

## Stardate 57527.5

Commander Jeron Lexra entered Captain Johnson's office. He held a PADD in his hand and offered it to his superior officer. "Good morning, sir. Here is my final evaluation on the *Horizon*."

Johnson stood as he accepted the PADD. He set it on his desk and reached out to shake the commander's hand. "Thank you, Commander. I'll read the details later but give me your overall impressions. How does she handle?"

"This is the third *Seeker*-class that you had me shake down, sir, and I have to say that the few problems that we had with the first and second ones seem to have been corrected with one exception."

"Oh?"

"It was a minor misalignment of the antimatter injector, so the first time we went to warp, it was a bit of a bumpy ride.; however, Commander McDougall was able to make the proper adjustments. Afterward, we were doing better than warp eight without any issues. It didn't seem like we were even moving." Commander Lexra had been one of the officers commanding newly-launched starships during their space trials. He enjoyed his job at Utopia Planitia Starfleet Shipyards; it allowed him to serve on multiple classes of starships including a few prototype vessels.

"How would you rate her compared to other ships you've tested?" Johnson asked.

"I would say that she is one of the best I've tested in the past two years."

"Of all classes?"

"Yes, I would say so." Lexra was one to be conservative about his estimates on a particular ship class and specific ships, but the U.S.S. *Horizon* had impressed him more than most starships that he was familiar with. "Do you know where this one will be assigned?"

Johnson picked up a chip that had been sitting on the edge of his desk and gave it to Lexra. "The orders are contained on this. She's going to the 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet, 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group based out of Starbase *Gateway Alpha*. I know that you have some leave time coming, but would you be willing to deliver this one?"

"*Gateway Alpha* is pretty remote, sir, but I think it will be nice to spend more time on this ship," Lexra said. "I understand that it will take a few weeks to get there."

"Yes, it's twelve light-years beyond Pacifica," Johnson said. "The crew has been assigned and should start arriving in a couple of days. By the end of the week, everyone should be aboard, and you should be ready to launch by then. You should also know that Commander McDougall will be staying on as the chief engineer. She must have been just as impressed with the *Horizon* as you because she requested the transfer as soon as the shakedown cruise was over."

“I thought she was happy here at the shipyards,” Lexra said as he wondered why the engineer wanted to transfer, but then again, she had been working at Utopia Planitia for more than a decade. “I will miss her.”

“I will too,” Johnson said. “Oh, I almost forgot to tell you that the *Horizon* will be renamed.”

“Renamed? Why?”

“Not long ago, we lost an *Ambassador*-class ship with all hands.”

“I read about that. Sneak attack, wasn’t it?”

Johnson nodded his head slowly. “Yes, as far as the investigation determined.”

“Do you think it was the Romulans?” Jeron Lexra had experiential memories of five lifetimes, and his second host, Razpira, had witnessed more than one of the despicable attacks that the Romulans conducted during the Earth-Romulan War more than two centuries ago. It was only natural that he would suspect the Romulans since the ship was lost only a few sectors away from the Empire.

“Those on the scene ruled out the Romulans. The residual energy signatures on the debris don’t match Romulan disruptors, and the Empire is still trying to recover from internal problems right now. Currently, they seem to be willing to keep the lines of communication with the Federation open...for now.”

“So, we should keep hoping for the best,” Lexra said. “When I get to *Gateway Alpha*, who do I transfer command to?”

“Fleet Captain Robert Stuart is the CO of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group. The *Republic* will be his flagship, but he doesn’t know that yet.”



## **To Boldly Go: An Interesting First Mission**

*A U.S.S. Republic Story*

By Cleve Johnson

**Stardate 57638.2**

Fleet Captain Rob Stuart had finished reading the weekly reports from each of the starship captains under his command. He was getting ready to turn off the computer monitor on his desk when the chirping sound announced that his new aide, Lieutenant J.G. Sokal, was calling. Stuart touched the com control. “Yes?”

*“Fleet Captain Stuart, there is a Commander Lexra to see you. He says that he has a...gift from Admiral Montoya.”*

Stuart wondered what kind of gift the admiral might have sent. “Send him in.”

The door opened and the Trill officer entered and stood at attention. “Commander Jeron Lexra reporting, sir.”

“Stand at ease, Commander,” Stuart said as he stood and walked around his desk to shake the newcomer’s hand. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m here to deliver your new flagship, sir.”

Stuart opened his mouth, but nothing immediately came out. He swallowed as he regained his composure. “I’m not expecting a new flagship.”

“Admiral Montoya requested one for you, Fleet Captain.”

“The last time I talked with him, I told him that I was fine working out of this office.” Rob was a little upset that the admiral had not contacted him with the news, but then he started to realize that he could use another ship since the *Sonak* and *Alliance* had both been reassigned. “Have a seat, Commander. Tell me about the ship,” Stuart said as he returned to the chair behind the desk.

Lexra sat across from Stuart and started to get excited as he began. “Well, sir, it is new. I just completed the shakedown before bringing it here. It’s one of the new *Seeker*-class light explorers.”

“I heard about the *Seeker*-class. It’s a multi-purpose vessel, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir. It’s designed to handle many of the same roles that the *Nova*- and *Intrepid*-classes perform. Like both of those, it is capable of landing on a planetary surface. The sensor packages have been improved for greater resolution and distance.”

“Anything new that previous classes don’t have?”

“The designers didn’t add any new technology, but many systems have been upgraded from previous classes,” Lexra said. “For example, the bio-neural gelpacks are more resistant to viruses and other biological threats.”

“What about speed?” Stuart was not concerned with having the fastest ship, unlike his friend Blake Adams, but he wanted to know if he could outrun a superior hostile ship if necessary.

“Cruise speed is warp 8, but it can reach 9.85 and hold it for about eighteen hours in an emergency.” Lexra’s enthusiasm was evident. “I have run many starships through systems testing once they come off the assembly line, sir, and I have to say that this one has been the most pleasurable to do a complete shakedown in a long time.”

“How long have you been doing that, Commander—testing starships?”

“Almost six years. I heard that the *Icarus* is part of your group.”

“That’s right.”

“The *Icarus* was the first ship that I commanded for post-launch systems tests.”

