

Stardate 57473.9

Admiral Luis Montoya loved surprises but not when he was on the receiving end. Today was a good day because he was the one who was delivering the surprise.

He beamed directly to Starbase *Gateway Alpha*'s CnC, specifically to Admiral Sjögren's office. After a brief greeting, Montoya exited the office and walked through the curved corridor to the office suite where the 3rd *Exploratory Group* headquarters was located. He entered the outer office.

"Admiral Montoya!" Lieutenant Baker snapped to attention. "Sir, I didn't know that you were coming for a visit."

You of all people should know that I occasionally might just show up, Richard." The admiral glanced toward the door to Rob Stuart's officer. "Is the boss in?"

"Not yet, sir. He had a meeting with Captain Grey on the *Monarch*." Baker's previous assignment had been the admiral's aide, so he went to the replicator and ordered a hot cup of coffee with two teaspoons of sugar and one teaspoon of cream. He carried it to the admiral without asking if he wanted it or not. "Here you go, Admiral. Would you like me to contact Captain Stuart?"

Montoya accepted the coffee and he lifted it to his face. After he breathed in the aroma, he said, "You remember just how I like it." He smiled, remembering that Baker had always provided a freshly replicated cup of coffee every day when the younger man had worked at 4th *Fleet* HQ. "Please don't let him know that I'm here. I want to surprise him, too."

"Understood, sir. Would you like to use his office?"

"Yes, thank you," Montoya said. "Do you know when he will be back?"

"He said he would be back by 1015 hours, sir."

Montoya looked at the chrono on the wall, taking note that it was now 0937. "Thank you, Richard. Just act like everything is normal when he arrives."

"Yes, Admiral. Not a word."



To Boldly Go: Changes in the Wind

A 3rd Exploratory Group Story

By Cleve Johnson



Captains Stuart and Grey were sitting in the ready room, the desk separating them. They had been discussing fuel consumption and various other reports as well as the minor maintenance issues that were standard protocol.

“How long will Henry and the rest of the engineering department take to finish maintenance?” Stuart asked his first officer.

Marcus Grey picked up a PADD from the desk and looked at it. “Two days.”

“Good. I have something that I want to talk about, and it concerns you.”

Marcus tilted his head slightly. “Of course, sir. I’m always willing to lend an ear.”

“I have been thinking about this for several weeks, and I have finally come to a decision.”

Marcus had few opportunities to talk with his CO since the incident with the *Enkara*, and he suspected that something was bothering Stuart. He wanted to help if he could.

Stuart took a deep breath. “Marcus, I have decided to transfer command of the *Monarch* to you.”

“Sir?”

“I spend most of my time on *Gateway Alpha* anyway, and I’ve learned that the overall morale of the crew would be better served if the ship was out exploring the many planets and getting to know all the new species in the sectors that we’ve been assigned.”

“But Robert...”

Stuart held up his hand to interrupt Grey’s objections. “No, Marcus, I’ve made up my mind. You’re ready to make the big decisions and have more autonomy. You deserve it. This crew deserves it. No more milk runs...at least for a while.” Stuart smiled as he stood up and reached his arm across the desk to shake his former first officer’s hand. “Congratulations, Marcus.”

Marcus Grey followed Stuart’s lead by standing and accepting the handshake. “Thank you, sir. I don’t quite know what to say.”

“Of course, you will need to find a first officer,” Robert said. “I know that Lieutenant Commander Mills has been doing double duty as tactical officer and second officer as well as acting as your number one when I haven’t been on board, but she still needs more time in her role as the second office. But that is your decision.”

Marcus nodded. “Yes, I agree. Do you know of anyone that might be a good exec?”

“I can put together a list of three or four possible choices, but you should contact the Office of Personnel and post the job opening,” Stuart said. “You will probably have a line of applicants at your door.”

“Robert, what advice do you have about selecting the right person?”

“Look for someone who will complement you in areas that you don’t feel that you are strong and someone who will not always agree with you. Someone that will challenge you...within reason.”

“Thank you, Robert.”

