

Stardate 57519.7

Commander Blake Adams finished reading Commodore Gardner's final mission report on the P'Khati relief effort. After two years, the 5th Exploratory Group had spent most of its time providing food and building supplies to help the Runii rebuild the cities in the northern hemisphere after the desolation caused by the Selladon, the parasitic lifeforms inadvertently brought to P'Khati by Runii astronauts. They had no idea that the planet Sella had a dangerous lifeform, nor did they think that their first interplanetary mission would be the catalyst for the loss of life on such a grand scale. Now, the relief mission had ended, and someone at Starfleet Command decided to disband the 5th before the ships had a chance to do much exploring together. *Providence* would still push farther into unknown space beyond the Beta Tongarii and Hurak sectors to map and do quick surveys, and the *Artemis* would do a more in-depth study of several of the planets and sentient species that *Providence* had previously discovered. A few months prior, The *Eclipse* had already been reassigned to the 4th Fleet, 3rd Exploratory Group commanded by Blake's best friend and form CO, Fleet Captain Rob Stuart. If Blake had his way, the *Providence* would be a part of the 3rd so that he would be closer to Stuart and Captain Melanie Leeson, whose ship, the U.S.S. *Trailblazer*, was also part of the 3rd Exploratory Group. The *Majestic*, under Commodore Charles Gardner's command, would visit the Runii every few months to check up on their progress or see if they needed any supplies or food, but the other ships would be reassigned to other areas of responsibility. The *Eclipse* had already been assigned to the 3rd Exploratory Group, and Blake was envious of Captain Storan.

Blake still thought about old friends and acquaintances that were lost along with the U.S.S. *Republic* not long ago when an unknown attacker destroyed it. His stomach did somersaults when he thought about being light-years away from any other Starfleet vessel in unknown territory in a tiny starship. He was concerned about his crew and what might happen to them if they would encounter the unknown hostile species that was powerful enough to take down an *Ambassador*-class starship. He hoped that he...that his ship would not come upon those responsible for the *Republic*'s demise. But if they did, Blake was determined to do whatever it might take to not let *Providence* suffer the same fate.

Blake's thoughts were interrupted by the intercom.

"*Bridge to captain.*" Lieutenant Commander Jada Lightfoot's voice was formal but did not indicate any urgency.

"What can I do for you, XO?"

"*Commodore Gardner is hailing, sir. He said it is important.*"

"Patch him through, Jada."

The monitor on the wall came to life as the commodore's image appeared. "*It's good to see you, Blake.*"

"Good to see you, too, Chuck. We just saw each other last week. Miss me already?"

Gardner smiled. "*I need my weekly fix of Blake Adams.*" His smile faded as he folded his hands and rested his forearms on his desk. "*I have an assignment for you.*"

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To Boldly Go: The Other Foot

A U.S.S. *Providence* Story

By Cleve Johnson

Blake entered the bridge and walked toward the CONN. Placing his hand on Lieutenant Eric Kelly's shoulder, he said, "Change course to zero four eight mark nine. Warp eight."

"Aye, skipper," Kelly responded. "May I ask where we're headed, sir?"

Blake gently squeezed the lieutenant's shoulder and released it. "You may ask." He turned away and started toward the ready room. "Jada, please join me."

"Yes, sir." The first officer followed Blake into the ready room.

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"The commodore has a special mission for us," Blake said as he sat on the edge of his desk. "The U.S.S. *Majestic* detected a transmission coming from a planet in the Hurak sector. He wants us to check it out since we are closer than he is."

Jada rubbed her chin. "What type of transmission, and why didn't we detect it?"

"It seems to be a message, but the *Monarch's* universal translator hasn't been able to decode it yet. The ship's linguist is working on it." Blake stood and started toward the replicator. "Commodore Gardner said that the message was sent in a tight-beam transmission directed toward P'Khati."

"Which explains why he picked it up and we didn't," Jada finished Blake's thought.

"Can I get you something?" Blake asked as he stood in front of the replicator.

Jada shook her head and said, "No, thank you, sir."

Blake nodded and turned to face the device. "Computer, Vanilla Coke with ice." He took the glass of his favorite beverage from the replicator and took a sip before walking back toward his first officer. "Mmm, that's good. You don't know what you're missing, XO."

Jada smiled. "I will have to live with the loss, sir."

"Anyway, the commodore forwarded a copy of the message to see if we might be able to help decipher it."

"We don't have a linguist, and our UT isn't any better than any other vessel, but I will check to see if we have anyone on board that has some experience with languages."

"Sounds good." Blake paused momentarily as he suddenly had a thought. "There's a mystery behind this situation."

"Sir?"

“Why would people on a planet fourteen light-years from P’Khati send a message directly to a planet that hasn’t yet developed FTL propulsion?”

“Good question, sir,” Jada said. “I will pose that question to the team I assign to work on the problem.”

“Very good. I’ll relieve you in an hour.”

“Yes, sir.” Jada turned and left the ready room.



Blake Adams entered the bridge and walked toward the center seat. “Report, XO.”

Lieutenant Commander Jada Lightfoot stood and faced Adams. “We should arrive at the coordinates in roughly four days, eight and a half hours. I assigned Lieutenant Stalesh to head up the team to work on trying to translate the alien message.”

“Stalesh? I thought his specialty is archeology.”

“It is, but he also has experience in interpreting languages. He’s studied various languages, especially several ancient languages that he has seen in some of his discoveries on various worlds.”

“I see.” Blake nodded. “Who else is on the team?”

“Petty Officer Vasko and Petty Officer Jacobs.”

“I understand why Vasko is on the team since she’s the communications technician, but why Jacobs?” Blake asked. “He’s a sensor tech.”

“Yes, sir, but Jacobs is fluent in three languages. The three of them have the most experience with languages on the ship.”