“She’s a fine ship, Commander. Captain Jeffers is proud of his ship and crew.”

Lexra realized that he had started to ramble. “Sorry that I deviated from the topic, sir.”

“It’s quite alright, Commander,” Stuart said. “Please continue.”

“I have tried to spend some time with the crew. They are starting to get used to each other. All positions have been filled except for two. You will need to recruit a first officer, and the engineering department has an opening for another warp field specialist. Your chief engineer knows her stuff. She has been at Utopia Planitia for almost twelve years, and I know her well enough to vouch for her ability.”

“There is one thing that you haven’t told me yet, Commander. What is the name of the ship?”

“That is another part of the surprise, sir. Its name is...U.S.S. *Republic*.”

Stuart’s body stiffened in his chair. Good memories of the previous *Republic* and the people that he once served with, as well as the news of its recent loss, flooded his mind. “So, they recycled the name sooner than I would have expected.”

“This ship was originally named *Horizon*, but the naming committee wanted to honor the memory of those who were tragically lost.”

“That means more to me than you realize, Commander Lexra.”

“I’m aware that you served on the previous *Republic*, Fleet Captain.” Jeron Lexra paused to allow Stuart to silently grieve. After a few moments, he continued. “I was told that Admiral Montoya specifically requested this ship after he found out that it would be renamed.”

“I will have to thank him for that,” Stuart said as he forced himself to smile. “I always suspected that he was a bit of a romantic. So, tell me about the crew.”

“As I said earlier, they are starting to learn how to work together. It is a very diverse crew including three people of mixed species.”

“Not that unusual in the galaxy we live in.”

“No, but have you ever encountered a Vulcan/Trill hybrid before?”

“Can’t say that I have, but since there have been cases of Vulcans and humans producing offspring, Trills are not too different from humans. It makes sense that biological compatibility is at least possible.”

“That is true, sir. An even stranger combination is a Vulcan/Betazoid.” Lexra nodded his head to one side and shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, that *is* interesting,” Stuart said. I never would have thought of that combination.”

“She is the ship’s counselor.” Lexra tried not to laugh, but he found it hard not to. “Sorry, sir”

Stuart smiled. “No need to apologize, Commander. A Vulcan counselor is an oxymoron.”

“She even smiles on occasion. I think that she was raised on Betazed, so her exposure to others’ feelings has shaped her more than the logic of her mother’s people.”

“You also mentioned the chief engineer.”

“Yes, Anne McDougall. I would have to say that she already has the engineering department running smoothly just after the few weeks that they have been together.” Joran Lexra, who had a background as an engineer in the early part of his Starfleet career, was impressed with how quickly she got the members of her department working so well together. “The science department is coming along well, too. You even have a marine biologist from Jenar.”

“Jenarans are an aquatic species, yes?”

“Yes, sir. Lieutenant Ner is rated as one of the top Starfleet officers in his field.”

“What was his previous assignment?”

“He was doing Cetacean research on Earth. He was helping to bridge the communication gap between dolphins and humans.”

“I look forward to meeting him,” Stuart said. “Any others of interest that I should know about?”

“They are all interesting people, sir, but you might want to make your own conclusions when you start meeting the crew,” Lexra said. “I would be glad to give you a tour of the ship and make introductions to your senior officers.”

Stuart stood up. “Well, there is no time like the present, that is if you are free, Commander.”

Following Stuart’s lead, Jeron Lexra stood and stepped aside. “I’m at your service, Fleet Captain.”

The two officers exited the office. Stuart turned his head toward his aide as he and Lexra moved toward the door. “Watch the store, Lieutenant. I’ll be on my new flagship.”

The Vulcan raised an eyebrow as he wondered about the meaning of Stuart’s terminology. He did not understand why his CO wanted him to observe a merchandising establishment.



As Stuart and Lexra walked out of the turbolift onto the bridge, the officer sitting at the engineering station was the first to notice the two senior officers’ arrival. He stood and announced to the rest of the on-duty bridge officers, “Captain on the bridge.”

All the officers immediately stood and turned toward Captain Stuart and Commander Lexra. Stuart smiled as he visually scanned his surroundings. “As you were. Commander Lexra is giving me the grand tour.”

The chief of security stepped toward Stuart with an outstretched hand. “Welcome aboard, sir. Lieutenant Commander Brian Kilrain at your service.”

“This is your head of security, sir,” Lexra said.

“I’m glad to meet you, Commander.”

“It’s good to know that a fellow Irishman is in command.”

“How did you know I’m Irish?”

“It’s the accent,” Kilrain said. “I would say that you’re from the Dublin area.”

Stuart’s grin widened. “That’s amazing, Commander. I was born in Dublin, but most of my early life was spent in San Francisco, so most people don’t realize that I’m from Ireland.”

“There’s still a hint of Dublin in your speech.” Kilrain’s smile was wide and genuine. “When you visit the shuttlebay, take a look at the name of the runabout. I think that you will approve.”

Another senior officer approached. “Are you sucking up to the commanding officer already, Bri?” the man also offered his hand to Stuart. “Lieutenant Commander Cooper Barnsdale. Senior tactical officer,” the man said with a southern drawl. “Most people call me Coop.”

“Good to meet you.”

One by one, the officers introduced themselves to their new CO. Not all of the department heads were currently on the bridge, but Stuart would either meet the rest as he toured the ship or in a gathering of all the senior officers that he planned to have at the earliest possible opportunity.

After the greetings and handshakes were completed, Commander Lexra showed Stuart the ready room on the port side of the bridge, the conference room aft of the bridge, and the starboard bridge lounge, which was primarily used for the relief bridge officers who would be on call. Stuart noticed a stairwell. “Where does that go?”

“Access to deck two,” Lexra said. “The designers thought that it would be a nice alternative to another standard turbolift.”

“Lead the way,” Stuart said as he followed the Trill officer down the gangway.



Commander Lexra led Fleet Captain Stuart on a complete tour of the ship, deck by deck, introducing department heads and other members of the crew along the way. When they entered the shuttlebay on deck six, Stuart noticed the name on the runabout—U.S.S. *Shannon*. “That’s why Mister Kilrain wanted me to take a look at the name.”

“Sir?”

“The *Shannon* is named after the longest river in Ireland.”