“Anything I can do to help,” Stuart said. “Let’s do the change of command ceremony in Eleven-Forward shortly after Beta shift begins if that gives you time enough to write your acceptance speech.”

“Acceptance speech? Is that necessary?” Marcus was not particularly fond of giving speeches. He would prefer just to accept command of the ship and get to work on the next mission.

Robert smiled as he patted Marcus’s shoulder. “A few words will be fine.”

“Thank you. I am not one to say a hundred words when ten will suffice.”

“That is because you’re an efficient person that doesn’t need a lot of words to get your point across,” Robert said. He tapped his com badge. “Computer, address intercom, all decks and sections. Crew of the U.S.S. *Monarch*, this is Captain Stuart. After several weeks of consideration, I have decided to transfer command of this starship to Captain Grey. I will still be in command of the 3rd *Exploratory Group* but will maintain that command from Starbase *Gateway Alpha*. I believe that this ship and crew will prosper under Captain Grey’s leadership, and I am sure that the sectors that we have opened up to exploration will provide many opportunities for you all to show the exemplary qualities that come with wearing a Starfleet uniform. The change of command ceremony will be held in Eleven-Forward at 1630 hours today. All senior officers and department heads are expected to attend. Thank you. Stuart out.”

Stuart gave another light slap on Grey’s shoulder. “I know that you have a lot to do, but I would like you to take some time to study the logs and reports from the *Alliance*’s first contact with the Joaxians on Stardate 57141. Talk to Captain Jans before the *Alliance* departs at the end of the week.”

“Right away, sir.”



After Stuart disembarked from the ship, he went to his office on *Gateway Alpha*. He walked in and greeted his aide. “Any messages, Richard?”

“No messages, sir.”

“I have some work to do, but I would like you to join me at 1230 hours.”

Lieutenant Richard Baker nodded to his CO. “Aye, sir.”

Stuart approached his office, and when the doors parted, he saw Admiral Montoya sitting on the couch reading a PADD. “Admiral? Richard never said you were here.” He walked farther into the office allowing the doors to slide shut behind him. He walked toward the admiral with an outstretched arm. “What brings you to *Gateway Alpha*?”

Montoya stood and shook Stuart’s hand. “I had business on *Pacifica* and figured that I would drop in since I was in the neighborhood.”

“You’re always welcome to drop in, sir.” Stuart noticed the half-empty coffee cup sitting on the table next to the couch. “Would you like me to freshen that up?”

“I appreciate the offer, but I try to only have one cup between breakfast and lunch. Otherwise, I would be bouncing off the bulkheads.” The admiral sat down, and Stuart sat in one of the cushioned chairs facing the couch. Montoya took a sip from the cup. Setting the cup back on the table, he leaned back and crossed his legs. “I have some good news and some bad news, Robert.”

“Oh? Well, I hope the good news more than balances out the bad.”

“Depends on your perspective,” Montoya said. “Which do you want first?”

“I prefer the bad first. Maybe the good will compensate for it.” Stuart wondered if another threat was brewing. He recently came out of a potentially bad situation with the Enkara, which fortunately turned out better than he had expected, so whatever the admiral was about to tell him would hopefully not be nearly as bad as what *almost* happened.

“Unfortunately, I need to downsize your command. There has been unrest at some of the Cardassian border colonies. We’ve been providing aid to help Cardassia rebuild since the war, but we recently discovered that some of the food and basic supplies are not being delivered to some of the outlying planets where many civilians are struggling to survive.”

“Where are the supplies going, sir?”

“That’s the problem. We don’t know. The Detappa Council insists that each of their colony worlds is being sent the appropriate portion of the supplies that the Federation provides, but most of those supplies are not being dispersed.”

“It wouldn’t surprise me if some of the old guard was behind rerouting those supplies.”

“That is the working theory,” Montoya said. “We are going to start supplying food, clothing, building materials, and industrial replicators *directly* to the colonies; however, we’re stretched pretty thin with our other operations right now. I need to transfer the starships *Alliance* and *Sonak* to help with the relief effort.”

“I understand, Admiral,” Stuart said. “We can adapt and make necessary changes with the remaining ships. We’ll take more time if we have to, but the job will still get done.”