“I trust your judgment, Jada.” Blake cocked his head to one side. “Good job. Now, I believe that it’s my time to take over.”

The corners of Jada’s mouth turned slightly upward. “Thank you, sir. I stand relieved.” She turned and made her way to the turbolift.

“Mister Kelly, I think that it’s time for you to go off shift as well,” Blake said to the senior CONN officer.

“I’m just waiting on Ensign Jamison to report, Skipper,” Eric Kelly said. “I don’t mind staying on duty a while longer.”

“I appreciate it, Eric, but go ahead. I know you and Lieutenant Gonzales have a picnic planned on the holodeck. I wouldn’t want you to be late.”

“Thank you, Skipper.” Eric stood and stepped aside. “Computer, activate the holographic CONN backup.” He smiled at his CO and left the bridge.



Three days later, Jada Lightfoot walked into Holodeck Two, which had been programmed to be a communications lab with all the most advanced linguistic and translation computers. She approached Lieutenant Stalesh at one of the holographic workstations. “How’s it going, Lieutenant?”

“Good evening, Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot,” the Vulcan said as he looked up from reading the data on the workstation monitor. “The petty officers and I are making progress; however, we still have not discovered the key to translating the signal.”

Petty Officer Redzi Vasko approached from one of the other workstations. “I may have found something, sir, ma’am.”

“What have you discovered, Petty Officer?”

“In my analysis, I noticed a repeating pattern in the signal. It occurs precisely every six point three seconds. If we can determine what that repeating pattern means, then we may have found the key to translating the message.”

“Well done,” Stalesh said. “Please continue to follow the direction of your analysis.”

“Yes, sir.” The Trill communications technician turned and hurried back to her station.

“She looks tired,” Jada said. “When was the last time you and your team slept?”

“Petty Officer Jacobs is resting now and will relieve Petty Officer Vasko in one hour thirty-seven minutes.”

“And what about you, Lieutenant?”

“As a Vulcan, I can go several days without sleep.”

Although Jada knew that Stalesh’s reply was a matter of fact, she thought it came across as a little arrogant. Then again, Stalesh probably did not mean anything by it. Humans, including Jada Lightfoot, usually perceived Vulcans as if they thought that they were better than other species. It was just how they communicated—cold, calculated, and logical. “Don’t push yourself too hard. I don’t want you to risk your health.”

“I assure you, Commander, that I will not do anything that will harm me.”

“I’ll take you at your word, Mister Stalesh. Carry on.” Jada turned and walked away. “Computer, arch.” The arch, containing the access panels and holodeck controls appeared and the door opened for the first officer to exit the room.



Jada entered the officer’s lounge and walked up to the bar. The holographic bartender smiled and stepped close to the first officer. Jada sometimes thought how easy it would be to forget that the ‘man’ standing on the other side of the counter was not alive.

“Hello, Commander Lightfoot. What will it be?”

Jada returned the smile. “Saurian Brandy but make sure it’s made with synthehol.”

“Coming right up, Commander.” The hologram walked away toward the replicator.

Jada looked around at the different patrons of off-duty officers and spotted her CO sitting at a table with the ship’s counselor, Lieutenant Commander James Goodman. She knew that Commander Adams saw her when he motioned for her to come to his table. She held up her index finger to signal that she would be there in a moment and turned back toward the bartender who was setting the glass of burgundy-colored liquid on the counter. “Thank you, Sam.”

Sam was the name that Blake Adams had given this particular hologram. He had once said that ‘Sam’ was a good name for a bartender. Jada assumed that Adams got the name from one of his ancient entertainment vids.

Jada walked toward her CO and the counselor. She sat down and set her glass on the table. She noticed that Counselor Goodman had a cup of coffee and that Commander Adams had two glasses—one empty and the other barely half full—of his usual drink of choice. “You rarely drink anything else, do you, Commander?”

“Not usually,” Adams said, grinning. “James and I were just talking about the upcoming crew evaluations. We specifically were discussing Lieutenant Kelly, and I wanted to know your thoughts.”

“He’s a fine officer and excels at his job. He gets along well with everyone that I’ve seen him with.”

“Especially with Lieutenant Gonzales,” Blake interjected.”

Jada grinned. “I suppose so.”

“Do you think that he’s ready for more responsibility?”

“He’s the senior flight officer. He already has a lot of responsibility.”

“James, tell Jada what you told me,” Blake said.

“Well, I obviously won’t divulge anything that Mister Kelly has shared with me during a routine counseling session, but I can tell you that he’s the type of man that needs new challenges on occasion. And I think that he’s at the point where he’s ready to move his career up a notch.”

Jada nodded and turned to Blake. “Then I agree. We should reward initiative. What additional duties do you suggest, sir?”

“I was thinking about increasing the number of shifts he serves on the duty officer rotation to four shifts each week. I would like to see him have the opportunity to eventually command an occasional away mission. Would you be willing to take him under your wing to prepare him?”

“Of course, sir.” Jada picked up her glass and took a swallow. “I’ll put a training schedule together right away.”

Blake held up his hand. “Whoa, Jada. I don’t want you to let him know that you’re training him. Be subtle about it.”

“Why?”

Blake smiled. “I like that kid, but I don’t want to appear that I’m giving him preferential treatment.”

Jada gave a nod and a slight grin. “Understood, sir.”



The next day, Blake and Jada entered the bridge together and took their respective chairs at the center of the bridge. Blake turned his chair to face the engineering station. “Mary, what’s our status?”

“We will arrive at our destination in just under four hours, sir.”

“Any word from Lieutenant Stalesh?”

“No, sir.”

Jada shook her head. “He’s cutting it close. I thought that he and his team would have finished by now.”

As if he had heard the summons, the turbolift doors opened and Lieutenant Stalesh entered the bridge. “Commander Adams, Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot, I apologize for the lateness of my report.”