“Ah, I see. Mister Kilrain is proud of his heritage.” Jeron Lexra understood the concept of pride in one’s homeland, and of all the humans that Lexra had met, the ones from Ireland seemed to embrace their ancestral home more than most. As a joined Trill, Jeron Lexra had the memories of several previous hosts and their accomplishments as part of his heritage. “In addition to the runabout, you have six shuttles-four type 6 and two type S-14.”

“Type S-14?” Stuart remembered that the S-14s were primarily passenger shuttles that had been in service for nearly sixty years. The last time he was on one was when he had graduated from the Academy and took a trip to the Starfleet Museum Orbital Complex. He thought that the docking ring at the rear of the shuttle was an asset to allow the ship to connect to a starship’s docking port as an alternative to always landing in a shuttle bay. “I’m surprised they’re still in service.”

“Built to last, sir. Built to last.”

“Well, Starfleet is still rebuilding after the war, so I suppose that some of the older shuttles are still considered strong assets.”

“Sir, would you like to inspect any of the auxiliary craft while we’re here?”

“There will be plenty of time for that. I’m not officially in command yet after all.”

“Speaking of that, sir, when would you like to have the change of command ceremony?”

“My schedule is somewhat flexible. I would like to adjust the ship’s time to match *Gateway Alpha*,” Stuart said. “Will that be an issue?”

“The ship is only a little more than three hours different than on the starbase, so the adjustment won’t affect the crew too much. I would suggest that the Gamma shift be shortened and update the time index to coincide with the station’s Alpha shift tomorrow.”

“Agreed. Let’s schedule the change of command for 1615 hours tomorrow.”

“I will make all the arrangements, sir. The Starview Lounge on deck two-forward would be the best venue.”

“I defer to your judgment, Commander.”

Jeron Lexra nodded. “Shall we continue the tour, sir? We still have four more decks.”

“Stuart’s lips turned slightly upward as he motioned with his right arm toward the nearest exit. “Lead the way, Commander.”



Rob Stuart entered *Gateway Alpha*’s main medical facility, nodded toward the nurse at the reception desk, and walked through the corridor that led to his wife’s office. The door was open as it usually was except when the doctor was off duty or meeting with patients or staff. Stuart smiled as he knocked on the wall. “Got a minute?”



Janice Stuart looked up from the computer monitor and smiled. “Always for you, dear,” she said as she rose from her chair behind the desk and approached her husband. “I called your office earlier, but your new aide said that you were taking a tour of your new flagship.”

“And it was the grand tour, which is why it took so long.”

“You saw the entire ship, huh?”

“I think I might have missed a couple of Jeffries tubes on deck eight.” Rob smiled as he took his wife’s hand and leaned in to kiss her. “Can you have lunch with me?”

“As long as I’m back by 1300 for Admiral Sjögren’s semi-annual physical.” She let go of his hand and turned to go back to her desk. She deactivated the computer monitor and returned to take her husband’s hand again, and the two of them left the office and made their way down the corridor. They stopped at the reception desk, and Jan spoke to the nurse on duty. “The admiral will be here by 1300 for his physical, but I should be back by then. Please check him in and take him to exam room one if he shows up early.”

“Yes, doctor.”

The Stuarts left the medical facility and walked toward the nearest turbolift.



“I’ll have the baked cod with a side of zucchini and ice water to drink,” Jan told the waiter.”

“And you, sir?”

“Spaghetti and a garden salad with ranch dressing. I will also have ice water.”

“Very good,” the waiter said. “I’ll be back shortly.”

After the waiter left the table, Rob smiled at his wife. “You know, I was content without having another flagship, but after touring the new *Republic* and meeting some of the crew, I am looking forward to spending some time among the stars on occasion.” Realization hit him, and he started to frown.

Jan immediately noticed his facial change. “What’s wrong?”

“I just realized that I will be away from you and the twins every time I take the ship out on a mission.”

Jan took Rob’s hand and squeezed it. “Don’t worry about that, Rob. You’ve been away from us before, and you always come back.” She smiled as she teasingly said, “Just don’t be gone too long at a time.”

Rob looked into her eyes. “I won’t.”

“So, who is your first officer?”

“Well, I have to recruit one. There’s also an open position in engineering, but I have an idea who to recommend to the chief engineer.”



“Who?”

“Lieutenant Elima Tamar.”

“Do you think that she would want to transfer from the *Monarch*?”

“A few months ago, she expressed an interest in a transfer to another ship—something smaller.”

“She’s like you in that regard, isn’t she?”

“I didn’t mean to be a bad influence.”

Jan laughed and squeezed his hand tighter before letting go. “You don’t have it in you to be a bad influence, dear. Tell me about your new ship.”

“She’s a *Seeker*-class light explorer but is suited for multiple mission roles,” Rob began. “Once the last two positions are filled, the crew complement will be one hundred sixty-five including fourteen civilians. There is a recreation center and a beautiful botanical garden.”

“What is your first impression of the crew?”

“I had the opportunity to briefly talk with most of the senior officers and a few others.” Rob started to chuckle. “Would you believe that the ship’s counselor is half Betazoid and...”

“And what?”

“The other half is Vulcan.” He chuckled again.

Jan started to open her mouth and then her mouth grew wider as she tried to stifle a full-fledged belly laugh. “I never would have thought of that combination.”

“There’s also a half-Vulcan, half-Trill and half-Bajoran, half-Cardassian.”

“Does that one claim to be Bajoran or Cardassian?”

“I only had a few minutes to talk with him, but he was raised on Bajor.”

“Was his mother raped during the occupation?”

“That was my first thought, but he said that his parents loved each other and married in a Bajoran ceremony. Apparently, his father was a civilian clerk stationed on Bajor, and he was not in agreement with his government’s policies or with the occupation.”

“What about the civilians?”

“One group runs the recreation center and the other group staffs the Starview Lounge,” Rob said. “There is a civilian barber whose father was also a barber on the *Enterprise-D*.”

“The famous Mister Mott?” Jan saw the puzzled look on Rob’s face. “He has the reputation of being the best barber in Starfleet.”

Rob slowly nodded. “I will take your word for it, dear. I don’t usually follow the exploits of Starfleet barbers.”