“I hate to do this to you, Robert.”

“Don’t worry, sir. I already planned to send the *Monarch* to Sector Gateway Alpha-02 where the *Alliance* had been assigned. The two crews were going to work together exploring that sector, but The *Monarch* can handle it.”

“That is a long distance away from your family...unless they are going with you.”

“I won’t be on the *Monarch*,” Stuart said. “I decided to transfer command to Captain Grey.”

“What will you do for a flagship?” Montoya asked.

“I can lead the 3rd from right here. I usually do most of the time as it is.”

“If that is what works the best for you, but I prefer that you still have a flagship available for use.”

“Yes, I understand that, but I’ve found that a large ship and crew don’t fit me.” Stuart moved slightly forward to the edge of his chair. “Don’t get me wrong, Luis. I have enjoyed my time on the *Monarch*, and the crew is outstanding. A smaller ship with a smaller crew would be a better fit.”

“I appreciate where you are coming from, Robert.” Montoya smiled as he looked back on the ships that he had commanded. “Those of us who have had the privilege of commanding more than one starship during our careers seem to have one that was special. Maybe when things settle down, I can find you something smaller. It might take some time.”

“I’m in no rush, sir.”

Montoya uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. “We can discuss this further at a later time. Right now, I wanted to share the good news.”

Stuart’s demeanor was laid-back, but he was silently anxious to hear the *good* news.”

“You submitted a recommendation for Richard to be promoted, and it has been approved.” The admiral held up an isolinear chip. “Here is the order.”

“Thank you, Luis. He deserves it, and I suspect that he will find his new role a welcome challenge.” Stuart took the chip from the admiral’s hand. “Would you like to do the honors?”

Montoya smiled widely. “Thank you, I would.”

Stuart went to the replicator and had the computer produce a dark rank pip. He tapped his communicator. “Stuart to Baker. Please report to my office.”

Within a few seconds, the doors slid apart, and Lieutenant Richard Baker entered and snapped to attention.

Admiral Montoya stood and walked up to his former aide.

Stuart stood to the admiral’s side. “Attention to orders.”

Montoya smiled at the officer that he had known for a few years. “It is my pleasure and privilege to promote you to the rank of lieutenant commander effective this stardate.” He shook Baker’s hand vigorously. “Congratulations, Richard. You deserve this.”

Baker’s face started to turn red. “Thank you, Admiral, and thank you, Captain Stuart. I’m not sure what I should say.”

“Well, Lieutenant Commander, I don’t think that I would have made it in my job if it wasn’t for you. I’m going to miss you as my aide.” Stuart stepped close and pinned the dark-shaded pip next to the two golden ones on Baker’s collar.

Baker was unaware that with his promotion he would be getting a new assignment. “Sir? I won’t be working for you anymore?”

Stuart smiled and said, “I didn’t say that you’re not going to be working for me. You’re just not going to be my aide. With higher rank comes more responsibility.” Stuart waited a moment for his statement to sink in. “You are now the 3rd *Exploratory Group* Strategic Operations Officer. You get to hand out the assignments and coordinate the missions for each ship.”

“Captain Stuart. I will do my best.”

“I know that you will. It’s going to be a big job, Richard, so I want you to request a yeoman from station personnel. You will need one.”

“What about a new aide for you, sir?”

“Don’t worry about me, Richard. I’ll find someone soon.” Stuart felt honored that his now-former aide was still looking after him, but he had to make sure that Richard focused on his new duties.

“Well, I at least want to help whoever you choose to learn the ropes.” Baker winked at Stuart. “I need to make sure that he or she knows what you expect and how you like your tea. The important things.”

“He’s right, Robert,” Montoya interjected. “Why don’t you just let Richard find someone to replace him?”

“That would be tempting.” Stuart placed his hand on Richard’s shoulder. “But you need to transition into your new position, and I need to find a new aide that will gel with my personality as well as you do; however, I will allow you to have one day to help my new aide...*learn the ropes*. Deal?”

“Well, okay, Captain,” Richard said reluctantly.