“Have you translated the message?” Jada asked expectedly as she stood to face the young officer.

“We have, Lieutenant Commander.” Stalesh handed a PADD to the first officer.

Jada accepted the PADD, activated it, and started to read out loud. “The alien spacecraft have left Haktano except for one. We continue to monitor the situation. The retrieval ship has been dispatched and will land at the pre-arranged coordinates one rotation after the last alien ship has withdrawn. Prepare to shut down operations and bring the study samples to Brazgaar.”

Blake’s eyes drew close together, his forehead began to wrinkle. “That’s it? Nothing else?”

“One more thing, Commander. There’s a reply originating from P’Khati,” Jada said as she started to read again. “Message received. The aliens are intending to leave within two *Haktano* rotations. All samples gathered are in stasis and ready for retrieval. *Grotesik* will complete his surveillance of planetary leaders in twelve *venrada*.”

Blake pondered the message. “I noticed that a few words were not translated. What is *Haktano*? *Grotesik*? What was the last word?”

“*Venrada*,” Stalesh said. “From the context, it appears that it is a time measurement. The other words are proper nouns. Petty Officer Jacobs suggested that *Haktano* might be the message originator’s name for P’Khati.”

“And the word...*Grotesque*?” Blake asked. He deliberately mispronounced the name to see if anyone would catch it. He still enjoyed joking with this crew on occasion.

“*Grotesik*,” Jada and Stalesh corrected their CO simultaneously. “It is another proper noun--possibly the name of a person,” the Vulcan said.

Blake nodded. “Maybe a partner of the person speaking.”

“That is my hypothesis as well, Commander.”

“Good work, Lieutenant,” Blake said. “You and the two petty officers can consider yourselves off duty for the next twenty-four hours to get some well-deserved rest.”

“I will pass on your words to Petty Officers Jacobs and Vasko.”

“Very good. Dismissed.” As Stalesh turned and started toward the turbolift, Blake looked at Jada. “Transmit the message to Commodore Gardner on a secure channel and request further orders. You can use my office.”

Jada nodded and went into the commander’s ready room.

Blake, still seated, crossed his legs. “Eric, maintain course but reduce speed to warp five so that the commodore has time to reply.”

Lieutenant Eric Kelly entered the information into the CONN. “Reducing speed, Skipper.”



Jada returned to the bridge and sat in her chair to Blake’s right. Leaning close to her CO and speaking softly, she said, “Commodore Gardner wants us to hold position until he can speak to P’Khati’s prime minister about aliens on his planet.

“Knowing Chuck, he’s probably curious to find out if the Runii are aware that there are other aliens on their planet besides those of us in the Federation.” Blake turned his head to the CONN. “Take us out of warp and bring us to a full stop, kid.”

Eric Kelly smiled. *He still calls me ‘kid.’* “Aye, skipper.”

As the ship came to a complete stop, Blake stood and looked at the first officer. “The bridge is yours, XO.” He made his way to the turbolift and as soon as the door closed, he ordered the computer to take him to his quarters.



“Sorry I’m late.” Eric sat down across the table from Lieutenant Maria Gonzales. “Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot wanted to talk with me about adding a couple more shifts as O.O.D. starting next week.”

“I guess your recent promotion came with a price,” Maria said. “You won’t get any reduction in CONN shifts, will you?”

“I hope not. You know how much I love to fly.”

“And I suppose that means we won’t have as much time together if you are working more double shifts.” Maria did not mean her words as an accusation but as a statement of fact.



Eric took it as an accusation. He started to feel a little anger welling up from within, but when he looked into Maria's eyes, he realized that there was no blame there. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For not having enough time to spend with you."

Maria smiled and placed her hand on his. "That's life in Starfleet, Eric. You don't need to apologize. We'll just make the most of the time we have."

"I still feel bad." Eric gently squeezed her hand moved his chair closer to Maria's. He leaned toward her and kissed her, which she gratefully reciprocated. There were a few other officers in the lounge, but Eric didn't care if they saw him express his feelings for Maria.

As she drew away, Maria smiled. "That felt good."

"Want me to kiss you again?"

"First, we eat a nice dinner." Maria teasingly looked Eric in the eye. "I worked through my lunch, and I'm starved."

Eric quickly gave her a peck on the cheek and stood up. "What would you like?"

Maria thought about what she had a taste for. "I'm in the mood for Chicken Fettuccini Alfredo with a side of broccoli."

"I'll be right back." Eric went to the replicator retrieved Maria's requested food and a plate of Chicken Parmigiana for himself. He returned to the table, set both plates down, and smiled. "Dinner is served. What would you like to drink?"

"Ice water will be fine."

Eric went back to the replicator and returned with two glasses of water, handing one to Maria. "Here you go, Maria. I'm surprised that you didn't want some wine since you had a rough day."

Maria cocked her head as she was getting ready to take a bite. Lowering her fork, she said, "How did you know I had a rough day?"

"You said you didn't have lunch. You wouldn't skip lunch unless you were extremely busy."

"Ah, so you think you know me that well." Maria was teasing, but she was glad that Eric noticed little things about her. It was a sign that he was drawing closer. "Well, it was busy but not rough. I'm studying some of the rock samples that I discovered on P'Khati several weeks ago."

Eric nodded as he chewed his food. After swallowing, he said, "Anything unusual about P'Khati's geological makeup?"

"One or two unusual elements that have me baffled." Maria shook her head as she put her fork down and reached over to squeeze Eric's arm. "Thanks for showing an interest in my work, but let's not talk shop, okay? Let's just enjoy our dinner and spend time together."

Eric, although he was interested in learning what Maria did while on duty, was glad that she wanted to focus on him and their time together off duty. “After we’re done eating, want to take a walk or go to the holodeck?”