Jan smiled as she saw the waiter approaching with a tray containing two plates and two glasses of water. She turned to look up at the waiter's smiling face. "Thank you," she said.

"It's my pleasure to serve," the waiter said as he placed each plate and drink on the table in front of his customers. "May I get you anything else?"

Rob shook his head. "No thank you. This smells wonderful."

"I will let the chef know, sir."

The waiter walked away as the Stuarts continued their conversation. Rob took a bite of his spaghetti and enjoyed the noodles and meat sauce as he chewed and swallowed. He took his napkin up to his mouth and dabbed the corners. "I will officially be taking command of the *Republic* tomorrow at 1615 hours. Would you be willing to attend?"

"Of course, I will attend, dear," Jan said. "A new command doesn't happen every day, and I want to see the botanical garden. Maybe you can sneak me in to check out sickbay to see what improvements have been made."

"You can count on it, Doctor." Rob smiled at his wife.

The two continued to eat and talk until they had finished their lunch. Once done, they asked the waiter to relay their compliments to the chef before they exited the café.



After Rob walked his wife back to the medical facility, he returned to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group office. He nodded to his aide. "Lieutenant, any messages?"

"Yes, sir," the young Vulcan said. "Admiral Montoya sent a communique, which I forwarded to your computer station. Also, Captain Storan would like you to contact him at your earliest convenience.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Stuart entered his office. He walked to his desk and activated the computer monitor. "Computer, play the most recent message from Admiral Luis Montoya."

The monitor's viewscreen came to life and the image of the 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet's commanding officer appeared. Montoya's image smiled as he sat behind his desk. "*Robert, I trust that you received your new flagship. I hope that you like it. I know that you would have preferred to run the show from your office on Gateway Alpha, but I think you know as well as I do that you need to be on the front lines of exploration...at least some of the time. I'm told that the Republic has done extremely well during its space trials and that the assigned personnel includes both experienced as well as some newer members of Starfleet. I'm sure that you will build them into a fine crew. Good luck on your new command.*" The image faded and was replaced by the UFP symbol.

"Computer, I want to send a reply message to Admiral Luis Montoya, Starbase 214, 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet Headquarters."

*"Please Record message."*

Stuart looked at the monitor and smiled. “Thank you, admiral, for the...gift. You were right when you said that I need to be on the front lines. I thought that I could effectively run the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group from behind this desk, and I can, but I realize that I am happier sitting in the center seat on the bridge of a starship. I just need to find a balance between exploring among the stars and being with my family. Jan has assured me that we can make it work, and that is what I plan to do. It won’t be long before you start to see my reports with the inclusion of logs of the U.S.S. *Republic*. Take care. Stuart out.” He sat back and contemplated how his new ship and crew would perform. “Computer, send the message.”

*“Sending message.”*

Rob tapped his combadge. “Stuart to CnC communications.”

*“Comms, Chief Webber. How can I help you, Fleet Captain Stuart?”*

“Please contact the U.S.S. *Eclipse*. I want to speak with Captain Storan.”

*“Yes, sir. It should only be a moment.”*

“Thank you, Chief.” Stuart did not have to wait long as Chief Webber contacted the *Nova*-class starship that was continuing its research on the planet that had been identified as Takaria by the *Eclipse*’s linguist.

The monitor came alive again as Captain Storan’s face appeared. *“It is aggregable to see you again, Captain Stuart.”*

“And to see you, Captain Storan.” Stuart preferred to be personable with those who served in his command, but he knew that Storan was a by-the-book Starfleet officer, and as a Vulcan, he spent little time using mundane speech. He preferred to get to the point of what he wanted to report without delay.

*“Sir, I have an important discovery to report.”*

“You have found out what happened to the Takarians?”

*“That mystery still alludes my science teams, Captain; however, the sensor drone that we launched into orbit three weeks ago has picked up some unusual readings emanating from the temporal anomaly in this sector.”*

“A buildup in tachyon particles?”

*“Tachyon particles have increased but at a low level. Other readings indicate that a small rift in space has appeared and is expanding.”*

“Can you send a shuttle to check it out?”

*“I have already dispatched a shuttle. It will take fourteen hours, twelve minutes, thirty-two seconds before it arrives at its intended destination.”*

“Very well, keep me informed.” Stuart ended the transmission as he clenched his jaw and thought about the latest development. The crew of the *Eclipse* had been studying Takaria for a few months and had found archeological evidence of a spacefaring civilization that had once

inhabited that world, but the population had suddenly disappeared more than a thousand years prior.

Stuart tapped the Starfleet emblem on his uniform once again. “Stuart to Commander Lexra.”

*“Lexra, go ahead, Fleet Captain.”*

“A situation has arisen, and I would like to move up the change of command to today.”

*“Of course, sir. Would 1500 work?”*

“Perfect. Just keep it quick and simple.”

*“As you wish, Fleet Captain. Lexra out.”*

Stuart grabbed a PADD and keyed in some information, and then he exited his office. He stopped in front of his aide’s desk.

Lieutenant J.G. Sokal stood and, in typical Vulcan fashion, placed his hands behind his back. “How may I serve you, sir?”

“I will be leaving for the Takaria system later today. Please inform Lieutenant Commander Baker that he is in charge while I’m gone.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“And I want you to get me the personnel file on this officer,” Stuart said as he handed the PADD to Sokal.

The Vulcan accepted the PADD. “Do you wish to have me transmit the file to the *Republic* or do you prefer that I download it to your computer?”

“Transmit it please. I’ll have something to read on my way to Takaria.” Stuart left the room, leaving his aide alone to complete his tasks.



Rob Stuart had gone to his quarters to pack a small circular container with the current book that he was reading, and a couple sets of civilian clothes. He also included two PADDs and a plastic box containing isolinear chips that contained the replicator programs for his favorite blends of hot tea and favorite non-standard meals. He could replicate other sets of uniforms as needed once he had settled into his quarters on the new *Republic*.

He had already contacted his wife about the abrupt change in his schedule, and that he would meet her at the Childcare Center. He didn’t want to leave without kissing his children goodbye. This was something that he knew would be difficult to adjust to—for him and his family.



Rob and Jan had left the Childcare Center and made their way to the turbolift. “Shuttlebay Four,” Rob said.