“I want you to take the rest of today off and do something enjoyable,” Stuart said. “Forget about work until tomorrow. Get with some friends and celebrate your promotion.”

“I appreciate that, sir, but I think that I should start my new duties right away.”

“Go have some fun, Lieutenant Commander. That is an order.” Stuart smiled.

Baker returned the smile and said, “Yes, sir. He turned and left Stuart’s office.

Stuart turned toward Montoya. “Where were we?”



1629 Hours

In Eleven-Forward, Fleet Captain Robert Stuart approached the podium that had been set on the dais for the ceremony. He nodded to Captain Marcus Grey, who walked up and stood next to Stuart. The senior officers, department heads, and several other crew members ended their conversations and turned to face the two captains.

Stuart stood erect and looked around the room, thinking about the few friendships that he had made and regretting not getting to know other members of the crew as he had not so long

ago expressed to the senior ship's counselor, Caitlyn Underhill. "Before I officially transfer command to Captain Grey, I would like to say a few words. "A little over two years ago, I took command of this ship. I have been honored to serve with a fine ship and crew, and it is my wish that you continue to do your duty and devote your service to the Federation and the U.S.S. *Monarch* under Captain Grey as you have under me. I'm sure that some of you are wondering if the ship will still be part of the 3rd *Exploratory Group*, and the answer is yes. You will get the opportunity to do more than you have been doing during the last year. You will be making history and discovering new worlds and meeting new species. I know that you will succeed in your mission." Stuart turned to Grey. "Marcus, you have been an outstanding first officer, so I am confident that you will be an outstanding captain. You have already proven yourself to be so."

Marcus Grey nodded his head and quietly said, "Thank you, Captain Stuart."

"Captain Marcus Grey, per Starfleet order 2380-4021 dated this stardate, you are requested and required to assume command of U.S.S. *Monarch*, NCC-88522. Computer, transfer command codes to Captain Grey."

"Computer, this is Captain Marcus Grey. I accept command from Fleet Captain Stuart."

"*Command Codes transferred*," the feminine computer voice responded.

Robert shook Grey's hands, and they stepped away from the podium and off the dais.

Lieutenant Commander Jennifer Mills and Commander Henry Li approached the two men to offer their congratulations to Grey. Other officers made their way to offer best wishes and congratulatory remarks to their new commanding officer and wished Stuart well. Some asked what Stuart's plans were, and others asked where the *Monarch* was being sent.

Young Ian Grey, the only civilian to attend the ceremony, approached his father and reached out to shake his hand. "Congratulations, Captain."

Marcus resisted the urge to mess up his son's hair. "Thank you, son." He cocked his head to one side as he regarded his son. "Ian, let's plan to have dinner at one of the restaurants on *Gateway Alpha*. Tomorrow evening. Just you and me."

Ian smiled as he had wanted to spend time alone with his father. "I would enjoy that, sir."

"Good lad."

Ian walked away as he knew that others would want to speak to his father.

Commander Henry Li, the chief engineer, came up to Stuart, shook his hand, and looked at him for a moment before he said anything. The two men had known each other since they were plebes at Starfleet Academy and had some insight into each other. But Li had not anticipated that his friend would give up command of the *Monarch*. He had only one question for his friend. "Why?"

Stuart shrugged his shoulders. "Why not?"

"You can do better than that, Robert."

Stuart quickly looked around to make sure that no one was too close to overhear before stepping closer to Li and leaning toward him. “Just between us, I have been overwhelmed with commanding a large ship *as well as* the responsibility of leading the 3rd *Exploratory Group*. For now, I need to focus on commanding the group.”

“Any other reasons?”

“The crew needs to do more than hang around *Gateway Alpha* or go on short jaunts to ferry me around for minor assignments. The *Monarch*’s resources and the crew have been underutilized for too long, and the only way to resolve that is for me to leave and let Marcus lead the crew to fulfill what they were trained to do—go where none have gone before.”

“I know that Marcus will do well,” Li said, “but I hope that you will not regret your decision. Robert, I know you, and I know that you need to be out there exploring, too. I remember when we met. You were excited about getting into space and making discoveries. Meeting alien species that no humans had previously encountered.”