“Why not both? We could go to the holodeck and take a walk through Starfleet Memorial Park in virtual San Francisco.”

“Great idea. I spent a lot of time there when I was at the Academy. I miss the place.” Eric started to eat again but frequently glanced in Maria’s direction. He knew that his feelings for her were growing, and he hoped that hers were also growing toward him.



Blake awoke after a peaceful night’s sleep. He got up made his way to the head and got ready to greet a new day. After taking a soothing sonic shower, he dressed in what he considered his favorite uniform. Of course, all his uniforms were identical except for the dress whites, but he still had one uniform that he considered his favorite.

He went to the replicator to order breakfast, his usual two eggs over medium with one slice of lightly buttered toast and two strips of bacon, and he sat down at the small table to eat. When finished, Blake returned the dishes to the replicator to be recycled. He brushed his teeth and tapped his combadge. “Adams to bridge.”

Lieutenant Mary Goodman’s voice responded. “*Bridge, what can I do for you, Commander?*”

“Good morning, Mary. Any word from the commodore?”

“*Not yet, sir. Shall I contact the Majestic?*”

“No, that’s not necessary. He will contact us when he knows something and has further orders.” Blake scratched his head. The one thing that he did not like about some missions was the waiting to find out what the next move would be. “I’m on my way, Mary.”



Blake arrived on the bridge and was greeted by Mary Goodman, who had served as the O.O.D. during Gamma Shift. She stood and surrendered the COs chair to Blake. “Anything to report?”

“It was an uneventful night, sir.”

“You mean it was boring?”

Mary smiled and nodded.

“I relieve you, Lieutenant,” Blake said.

Mary nodded her head once again and said, “I stand relieved.” She took a few steps to the engineering station and deactivated the holographic engineer.

Blake looked around the small bridge and wondered why the rest of the shift changed before he arrived, but then he looked at the chrono on the arm of his chair. He was almost two

minutes late. He made a mental note to have the computer wake him earlier so he would make it to the bridge before the change of shift going forward. He noticed that his first officer was missing, which was not normal for her. "Has anyone seen the exec?"

"My apologies, sir. Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot contacted me earlier and said she would be delayed this morning. She said that she needed to meet with Lieutenant Stalesh."

Blake had given Stalesh and his team time off so that they could rest after all the hard work. He wondered what was so important that Jada would interrupt Stalesh's rest time.

The turbolift doors slid apart, and Jada entered the bridge. She quickly took her seat next to Blake. "Sorry I'm late, Commander."

"What was so important that you had to meet with Mister Stalesh when he was supposed to be off duty?" Blake's tone and words were not meant as a reprimand, but he saw in Jada's eyes that she took them as such.

"Sir, Lieutenant Stalesh contacted me because he had found something else in the alien transmission that the team missed before."

Blake waited a moment to see if Jada was going to continue. "And?"

"And he said that there was an additional message hidden in an encrypted level below the first message."

"What did it say?"

"It was in the reply from those on P'Khati. It said, 'Essential mineral found. If the quality is sufficient, we recommend that mining operations begin immediately.'"

"Excuse me, skipper." Eric turned around to face the commander.

"What is it, kid?"

"Maria, I mean Lieutenant Gonzales, mentioned that there were some unusual elements in some of the rocks that she was studying."

"Rocks from P'Khati?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, kid." Blake turned to the science station. "Please have Lieutenant Gonzales report to the bridge."

Lieutenant Commander T'Les acknowledged the order and contacted Gonzales.

Moments later, Maria walked out of the turbolift. "You wanted to see me, Commander?"

"Mister Kelly said that you had mentioned that you had discovered some unusual elements among the rocks samples from P'Khati. What can you tell us?"

Maria shook her head slowly as she thought about her analysis up to this point. "A few of the samples have minerals that I am unfamiliar with. No record of these minerals is in the LCARS geological database nor anything that resembles them."

“Sounds like you might have discovered something new, Lieutenant.” Blake smiled at the ship’s geologist. “Anything that you can tell us about those minerals, their properties?”

“I’ve been running tests on the samples for almost two weeks, but the only thing that I’ve found so far is a non-radioactive energy signature.”

“How strong is the energy signature, lieutenant?” T’Les asked.

“Not more than a one hundred fifty to one hundred sixty joules, but I only have small samples to analyze.”

Blake nodded. “Keeping working on it, Lieutenant. Anything that you learn will be helpful.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll get right on it.” Maria turned and left the bridge.

“Sir,” Mary Goodman interrupted, “I received a response from the *Majestic*. Commodore Gardner says that the Runii peacekeepers are searching for the aliens. He wants us to proceed to the planet where the message originated and attempt contact with the sender.”

“Well, back to work people,” Blake said. “Eric, resume course; warp five.”



The starship *Providence* came out of warp just outside of the star system and proceeded toward the fifth planet, the source of the alien transmission, at three-quarter Impulse speed. On the bridge, the crew watched the planet gradually grow larger on the viewscreen.

Blake wondered what kind of reception the aliens would give. “Mary, call your husband to the bridge, please, and then hail the planet. Let’s see if they want to talk to us.”

“Aye, sir.” Mary Goodman did as she was ordered. “James is on his way.”

Several seconds went by with no response. It was little more than a minute when James arrived, but the aliens were not as prompt. Blake did not need to turn around to see that Lieutenant Commander James Goodman was not standing behind him. “Sense anything, Counselor?”

James thought Blake’s question was meant to be a joke since Blake knew that James was only one-quarter Betazoid and could only pick up others’ emotions from a short distance, a few meters away at best unless the emotions were intensely strong. “Sorry, Skipper.”

“No need to apologize.” Blake fixed his eyes on the planet. “Mister Kelly, standard orbit. Mary, hail them again.”

Both officers acknowledged and carried out their tasks. After several more seconds of silence, Mary Goodman said, “Sir, I am receiving a feedback signal indicating that someone is listening but not saying anything.”