“Shuttlebay?” Jan questioned. “Why not just beam over or go to the docking port?”

“Tradition. When a captain takes command of a starship, it is standard practice to enter the ship by shuttle. You know that.”

“I just thought under the circumstances...”

“As far as I know, there’s no emergency, and you, yourself, said that taking command of a starship doesn’t happen every day.”

“I did say that,” Jan admitted. “I hope you don’t mind, but I invited Admiral Sjögren to attend. He will meet us on board.”

“I don’t mind at all. I was going to invite him, but it slipped my mind after I talked with Storan.” Rob shrugged his shoulders. “I’m sorry that I’m leaving so soon.”

“Duty calls, Rob,” Jan said. “The kids and I will adjust.”

“But the kids are too young to understand.”

“You have been away before. And when you came back, they acted as if you had never left.”

Rob smiled. “I hope it doesn’t get harder as they grow older.”

“Just keep spending quality time with them when you are home. It will be fine.”

“I hope so.”

Jan smiled and hugged her husband. “It will.” She kissed him and slowly eased her grip around his back as the turbolift stopped and the doors parted. “This is our stop.”

Rob led Jan into the corridor, and they walked a few meters to the shuttlebay entrance. After entering his personal code into the keypad and allowing the sensor to scan his retina, the doors slid open. Both walked in and moved toward the type 6 shuttle that was on the ready pad.

A young Native-American man stood at attention next to the rear opening of the craft. “Ensign David Grey Wolf, sir. I am here to transport you to the starship *Republic*.”

“Thank you, Ensign. This is my wife, Doctor Stuart. She will be accompanying me for the ceremony,” Rob said.

“It is good to make you acquaintance, Ma’am.”

“Thank you, Ensign.”

The young officer offered his hand to help Jan up on the ramp leading to the shuttle. “May I, Doctor?”

“Thank you again.”

“My pleasure, Ma’am.”

The three officers entered the shuttle. Both Rob and Janice sat on the portside couch as Grey Wolf made his way to the forward section and sat at the CONN. He activated the control to

close the rear hatch and looked over the readings on the console. He pressed the communications control after all systems had been checked out. “*Gateway Alpha* Control, this is *Republic* shuttle *Archer*. We request permission to launch from Shuttlebay Four.”

“*Archer*, you are clear to launch.”

“Roger that. Launching now.”

The shuttle smoothly lifted off the deck and passed through the atmospheric force field. It made its way out of the starbase and curved around the structure to approach the *Seeker*-class starship that was docked at one of four docking ports that protruded below the outer edges of the upper saucer section of the starbase. The officer piloting the shuttle turned his head toward the rear section. “Would you like me to do a flyby so that you can get a good look at your ship, sir?”

“Thank you, Ensign. I would like that very much.” Rob looked at his wife with what she referred to as ‘puppy dog eyes.’ “Mind if I go forward?”

Jan deliberately stared blankly at him. “Yes, I mind.” She could not hold the stare for more than a few seconds before smiling. “Of course, I don’t mind, dear. Take a good look at your new flagship.”

Rob placed his hand on hers and gently squeezed it before letting go and making his way forward where he sat in the co-pilot’s chair. “Now this is a sight.”

Grey Wolf nodded in agreement. “She’s the third *Seeker*-class starship in service. She’s capable of landing, and I heard that she can travel underwater like one of the old submarines.”

“That would make my brother happy.”

“Sir?”

“My brother is a scientist. He’s working on the Atlantis project.”

“I heard about that project, sir. No offense to your brother, but I hope that those in charge of that project will change their minds and scrap it.”

“Why is that, Ensign?”

“I don’t believe that people should try to change Earth’s geology to that extent. I’m afraid that something will go wrong and lead to catastrophic consequences.”

“Are you a geologist, Mister Grey Wolf?”

At first, Grey Wolf thought that his new captain was challenging his opinion, which would make sense since Stuart’s brother was working on the project. But Grey Wolf turned his head and saw in Stuart’s eyes that there was a look of genuine interest in what the young man thought. “No, sir. I’m a concerned citizen of our planet. I don’t want to see it devastated like other worlds that have tried similar methods that ended up wiping out entire ecosystems and nearly made life uninhabitable.”

“I would love to sit down with you sometime and discuss this further, Ensign,” Stuart said. “I have had reservations about the Atlantis project, too.”

Grey Wolf smiled as he maneuvered the shuttle around the *Republic* to give the captain a full view of the starship's exterior.

Suddenly, a voice came through the speaker. "*Republic to Archer. How long are you going to be flying in circles, Grey Wolf?*"

The young ensign started to reach for the transmit button, but Stuart held up his hand and winked. Stuart waited a moment before pressing the touchpad. "*Republic, this is Captain Stuart. I requested that Ensign Grey Wolf give me an inspection flyby.*"

After several seconds of silence, the voice came back. "*Uh, sorry, Fleet Captain. I...uh...*"

"No problem, *Republic,*" Stuart said as his smile broadened. "By the way, who am I speaking to?"

"*Uh, this is Lieutenant Weston, sir. I'm, uh, one of the, uh, OPS officers, sir.*"

"I look forward to meeting you face to face, Lieutenant Weston. Carry on with your duties. We'll be landing soon." Rob closed the transmission as he grinned.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but were you messing with him?"

"Maybe just a little bit."

"May I ask why?"

"It seemed like he was going to come down on you for being kind enough to show me the exterior of the ship. You were doing what any good officer would do, so I wanted him to know that you had my support."

"Thank you, sir." David Grey Wolf turned his attention to the controls. "Are you ready to go aboard, Fleet Captain?"

"Make it so."

The ensign reopened the communication. "*Archer to Republic. We are on final approach and request permission to land.*"

Lieutenant Weston's voice came back over the speaker. "*Permission granted. Ensign, you are cleared to approach the shuttlebay. Reduce speed to four meters per second and cut power to engines as soon as the tractor beam engages.*"

"Roger that, *Republic.*"

The shuttle swung around and drew nearer to the shuttlebay as its door began to open. As soon as the door opened completely, the tractor beam inside the bay activated and brought the shuttle in, setting the auxiliary spacecraft gently on the deck.

Stuart patted the pilot on the back. "Thank you, Mister Grey Wolf. Nicely done."