“What are you saying, Henry?”

“I’m saying, don’t let your command responsibilities take away your sense of wonder for the unknown. You need to remember why you joined Starfleet and occasionally get out on the front lines of exploration again.”

Stuart appreciated his old friend’s advice, and he knew that Li was right. He also knew that a time was coming when he would take that advice. But that time was not now. “Thank you, Henry. I promise that I will get back on the front lines when the time is right.”

“Then all is left to say,” Henry said, “is good luck, Robert.”



Captain Constance Thorpe entered the bridge of her ship, the U.S.S. *Sonak*. After the turbolift doors closed behind her, she looked around the room and admired the people that she worked with. They had performed well together for more than four years, and her pride in them motivated her to give one hundred ten percent effort to their well-being. She went to the OPS station and stood next to her first officer, Commander Abdul El Sherif. “Commander, anything to report?”

The second-in-command swiveled in his chair and looked up at his CO. “All sections are operating at one hundred percent efficiency, Captain. We are currently heading back to Starbase *Gateway Alpha* at warp six and should arrive by tomorrow afternoon,” he said.

Thorpe already knew the ship’s status and timetable, but she loved to listen to El Sherif’s Middle Eastern dialect. “Thank you, Commander. I’m authorizing shore leave on the station for all personnel when we get back. Can you draw up a rotation schedule?”

“I anticipated that you would grant shore leave, so I have already started working on the schedule, Captain. What duration?”

Connie had always appreciated her first officer's ability to anticipate her orders. They had learned to work well together over the last few years. "I think forty-eight hours per person."

"The schedule will be completed by the time we dock, Captain."

"Thank you." Connie knew that Abdul would have it done when he said it would be done. She could count on it. "Lieutenant Leary, please send a message to Fleet Captain Stuart's officer to update him on our ETA."

"Yes, ma'am," the communication officer said.

Connie went and sat in the command chair. She looked at the small monitor located on the right arm of the chair and activated the control. She started reading that day's reports from the ship's department heads when Lieutenant Leary interrupted her.

"Captain, Fleet Captain Stuart would like to speak with you privately."

Connie stood and started toward the turbolift. "My ready room, Leary."

Connie exited the bridge, took the turbolift one deck down, and went to her ready room. She sat down and activated the monitor on her desk. Rob Stuart's image appeared. "Rob, what can I do for you?"

"I have new orders for you, Connie," Stuart said.

Constance Thorpe saw the look on her old friend's face. She could see that he was hesitant. "You look like you just ate Gagh, Robert. Just tell it to me straight."

"I'm afraid that the Sonak is being reassigned to the Cardassian border colonies to provide food and other needed supplies."

"The war's been over for almost six years and we're still helping the Cardies get on their feet." She shook her head. "How long will this mission last?"

"I don't know, but I suspect that the transfer to the 4th Fleet Relief Group will not be temporary, so don't expect to be coming back."

You know that I have been working hard to build a strong relationship with the Nazar and Oshi, right?"

"Yes, and I appreciate all the work you have done, but I'm going to have to find someone else to be our liaison with those worlds." Stuart looked down at his desk momentarily and looked back to face his friend. *"I'm sorry, Connie."*

"Don't worry about it, Rob. So, do I have to turn my ship around and head for Starbase 214 now, or can I still let my crew have shore leave on *Gateway Alpha*? They need some time off."

"Continue back to the nest, Connie. I would like you to help me find someone to work with the Nazar and Oshi. You can brief me about the Kelosians as well," Stuart said.

Connie forced herself to look somewhat happy about the situation, but she had built a trust with leaders of the Nazar Alliance and invested a lot of time helping the Nazar and Oshi

with their trade agreement. She also had a successful beginning with the Kelosians and had hoped to continue. “Rob, couldn’t the *Alliance* go instead of my ship?”

“*The Alliance is also being reassigned.*”

“What? How does Admiral Montoya expect you to do what he expects you to do in nine sectors with two fewer ships?”