“They must be shy,” Blake said. “T’Les, anything on sensors?”

“Yes, sir. The planet has several advanced cities on all four continents. The planet’s gravity is zero point nine one of Earth’s, and oceans make up seventy-six percent of the surface. The population is more than two billion. The technology level is comparable to ours.”

“Skipper, a ship just launched from the surface and the projected flight path will match our orbit,” Eric Kelly said from the CONN station. “I’ve never seen anything fly through an atmosphere at that speed with no apparent air friction.”

“How fast?”

“Almost fifty-eight kilometers per second, skipper.”

Blake’s eyes widened as he pushed his back in his chair. “No way can a ship travel through an atmosphere that fast!”

“Sensors confirm the craft’s speed at fifty-six point seven three kilometers per second, Commander.” Without her Vulcan discipline, T’Les would have displayed an incredulous look as did the others on the bridge. “Although the aliens possess a technology level similar to ours, it is quite different. The ship appears to possess some form of anti-gravity drive system, and the hull is made out of an alloy that is unknown to Federation science. The engine core is made of the same elements found in Lieutenant Gonzales’s rock samples.”

“That’s interesting.”

“The ship is slowing, skipper,” Eric said as he struggled to keep his voice steady. “It’s now come to a complete stop relative to our position. Distance: twelve kilometers.”

“Should I raise shields, skipper?” Lieutenant Yoshi Nakamura had been quiet to this point, but he was ready to activate shields and weapons at a moment’s notice.

“Raise shields. Do *not* lock weapons but keep them on standby.” Blake wanted to be ready to defend his ship, if necessary, but he did not want to provoke the aliens into a fight if it could be avoided. “Mary, hail them again.”

“All frequencies are open.”

“This is Commander Blake Adams of the United Federation of Planets starship *Providence*. We come to your planet in peace.” As soon as he said it, he remembered a similar dialogue from several mid-Twentieth Century science fiction motion pictures. What he just said sounded just as comical as some of those old films. “We are on a mission to discover other lifeforms, such as yours, to learn and create mutual understanding and friendships.”

“We are being scanned, Commander,” T’Les said.

Blake turned in his chair toward the sciences station. “Through our shields?”

“Yes. I am endeavoring to isolate and block files containing classified information and technical specifications.”

Blake nodded and turned back to face the image of the alien ship. “We know that you are scanning us, and we are willing to share *some* information with you, but it is impolite to do so without our permission.”

“They are still scanning us, Commander.”

“Then return the favor, T’Les.” Blake turned to Jada at his right. “Thoughts?”

“We don’t know anything about them. And we can assume that they know nothing of us,” Jada said.

“That we know of,” Blake replied.

“That we know of,” Jada echoed. “Maybe they don’t want to communicate with us until they find out all they can through sensor scans.”

Blake and the rest of the bridge crew observed the saucer-shaped vessel on the viewer. None of them could discern any visible engines or anything that resembled warp nacelles. The sun reflected off of the ship’s silvery metallic hull.

“A verbal message is coming in, sir. Audio only,” Mary Goodman said.

“On speakers.”

“Welcome to Brazgaar,” a voice said. “We are Fwelev. Our analysis of your records indicates that you and we are alike in our desire to explore and study other species. We invite you to our planet for further dialogue.”

Blake thought about the possible scenarios and the consequences of accepting the aliens’ invitation. “We need time to consider your invitation. I will contact you shortly.”

“You are curious but cautious,” the alien said. “Your request is acceptable. We await your reply.”

Blake turned to Mary and ran his finger across his throat to indicate that he wanted her to end the transmission. He stood and walked to the front of the bridge and turned to face everyone. “Okay, I want opinions, so don’t be shy. T’Les, what do you think?”

The Vulcan science officer quickly calculated the risk factor in her mind before she replied. “With little information, we can only guess the motives of the Fwelev. It would be logical to accept their offer to discover their intentions.”

“Yoshi?”

Lieutenant Yoshi Nakamara slowly shook his head. “Skipper, I advise caution. If we accept, their invitation, we open up the possibility of them taking hostages.”

“We could invite them here, Skipper,” Eric Kelly said. “Keep them where we can control the situation.”

“That might insult them, Mister Kelly.” Counselor James Goodman crossed his arms. “How many times have we asked for others to trust us? Maybe we should give this species the benefit of the doubt.”

“Mary?” Blake looked to the OPS officer and chief engineer. “What are your thoughts?”

“I see both arguments as valid, but I’m not sure which is the best course, sir. Part of me wants to trust the aliens and take their invitation as benign, but I also think we need to be cautious.”

“Jada?”

“We need to be cautious, but we all know that being in Starfleet means that we take risks.”

“Not unnecessary risks,” Yoshi said.

“I would consider this a necessary risk, Lieutenant,” Jada said. She appreciated the dissenting opinions, but her science background caused her to want to meet the aliens face to face and find out as much as she could. She wanted to know why they had some of their people on P’Khati. She turned to face her CO. “I know the decision is yours, Commander, but I would like to accept their invitation.”

T’Les stood up next to her station and placed her hands behind her back. “Sir, I too would like to accept.”

Blake nodded and turned around to face the viewscreen. “Mary, please reestablish communication.” The viewer still showed the image of the alien vessel as the aliens had not yet provided visual contact. “This is Commander Blake Adams again. We accept your invitation to come aboard your vessel for transport to your planet. My first officer and a few of my crew will be ready to transport to your spacecraft in a few minutes.”

