking at the floor. Rob took a deep breath and approached the cell. “You wanted to see me?”

The alien looked up to face Stuart. “If I give you information about Zar-Bek, will you help my family escape Enkar space?”

Stuart saw the pleading of the alien’s facial features. He wanted to help, but he knew that he could not violate the non-aggression pact...or the Prime Directive. “I’m not in a position to do that...as much as I would like to.”

“If you had the means, would you rescue them?”

Stuart studied the Fuval on the other side of the force field. “I’m sorry, but I cannot do anything for your family while they are in Enkara space. The highest law our people have is to not interfere in the internal workings or natural development of other cultures...even if we desired to do so.”

“Did you not interfere when you escaped from Enkar and took Zar-Bek prisoner?”

Stuart pondered the question for a moment before answering. He shook his head. “No, I didn’t. Zar-Bek and the Enkara committed acts of war against us, so the situation is not the same.”

The alien frowned. “Enkara committed acts of war against my people and made us slaves. I see no difference.”

“If your planet was allied with the Federation, then it would be the same,” Stuart said. “If I were to lead a ship into Enkara space, then my people would violate an agreement with Enkar. I sympathize with you, but I am unable to help you.”

“Then I cannot help you. What Zar-Bek has planned will not be revealed.”

“I understand,” Stuart said.

“And will I be executed for my silence?”

“No, that’s not our way. You will stand trial for the murder of my officers, and, if convicted, you will be sentenced to prison.”

“I have been in prison since the Enkara conquered my world. I see no difference.”

“There’s a difference,” Stuart said. “I hope that you will discover that one day.” Stuart turned and left the brig.



Rob Stuart entered his office and sat down as he hit the touchpad on his monitor. “Computer, open a secure channel to 4th Fleet headquarters. I need to speak to Admiral Montoya.”

*“Communication established,”* the computer responded after a few seconds. *“Admiral Montoya is currently unavailable. Do you wish to leave a message?”*

“Yes, begin recording,” Stuart said. “Admiral, I have reason to believe that Zar-Bek may still have a considerable influence and is planning something against us. I don’t know if the legitimate Enkara government is involved or if Zar-Bek is a renegade, but I am putting the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group on alert. Stuart out.” Rob closed the transmission and leaned back in his chair and started to rub his eyes. He swiveled in his chair to face the window and stare at the stars beyond. “Alright, Zar-Bek, what is your game?”

*To be continued...*