"Any time, sir," the ensign replied.

Rob and Janice Stuart entered the Starview Lounge where Commander Lexra greeted them. Stuart introduced his wife to the acting captain and a few of the senior officers that he had met earlier. Jan noticed a dark-skinned bearded man wearing a blue shirt under his uniform jacket enter the room. She recognized him and excused herself from the others to approach him.

Jan smiled as she approached and stretched out her arms toward the man, and when he recognized her, he reciprocated by embracing her in a tight hug. She almost laughed as he let go. “Kofi, it’s good to see you again!”

“Janice!” he exclaimed and laughed deeply. “It has been too long. Where have you been keeping yourself?”

Janice took a step back as she continued to smile at the African. “Lately, here.”

Rob saw the exchange between Jan and the man, so he moved toward them. “Jan, you know Doctor Achebe?”

“We’re old friends, Rob. Kofi and I met at a medical conference several years ago on Centaurus.”

“And we were stationed together for a short time on Starbase 82,” Doctor Achebe said,

Rob nodded and smiled. “It’s good to know that my favorite doctor and my new CMO already know each other in case there is ever a need for medical collaboration.”

With a strong Kenyan accent, Achebe said, “Fleet Captain, how did Janice become your doctor?”

“She was my CMO on the *Providence* and the *Monarch*. Now she is *Gateway Alpha*’s CMO.”

“A better doctor you will not find this side of Bajor,” Achebe said.

“Agreed,” Robert replied. “And I couldn’t imagine a better wife and mother either.”

“Ah, Janice, I didn’t know that you had remarried. And you have children?”

“Twins. A boy and girl,” Janice said. “They keep us busy.”

“May I see them some time?”

“Of course., Rob and Jan had answered simultaneously.

Commander Jeron Lexra approached the trio and whispered in Rob’s ear. “Sir, it’s almost time.”

“Before we start the ceremony, I was wondering...would you stay on as acting first officer since this mission came up abruptly?”

“Absolutely, sir. Obviously, you haven’t had time to consider candidates for the position yet.”

“Thank you, Commander. I appreciate you staying aboard.”



“You’re welcome, sir.”

Rob turned his head and nodded to Doctor Achebe and leaned over to kiss Jan. “It’s show time.” He smiled and followed Commander Lexra toward the podium at the front of the lounge. Rob noticed that Admiral Sjögren had been talking with the chief engineer and the senior tactical officer a few meters away from the podium. The admiral caught sight of Stuart approaching the front of the room and nodded to him.

Lexra stepped behind the podium as Stuart stood beside him. “Attention to orders.”

The various conversations ended abruptly and all senior officers and senior enlisted crew, along with the lounge staff, the recreation center manager, and a few members of security all faced the front of the room as they stood reverently.

Lexra stepped aside to allow Stuart to take his place behind the podium. Lexra handed a PADD to Stuart, who accepted it, activated it, and set it down on the podium.

Stuart began reading. “To Stuart, Fleet Captain Robert P. You are hereby requested and required to take command of U.S.S. *Republic*, NCC-78263 this stardate. Furthermore, U.S.S. *Republic* is hereby assigned as the flagship of 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet, 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group. Signed Montoya, Vice Admiral Luis, commanding officer, 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet.”

Stuart deactivated the PADD and turned to face Commander Lexra. “I relieve you, sir.”

“I stand relieved, sir,” Lexra replied. “Computer, transfer command codes to Fleet Captain Robert P. Stuart.”

*“Command codes transferred.”*

Stuart and Lexra shook hands, and Stuart turned back to face the officers and crew that were assembled. “I look forward to working with you and getting to know each of you. I understand that the crew has already started to work well together, and I look forward to building a strong unity between departments. In the weeks ahead, I will work with all department heads to schedule one-on-one meetings with each member of the crew so we can get to know each other.” He paused and smiled. “Don’t worry. These meetings will be informal. I think that you will find that my command style is more laid back than what some of you may have experienced in previous assignments.” Rob paused again to peruse the room from one side to the other. He wondered what each of his new crew members was thinking. “I want you to all know that I once served as the second officer and later as the first officer of this ship’s predecessor. I am grateful that Starfleet chose to rename this ship in honor and memory of those who lost their lives while serving aboard that ship, and I ask you all to honor their memory by giving your best while serving aboard this new *Republic*. And to conclude, I ask you to grant me a personal favor. I am, by rank, a fleet captain, but unless the situation warrants, I prefer that you simply address me as Captain.”

“Or Skipper,” Janice called out.

Rob gave his wife a half-hearted stern look. "Please ignore my wife's suggestion on that subject." He started to grin as he looked at Janice. A few of the attendees grinned and/or chuckled at Rob's comment.

He continued talking to those in attendance and those who were watching the live-streamed broadcast on monitors in other areas of the ship. "I wanted to give you some time off after your long journey from Utopia Planitia, but a situation has arisen. The details will be provided by department heads after they have been briefed. I apologize that the reception will be a short one. I would like senior officers to gather in the main conference room in fifteen minutes. We launch in thirty." Rob started to step away from the podium, and then he remembered something else. "Oh, I also want to thank Commander Lexra for agreeing to stay on as acting first officer for this mission." He stepped away from the podium and started to walk to rejoin his wife.

The admiral and Jan moved toward Stuart. Jan kissed her husband while Sjögren patted Rob on the back. "Good speech, Robert."

"Thank you, Erik. I hope I made a good first impression."

"Of course, you did," Jan said. "I'm sure that you are going to get along fine with this crew."

"Thanks," Rob said. "I don't want you two to think that I am pushing you off the ship, but..."

"Understood, Robert," Sjögren said. "Doctor, may I accompany you back to the starbase?"

"I would be honored," she said.

Admiral Sjögren smiled and said, "I will wait for you in the corridor," as he walked away.

"Be right there," Jan said as she faced her husband. "Well, this is it. I'm not going to say 'goodbye.'"

Rob smiled. "Neither am I, dear." He leaned in and kissed her again. He smiled. "I hope that I won't be gone too long."

A tear started to form under Jan's left eye, and she wiped it away. "I hope not. Try to contact me every evening?"

"I will." Rob watched as she stepped back, turned, and walked toward the exit. Although he looked forward to finding his 'space legs' again, Rob was going to miss his family.