“*We’ll make it work,*” Stuart said. “*Changes in the wind, Connie. We can’t always control the situation.*”

“We can only respond to it the best we can,” Connie said. “I remember Commander LaGrange drilling that into our heads at the Academy.”

“*I wish she was here now. I could use her advice,*” Rob said.

“She was still teaching at the Academy last I knew...if you wanted to get in touch.”

Rob let out a little laugh. “*If I can’t figure it out, then I’ll request her assistance.*”

Connie’s eye had just the hint of a sparkle. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Rob.”

“Tomorrow,” Rob echoed. “Stuart out.” His image faded as the monitor went dark and was replaced by the Federation emblem.



The next day, Captains Grey, Leeson, Thorpe, Storan, Jans, Granger, and Commander Morgenstern sat around the conference table when Fleet Captain Stuart entered the room. He motioned for them to stay seated as he moved to the chair at the head of the table and sat down.

Stuart placed his hands flat down on the tabletop and appeared somewhat tense. He forced himself to relax and eased back in his chair. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he began. “I talked with Captain Thorpe yesterday and told her that there are changes in the wind.” After a brief pause, he sighed. “We have made a lot more progress in the last year than I expected. You and your crews have performed admirably. Captains Storan and Granger, although you have only been with us a few months, I want you to know that your efforts have also been outstanding.”

Both Storan and Thomas Granger, the captains of the two *Nova*-class starships, nodded silently in appreciation.

“As you all have been told, The *Sonak* and *Alliance* have been reassigned to the 4th Fleet proper to help aid the Cardassian border colonies. Admiral Montoya will give you the details when you arrive at Starbase 214.”

Captain Kazed Jans raised his hand. “Sir, I understand that the admiral is here at *Gateway Alpha*, so why doesn’t he brief us now?”

“He left early this morning,” Stuart said. “I know that you were hoping to head back to Joaxia, Kazed, but I would like you to take the next day or two to fill in Captain Grey about the Joaxians, Idrarus, and the other species that you have discovered in Sector Gateway 02 since the *Monarch* will be heading to that area later in the week.”

“Of course, sir.” The Trill captain looked toward Marcus Grey. “My ship or yours, Captain?”

Marcus, abandoning his usual British stoicism, grinned at the Trill. “Based on your reputation for hospitality, I would gladly meet you on your ship.”

“Does 1730 hours work for a working dinner?”

“I will be there.”

Stuart smiled at the jovial exchange between the two officers. “That’s one meeting arranged.” He looked at Melanie Leeson and Constance Thorpe, who sat next to each other. Rob had observed that during the past year, even though they rarely had close contact due to where their ship assignments had taken them, the two women had become friends. “Connie, per our discussion earlier today, I would like you to brief Mel about the Nazar, Oshi, and Kelosians. Be thorough in as much information as you have.” Stuart turned his head slightly to focus on Captain Leeson. “Mel, The *Trailblazer* will be spending a lot of time in the Omicron Ceti and Nazar Sectors. You will also continue to be our liaison to the New Britain Colony. I know that is a lot of territory to cover, but your ship can sustain a higher warp speed for extended periods and cover the distance in less time.”

“What about Ruhl and Neran V, Rob?” Leeson had spent some time with the Ruhl, a species that she had made first contact with, and she had developed a fondness for the Ruhl homeworld and its people. She also wanted to get to know the people of Neran V after her first visit was cut short and her second only allowed her three days with members of the government and the Neran Space Navy.

“Ambassador Chen is still on Ruhl and has everything well in hand, and the *Icarus* is on its way to transport her to a planet called Nu-Tirath, which the Ruhl government has relations with,” Stuart said. “As far as Neran V is concerned, from your report, it seems like you have opened the door for future visits. Lieutenant Commander Baker and I will discuss Neran V and how we will proceed.”

“If possible, I would like to go back there,” Leeson said.

“I’ll take it under consideration, but you don’t want to bite off more than you can chew.”

Leeson smiled. She was aware that she tended to push herself to the limit and sometimes past it. “Message received, Captain,” she said, smiling.