The viewscreen image of the saucer-shaped alien spacecraft began to fade and was replaced by an image of what Blake assumed was the alien bridge. Four aliens were in the background standing at various consoles, and one alien, presumably the commanding officer, faced Blake, who noticed that the Fwelev species was similar in appearance to the fictional aliens that appeared in some Twentieth Century motion pictures and television shows. Blake estimated their height as slightly shorter than most humans. The aliens had large heads and eyes. They were bald but the exposed areas of their skin, which was light-caucasian colored with mottled reddish splotches. Blake noticed that each alien that he could see had a similar splotch pattern. He could see more features of those in the background. He could not see their feet, but the aliens wore gloves that revealed the shape of clawed hands, which Blake assumed revealed the actual shape of their hands. Each wore an identical uniform, which looked like the material was a combination of metal and shining cloth.

“Would you prefer to use your matter transportation device or ours?”

“If you will supply coordinates, we will use ours.” One thing the aliens revealed was that they have transporters, which answered one of Blake’s questions about Fwelev technology.

“We will send you the precise coordinates. We will allow you to bring any devices that you require since you are a curious species as are we.”

“Thank you,” Blake said. He wondered if the aliens would be offended if the members of the away team were armed. As soon as he had the thought, the alien on the viewer addressed his concern.

“Your delegates may bring weapons for self-defense if it makes them more comfortable.”

“Thank you again. I will contact you when my people are ready to transport.”

“That is not necessary, Commander Blake Adams. We will know when to expect them.”

The transmission ended and Blake went back to sit down in the center seat. He faced Jada and said, “Choose your away team, XO.”

Jada looked at the security chief. “Mister Nakamara, I would normally want you on an away mission, but I think it best if you stay on the ship...just in case the Fwelev are not as friendly as they seem.”

“I will have Lt. J.G. Patrick and a couple of enlisted security people meet you in the transporter room.” He was not happy about not going, but he understood the first officer’s reasons.

“T’Les,” she said as she turned toward the science officer, who still stood beside her, “you’re with me.”

“With your permission, Lieutenant Commander, I would like Lieutenant Onar to join us.”

Jada thought the science officer’s request was reasonable. It would be good to have an exobiologist along to help ascertain information on a newly discovered lifeform. “Agreed.” She tapped her combadge. “Doctor Matal, please report to Transporter Room Two for away team duty.” She started toward the turbolift to join Lieutenant Commander T’Les, who had already entered it, when she stopped and turned back to look at the CONN. “Mister Kelly, would you like to get a chance to find out how that ship flies?”

Eric smiled and got out of his chair. “I would love to, ma’am.” He called for a relief CONN officer to come to the bridge as he joined Jada and T’Les in the turbolift.

Before the doors shut, Blake spun around in his chair to face the three officers. “Be careful and find out all you can about the Fwelev. Most of all, find out why they have people on P’Khati.”

Jada nodded. “Yes, sir.”

As the turbolift doors closed, James Goodman placed his hand on Blake’s shoulder. “You’re worried about something, Blake.”

“I have a gut feeling that these aliens are sincere in what they’ve said, but there’s still something I can’t put my finger on.”



The away team materialized in a dimly lit room. T'Les immediately opened a tricorder and started scanning. "Internal atmosphere similar to ours with trace unknown elements. My tricorder does not penetrate the walls, so I cannot scan what is on the other side."

Jada looked around the room. The silver metallic walls were plain and undecorated. A round metallic table surrounded by nine metallic stools dominated the center of the room. No other furniture or decoration was present. "Conference room?"

"A logical assumption, Commander," T'Les said.

Only one door separated the room and whatever was on the other side. It opened to reveal the alien that had previously appeared on the *Providence's* bridge viewscreen walked in. The two enlisted security men, Petty Officer Seamus O'Connor and Crewman Alexander Watts, both placed their hands on the hilt of their phasers. Lieutenant J.G. Timothy Patrick, the assistant chief of security, noticed and turned his head toward them. He slowly shook his head.

The alien did not see what the security men did, but he knew that they were preparing to defend the Federation visitors. "Your weapons will not be necessary. I mean no harm to you."

Lieutenant Patrick moved his head to watch the alien whose face was void of expression. Jada, also with a neutral expression took one step forward. "Thank you for your invitation. We look forward to learning about you and providing you with information about us." She stepped to one side and half-turned toward the rest of the away team. "I am Lieutenant Commander Jada Lightfoot, second in command of the Federation starship *Providence*. With me are Lieutenant Commander T'Les, ship's science officer, Lieutenant Bel Onar, exobiologist, Doctor Rasa Matal, Lieutenant Eric Kelly, CONN officer, Lieutenant J.G. Timothy Patrick, our ship's assistant security chief, Petty Officer Seamus O'Connor, and Crewman Alexander Watts, also of our security department."

"Yes, we are acquainted with each of you." He looked at T'Les. "You have a disciplined mind."

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow. "You are telepathic." She had sensed that the alien had been trying to enter her mind, so she had blocked the intrusive thoughts.

"Yes." The Fwelev did not react to T'Les's revelation, nor did he try to explain his attempted actions. He turned his head toward Eric. "You are curious about how our ship navigates. We will show you."

"Thank you; I would like that."

Jada started to ask the alien's name, but before she could open her mouth, he looked at her and said, "I am called Dweless."

"I am interested in your physiological makeup as a species," Lieutenant Bel Onar, the Bolian exobiologist said. "Are you willing to provide information about your species?"

"We will make our medical database available to you."

“We appreciate your willingness to share information about you and your people,” Jada said. I am curious about your interest in P’Khati.”

“Like you, we are curious about other species,” Dweless said. “We have studied that world for many revolutions around its star.”

“What is your interest in the Runii people?” Doctor Matal asked. “Is it just curiosity?”

“They are an interesting people; however, our interest is in Hakteno—the planet you and the native people refer to as P’Khati. We discovered an abundance of the mineral Boref Gres. It is a necessary element in the production of our spacecraft.”

Eric Kelly’s eyebrows drew together as he assumed the implication that the alien was making. “You plan on mining the mineral from the Runii’s planet?”