Stuart entered the conference room and stepped down from the turbolift which was two steps higher than the deck. The senior officers were assembled and started to stand, but Rob held up his hand. "Stay seated." He sat in the chair at the head of the table. "Thank you for coming. I hoped that we would have some time to break the ice before leaving the nest, but the U.S.S.

*Eclipse* detected an increase in energy readings from a temporal anomaly a few light-years from their current location. “Last year, there was a temporal event near the anomaly. This is the first time since then that anything has been detected in that area, which is why we are going to investigate further.”

“Begging your pardon, Flee...I mean, Captain,” Lieutenant Tharon Ch’Toriith, the Andorian OPS Manager said, “but if the *Eclipse* is already in the vicinity of the anomaly, why doesn’t that ship investigate?”

“That is a fair question, Mister Ch’Toriith,” Stuart replied. “The *Eclipse* crew is currently conducting an archeological expedition and investigation into the mystery of what happened to a planet’s population. A whole civilization disappeared centuries ago, and we don’t know why. Captain Storan and his crew have been working there for months studying the planet and looking for clues to the inhabitants’ disappearance.”

“Sir, may we know the details of the temporal incident you spoke of?” It was the senior science officer, Lieutenant Commander Grezka, a Xindi Arboreal, who had inquired.

“Some of the information is classified, but I can say that it involved a Federation starship that traveled from fifty years ago. We were able to create an opening in the anomaly to send them back to their time.”

“How do we know that incident did not create an alternate timeline?” the Xindi asked.

“I have the assurance of a member of that ship’s crew that the timeline was not corrupted, but I am not at liberty to say anything more on the subject.” Robert offered a conciliatory grin. “I don’t want Temporal Investigations to give us a visit.”

“Amen to that,” Lieutenant Commander Cooper Barnsdale, the senior tactical officer, said.

“What is considered a safe distance from the anomaly, Captain?” Lieutenant Commander Axred Nulan asked. As the senior flight control officer, he wanted to have the information to feed into the CONN.

“Well, Mister Axred, that *is* the question,” Stuart said. “We honestly don’t know. With the current deployments of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group’s starships, we have not put enough time into studying this anomaly as much as we should have. At least not yet.”

“Would it be possible to have access to the previous sensor readings and logs concerning the anomaly, Captain? Grezka asked. “I would like to have Lieutenants Fontaine and T’Lan review the data.”

Stuart nodded. “I already authorized the non-classified records and data to be downloaded into the ship’s computer from *Gateway Alpha*.”

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Of course.” Rob looked around the room to see if there was a need for further discussion. He looked at the Bajoran flight officer. “Mister Axred, I had *Gateway Alpha*

download the star charts and planetary coordinates for the sectors that we have already mapped into the computer for transfer into the CONN.”

“I appreciate that, sir.”

“Does anyone have anything to add or ask about our mission?”

The officers shook their heads or otherwise indicated by their silence that, for the time being, there was no more discussion needed.

“On to the next topic, then,” Stuart said. I am going to ask Commander Lexra to schedule individual meetings for me with each one of you during the next couple of days. I want us to get to know each other, so, as I said earlier, these meetings will be informal. I want everyone to feel relaxed. I believe that it takes time for a crew to learn to gel, so I don’t want to delay getting started.” Stuart turned to his right to face Jeron Lexra. “Commander, can you start the schedule at 0830 tomorrow in one-hour intervals? Also, include lunch for you and me in the Starview Lounge in the schedule.”

“Aye, Captain. It will be on your desk before the end of shift.”

“May I request to also schedule your preliminary physical, Captain?”

“Coordinate with Commander Lexra on that, Doctor. I will ask my wife to transmit my medical records when I talk with her this evening.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Doctor Kofi Achebe said, smiling. “You are the most cooperative ship captain that I have served with.”

Stuart tilted his head to one side and grinned. “Being married to a doctor has taught me to cooperate if I wanted to have a good doctor/patient relationship.”

Everyone around the table could not help but be amused.

“The last agenda item concerns regular briefings. We will have daily briefings with the entire senior staff daily at 0730 when abroad and Mondays and Thursdays when at our port of call. Does anyone have an issue with that schedule?”

Again, several ‘no’s’ and headshakes signaled that all were in agreement.

“Okay, is there any other business at this time?” Stuart waited for input. After none was offered, he stood up (and the others stood as well). “Prepare to get underway. Dismissed.”



### **Five days later...**

The U.S.S. *Republic* approached Takaria at one-half impulse speed. As Captain Stuart entered the bridge from his ready room, he saw the planet growing larger on the forward viewscreen. “Report, Mister Axred.”

“Sir, we are approaching the planet. Sensor scans do not detect the *Eclipse*.” The Bajoran exited the captain’s chair and moved to the VIP seat to the captain’s left. “We have detected a

Federation sensor probe orbiting at approximately fourteen hundred kilometers above the surface.”

“Thank you, Mister Axred,” Stuart said. “The *Eclipse* is on the surface.”

“I apologize, sir,” Lieutenant J.G. Hiro Takahashi said from Science I. “I didn’t think to scan the surface.”

“First time manning a bridge science station, Lieutenant?” Stuart asked.

“Yes, sir. I mean...no, sir. I have manned it under supervision on two occasions, but this is my first time by myself.”

“Everyone has to experience a first time. It’s not unusual to make a few mistakes, but that is how we learn.”

“Yes, sir.”

“OPS, hail the *Eclipse*.” Stuart had crossed his legs when he sat down, but he uncrossed them and leaned slightly forward with his forearm resting on the armrest.

“Hailing frequencies open, Captain,” Lieutenant Mace Weston said.

Stuart stood and took a couple of steps toward the viewer. “This is Fleet Captain Robert Stuart aboard the starship *Republic*.”

The view of the planet morphed into an image of the *Eclipse*’s bridge. Captain Storan sat in the command chair with an emotionless expression on his face. “*Captain Stuart, welcome. I congratulate you on your new command*”

“Thank you, Captain Storan. Have your people detected further activity near the anomaly?”