“The U.S.S. *Starquest* is on its way to Suplax. The Incharu have agreed to meet with Captain T’Paski to discuss the possibility of studying their planet.” Stuart looked at Commander Morgenstern. “Saul, it’s because of your first contact with the Incharu that we have this opportunity. Thank you.”

“Just doing my duty, sir.”

“Don’t be so modest, Saul,” Stuart said. “You and your crew have provided a lot of information about Sector Gateway 01, but there’s still almost five thousand cubic light-years to survey. Any problem with that?”

“I don’t like leaving a job undone, Captain,” Morgenstern said. “It will be my pleasure to go back to 01.”

“Glad to hear it, Saul.” Stuart looked around the room and turned his attention to The captain of the starship *Eclipse*. “Captain Storan, how is the Takaria mission going?”

“The botanical and zoological teams have cataloged two thousand four hundred sixty-one species as of Stardate 57392.2,” Storan said. “Lieutenant Jabethu is close to discovering the key to translating the Takarian hieroglyphs, which will greatly aid the archeological team in the search for information about the inhabitants as well as the mystery of their disappearance.”

Lieutenant Jabethu is from Zanaria, correct?”

“Affirmative,” Storan replied.

Stuart knew the reputation of the Zanarians and their proclivity for languages. More than three hundred languages were still used on their planet, and it was common for every Zanarian to fluently read and speak at least a dozen of those languages by the time they reached fourteen years—the age that Zanarian society recognized that its people entered adulthood. “I guess the rumors about their linguistic ability are true.”

“Indeed,” Storan said succinctly. “I surmise that the rumors are underexaggerated.”

“I look forward to hearing more about your progress,” Stuart said. “I expect that you will be returning to rejoin your science teams soon.”

“That is correct, Captain.” Storan, as a Vulcan, had full control of his emotions, so he did not express his concern about leaving about one-fourth of his crew on Takaria with only two shuttles and portable shelters and laboratories at their disposal; however, he did not intend to leave them alone on that uninhabited world any longer than necessary. “The *Eclipse* will be departing as soon as our business here is concluded.”

Stuart nodded. “Very good, Captain.”

“What about the *Solar Flare*, sir?” Captain Thomas Granger asked. Is the geological survey on Gem World still a go?”

“Absolutely,” Stuart said. “The initial scans indicated that there might be an abundance of dilithium there as well as other minerals. I want you and your crew to do a thorough survey of the planet to see if it would be worthwhile for the Federation to set up a mining operation there.”

“When do I leave?”

“At your convenience, Tom.” Stuart figured that the CO of the *Solar Flare* was eager to start his mission. Granger’s assignment as commanding officer of the *Nova*-class starship—his first command—was just given to him eight months prior, and this was a chance to prove himself and his crew. Stuart was glad to see Tom’s enthusiasm.

“Any news from the *Raleigh*, Rob?” Constance Thorpe asked. She had once served with Commander Thel, the Andorian CO of the *Ericsson*-class scout ship, and wondered about him.

“The Raleigh should be crossing from Sector Gateway 02 into Gateway 03 within the next few days,” Stuart said. “Commander Thel has orders to launch a subspace communication buoy a few light-years from his last known position.” Stuart cocked his head to one side as he noticed Captain Thorpe’s face. He could see that she seemed concerned. “Any special reason why you’re asking, Connie?”

Thorpe shook her head. “No. No, I’m just curious. We served together a few years ago, and we became friends. We haven’t been in contact with each other for some time, and I’m missing some of the conversations we used to have.”

Stuart smiled. “Wanting to talk with him before you sail off to the Cardassian border?”

Connie returned Stuart’s smile but did not feel that she needed to answer.

Stuart looked around the table at each of the ship captains. “So, are there any more questions about your assignments?”

After several heads shaking and ‘No’ answers, Stuart stood up. “Well then, I want to wish you all good luck, especially to Captains Thorpe and Jans. I will miss you and your crews’ exemplary service.”

The meeting ended as Stuart exited the conference room and each of the ship captains rose from their chairs and dispersed. The *4th Fleet, 3rd Exploratory Group*’s dynamics were changing, but the captains and crews would face the changes and excel in their resolve to explore the nine sectors assigned to them.

The End