Dweless turned his attention to Eric and spoke with no change in facial expression. “Yes, once we reveal ourselves to the people and gain their permission.” He turned back to face Jada Lightfoot. “They have a resource that we need. We sent a research team to their planet to study the people as well as their world; however, once our researchers discovered an abundance of Boref Gres, we decided that we would make contact with the people after they had become mature enough to accept the existence of life beyond their world. We expected that it would be another sixty to eighty revolutions around their star before they would be ready for us to reveal ourselves, but your people’s contact with the Runii has greatly advanced our timetable.”

“Are you saying that you are going to make first contact with them?” Jada already suspected the answer to that question before she asked it. Her suspicion was correct.

Dweless nodded. “Yes. Now that your people are leaving, we will make preparations to contact their leaders after we retrieve our research team and assimilate their data.”

Eric felt his heart starting to pound. “What if the Runii decide not to allow you to mine the mineral from their world?”

“We can be persuasive.”

That sounds like a threat, Eric thought.

Dweless peered into Eric’s eyes. “We will not take Boref Gres by force. We will open a dialogue with them and try to persuade them to allow us to mine the mineral from their world. We have the means to provide them with several beneficial forms of compensation in return.”

“The United Federation of Planets has designated P’Khati as a protected planet,” Eric said with a hint of a warning in his tone.

“Lieutenant!” Jada stared at the younger officer with a warning of her own.

Eric’s countenance softened as he looked down momentarily before facing the alien again. “I apologize, Dweless.”

Dweless cocked his head to one side and said, “I am not familiar with what you call ‘apologize.’”

Eric tried to figure out how to explain. “It means that I...regret what I said. Specifically, I regret the tone of voice I used.”

“Ah, I think that I understand. There is no need. I am not offended by your concern that my people might harm the Runii. We will not invade and conquer them as you imagine.”

Wanting to change the subject, Lieutenant Bel Onar interrupted. “May I scan you to get some information about your physiology?”

Dweless nodded. “You have my permission to do so.

The Providence’s exobiologist. Opened his scanner and held it close to the Fwelev.

“Dweless, We appreciate your willingness to help us understand you and your people,” Doctor Matal said. I am interested in your physiology, but I’m also curious about your medicines and how you treat illnesses.”

“We do not have illness on our world.”

“What about accidents? How do you treat injuries?”

“Some Fwelev can use their telepathic powers to expedite physical healing in others in rare occurrences of bodily injury.”

“I’m curious about how long your people live.”

“I suspect hundreds of years if what my tricorder shows is correct,” Bel Onar interjected.

“You are correct,” Dweless said. “I have seen two hundred ninety-seven revolutions of our star. Some Fwelev have attained more than four hundred revolutions. Few have surpassed four hundred seventy.”

“It is not unusual for my species to exceed two hundred,” T’Les said. “Human lifespan averages one hundred twenty-seven and Bolians average one hundred two.”

“The diversity of your United Federation of Planets is intriguing. Fwelev have not previously encountered species that cooperate for mutual benefit to the extent that your people do.”

Jada smiled. “We still have our differences to work through. Some species are more argumentative than some of us would prefer.”

Dweless saw an image in Jada’s mind of a Tellarite engaging in a heated debate with a Bajoran over his beliefs in spiritual entities that lived inside a wormhole near his homeworld. The memory was an interaction that took place on a Federation space station four years before Jada became the first officer of the starship that now orbited Brazgaar. “It is curious that your differences do not destroy your Federation.”

“We have found that our differences are what gives us strength,” Jada said.”

“My people live by the philosophy of the IDIC—infinite diversity in infinite combinations,” T’Les said.

Dweless looked into the Vulcan's eyes. "You have telepathic abilities to a lesser extent than Fwelev; however, you can block me from hearing your thoughts."

"Yes, due to years of mental discipline. My people prefer to keep our thoughts private and share them with few others outside of our families and those who are our closest friends."

"Interesting," Dweless said. "Fwelev are open to each other and the thoughts of all species that we have encountered."

"There are some telepathic species within the Federation, such as the people of Betazed, who are open to one another, but they understand that most other people within the Federation want to keep their inner thoughts private. Most of our societies find the idea of those with telepathy entering another person's mind invasive and, well, rude behavior," Jada said.

Looking at Eric, Dweless said, "It is my turn to apologize if I have given offense."

Eric nodded. "No need."

"Come and see our planet and learn about us."



Blake entered the transporter room and stood next to Chief Petty Officer John McKinney at the console. "How you doing, Mac?"

Tiptop, Commander. You?"

"That depends on what the XO has to report." Blake patted the transporter chief on the back. "Have they signaled?"

"Not yet. We still have a couple of minutes before the prearranged check-in."

"I can set my chronometer to her," Blake said.

McKinney smiled and started to reply when a light on the console started blinking followed by a familiar beeping sound. "She's early. He opened the communication with a press of one of the touchpads. "*Providence*; go ahead Lieutenant Commander."

"The away team is ready to beam up."

"Energizing." Chief McKinney skillfully worked the transporter controls and swiped his hand over the panel to activate the beam.

It only took a few seconds for the away team to materialize on the transporter pads. Jada stepped down to the deck first and walked to stand in front of the transporter control station. "Thank you, Chief." She turned to face Blake. "Commander Adams, I expected to meet you on the bridge."

"You should know by now that I like to *occasionally* do the unexpected," he said. "What did you find out?"

"Sir, I would like to prepare a formal report."

"I will look forward to reading it but give me the short version."

“Their technology is quite advanced. They claim to be like us in matters of curiosity, and from what we learned about them in the time we had, I would have to agree. They set up a research base of operations on P’Khati almost thirty years ago to study the Runii, but their priorities changed when they were taking rock samples. They discovered a mineral that they call Boref Gres, which they say is what they use in the manufacture of their spacecraft. Dweless, the person we talked with, said that they have not found as much of this mineral on any planet that they have visited other than their own.”

“What do you think their intentions are?” Blake asked.

“They plan to contact the Runii government and negotiate mining rights.”

“That’s what they said, but I don’t know if we can trust them,” Eric added.

Jada quickly turned around and faced the CONN officer. “Mister Kelly, I am giving the report. You will have your chance.”

“Yes, Commander,” Eric said. “I apologize for interrupting.”

“Please continue, XO,” Blake said as he rested one hand on the edge of the transporter console.

Jada turned back to Blake and took a deep breath. “I don’t think they mean any harm to the Runii, and Dweless did say that his people would compensate the Runii for their cooperation.”

Blake glanced at the science officer. “Lieutenant Commander T’Les? Your thoughts?”

T’Les stepped closer to Blake and Jada. “I observed no evidence of subterfuge, Commander. The Fwelev appear to be as curious as they claim. They were willing to share information about their purpose on P’Khati and information about their society and technology. They are a telepathic race. My only concern is that they seemingly have no qualms about reading the minds of others.” T’Les paused. “I was able to block his attempt to probe my mind even after I indicated that Vulcans and other species valued the privacy of their thoughts.”

“Other than being rude, do you think that they pose a danger to the Runii?”

“It is illogical to assume that they pose a threat without direct evidence to the contrary, Commander; however, I think that it would be prudent for Commodore Gardner to have a Starfleet presence at the Fwelev’s introduction to the Runii.”

“I’ll pass on your recommendation to the commodore along with everyone’s reports.” Blake nodded his head toward Lieutenant Rasa Matal. “Doctor? Do you have anything to add?”

The medical officer shook her head. “Not at this time, sir. I need time to study the tricorder scans I took.”

Blake looked to the Bolian standing next to the doctor. “Mister Onar?”

“Their anatomy is interesting, sir. I, too, need time to analyze my scans, but I will say that their brain structure is quite unique compared to most sentient life forms that I am familiar with. Physiological, there are not many surprises, but they do have interesting eye configurations.”

“Oh? How so?”

“They can see various spectrums that are beyond that of other humanoids. Also, one eye is blue, and the other is green.” He let out a small chuckle. “It was quite a sight, Commander.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Blake grinned as he turned toward Eric Kelly. “Kid? I know that you have something to say, so you might as well speak your peace.”

“I’m wondering what gives them the right to spy on the Runii...or any other group of people?”

T’Les crossed her arms and took a step towards Kelly. “Lieutenant, the Fwelev are not doing anything that the Federation has not done many times. We have covertly observed many less-developed races through hidden research centers and personnel posing as indigenous people. You would do well to study the missions to Mentaka and Melcor as well as dozens of others that the Federation has conducted.”

“She has a point, Lieutenant,” Jada said.

Blake smiled. “The shoe is on the other foot, wouldn’t you say, Eric?”

Eric blushed. “I guess I didn’t see it that way, Skipper. I will try to keep an open mind.”

“Good,” Blake said. “Okay, everyone, gather your thoughts and write your reports. I would like them finished by 0900 tomorrow. I will review and forward them to Commodore Gardner. Dismissed.”



Captain’s Log, Stardate 57531.8

Commodore Gardner informed me that he has made the Runii government aware of the Fwelev presence on P’Khati and their intent to contact the prime minister with a request to meet and ask permission to mine the mineral they have named Boref Gres. I was surprised when the commodore told me that the prime minister is looking forward to meeting the aliens even with the knowledge that the Fwelev have been on their planet observing for three decades. The Providence has left Brazgaar and resumed course to continue mapping the next sector.

The door chime chirped. “Computer, pause recording,” Blake said. “Enter.”

The doors parted and Eric Kelly took a step into the ready room. “Do you have a minute, Commander?”

Blake frowned as he motioned the CONN officer in and pointed to the chair on the other side of the desk. “Commander? Why so formal, *Lieutenant?*”

Eric tried to keep his tone and face neutral. He could not remember the last time he had called Blake Adams by his actual rank. “I wanted to apologize for my comments yesterday about the Fwelev.”

“Kid, never apologize for bringing a concern to the table,” Blake said. Your point was just as valid as any other. I’m glad that you were willing to give an opinion that went against the XO’s.”

“You wanted me to disagree with Lieutenant Commander Lightfoot?”

“I wanted you to express your honest opinion regardless of whether it agreed or disagreed with other members of the away team.” Blake smiled at his protégé. “I want officers who think for themselves and don’t just go along with what others think.”

“Then why did you reprimand me?”

“I don’t recall reprimanding you, kid. Jada reprimanded you for interrupting her, but she was gentle about it. T’Les reprimanded you for not appearing to know that the Federation has done the same thing to less developed planets that the Fwelev are doing on P’Khati. She wasn’t as gentle, but she’s Vulcan. Consider the source.” Blake stood and walked around his desk and sat in the chair next to Eric. Placing his hand on the younger man’s shoulder, he said, “She shared her concern as well, and my message to the commodore included hers and *yours*. If this Dweless was lying, Commodore Gardner is already on his guard and will be better prepared.”

“Thank you, Skipper.” Eric stood and started to turn, but Blake gently grabbed his arm.

Blake let go but reached out and shook Eric’s hand. “I’m proud of you, Eric. You did well, and you can expect to be on more away missions. And your report was one of the best I’ve ever”

Eric’s face started to turn a light shade of red as he smiled. “Thanks, Skipper.”

“Don’t mention it. Your shift is over, so go have dinner with Lieutenant Gonzales or something.”

“Aye, Skipper.” Eric turned and exited the ready room.

Blake watched the young man leave and went back to sit behind his desk. “Computer, resume recording.”

The End