*“Energy readings continue to rise steadily. My senior science officer calculates that if the energy continues at its current rate of increase, it will create a temporal eruption in forty-one point two six hours.”*

Stuart turned around to look at the senior flight officer. “Commander Axred?”

“We can be at the anomaly in a little over forty hours at warp eight.”

Stuart turned back to face the viewer. “Thank you, Storan. I would like to upload your data.”

On the viewscreen, the Vulcan turned his head to one side and nodded to someone off-screen and turned back to face Stuart. “*The information is being transmitted now, Captain.*”

“Thank you, Captain Storan. I will share our findings with you after our investigation is concluded.”

*“I appreciate that, Captain Stuart. Eclipse out.”*

Stuart returned to the command chair and sat down. “CONN, take us out of orbit and set course for the anomaly. Engage at warp eight once we are out of the planet’s gravity well.”

“Aye, Captain,” Lieutenant Anders Johansson replied.”



Rob Stuart had been riding a stationary bicycle in the ship’s recreation center when Lieutenant Commander T’Faaz Laris, the Vulcan/Betazoid counselor approached. He noticed that she wore a similar unisex exercise sweat suit to what he was wearing. She had a towel around her neck. The counselor removed the towel and draped it over the handlebar of the bicycle positioned next to Stuart’s.

“Mind if I join you, Captain?”

“Not at all, Counselor,” Stuart replied as he continued to peddle at a steady pace.

The counselor mounted her bicycle and set the timer for thirty minutes. “How far have you gone so far?”

Stuart looked at the odometer. “Almost eight kilometers. It’s been a while since I’ve been on one of these things, but I’m going to see if I can make it to twelve today.”

“I usually stop at ten, most days, but I think I can add another two to five over the next few weeks.”

“I’m surprised that you’re not doing twenty kilometers a day with your Vulcan stamina.”

The counselor smiled as she started to peddle a little faster. “My stamina isn’t as good as most Vulcans. Remember, I’m half Betazoid.”

Stuart noticed a few things about T’Faaz Laris. First, she smiled, and in his one-on-one introduction meeting with her a few days earlier, she had told a couple of jokes. Second, she used contractions when she talked. Stuart was not used to Vulcans doing either of those. He was not used to Vulcans freely displaying their emotions. But as she had said, she was half Betazoid. “It’s been my experience that even half Vulcans still have the physical strength that most full-blooded Vulcans have.”

“Ah, but Vulcan has higher gravity than most M-class worlds. I was raised on Betazed with my father’s family after he and my mother died.”

“So your father was from Betazed and your mother from Vulcan?”

“Yes, sir. I was visiting my paternal grandparents on Betazed while my parents were traveling to Earth for a science symposium.” She paused to catch her breath as she had increased her speed more than she intended. “Mother was a geologist.”

“And your father?”

“Psychologist.”

“So, you decided to follow in your father’s footsteps.”

“It was an easy choice. My grandmother was also a psychologist. And I chose to serve in Starfleet due to my grandfather’s influence. He was an enlisted engineer for almost forty years.”

Stuart realized that he had increased the speed that he was peddling. He wasn't sure, but he thought that he was unintentionally trying to push his speed to keep up with his biking partner. No matter the reason, he consciously forced himself to reduce his speed so that he could reach his goal of twelve kilometers. "If you don't mind me asking, have you ever gone back to Vulcan to visit your mother's family?"

"Once, when I was eleven." T'Faaz quickly wiped some sweat from her brow as she continued to peddle. "They made it clear that they didn't want me because of my 'emotional outbursts,' which was nothing more than a tendency to giggle." She looked over at Stuart and smiled. "I think they were embarrassed to take me out in public."

Stuart could not help but grin. "I'm sure."

"So, are you empathic like most half-Betazoids?"

"I'm more than empathic. I can communicate telepathically with most Betazoids and a few other telepathic species that I've encountered. I also have learned how to successfully master the Vulcan mind-meld."

"Really?" Stuart wondered if she could read the thoughts of non-telepaths, so he deliberately concentrated on a specific memory of when he was a teenager. "What am I thinking?"

The counselor continued to peddle, but she turned her head in Stuart's direction and closed her eyes. "You just arrived home from playing football with your friends. Your mother welcomed you and handed you an old-style envelope. When you opened it, you pulled out a letter and silently read it, and then you jumped up and down several times and wrapped your arms around her. Both of you were laughing and hugging. Your mother started to shed tears, but they were happy tears. It was your acceptance letter from Starfleet Academy."

Stuart's face appeared bright as he remembered that day. "That's right, Counselor. I guess you are a telepath. Have you had any trouble relating to other Vulcans that you have served with?"

"If so, no Vulcan that I've served with has ever admitted it. When conversing with Vulcans, I try to be more reserved and logical. I know how to walk the walk and talk the talk if necessary."

"But do you feel that you are subduing your personality for the other Vulcans?"

"One of your planet's revered religious leaders advocated that he had become all things to all people." T'Faaz turned her head to face forward again as she started to reduce her speed slightly. "As a ship's counselor, I practice that philosophy frequently."

"But who counsels the counselor?"

Smiling again, T'Faaz said, "You're doing a good job of that right now."

Stuart tilted his head to one side. "How so?"

“You’re talking with me as a regular person, not as a counselor or as a member of your crew. We’re just two people having a conversation while exercising together.”

Stuart thought about the importance of relating to his crew on a more personal level, and that it was the very thing that he had wanted to do. It seemed more natural than he thought it would be. “I hope that it helps.”

“It does,” T’Faaz said.

“Good,” Stuart said. “I have a friend on one of my previous commands. He’s also a ship’s counselor *and* he’s part Betazoid, too. I think the two of you would hit it off.”

“What is his name? Maybe I’ve met him.”

“James Goodman.”

“I have had the pleasure of being in three classes with him at the University of Betazed. He was a year ahead of me. Nice person. He helped me understand some of the early psychologists of Earth’s Twentieth Century.”

“Sounds like you spent some time together.”

“We did. I had hoped that we would reconnect at Starfleet Academy, but when I got there, I found out that he was involved with another cadet. I couldn’t figure out what he had in common with an engineering student.”

“Well, there must have been something there because he married her.”

“I’m glad for him,” T’Faaz said. “Do they have children?”

“No, not yet. I think that Mary—that’s his wife’s name—isn’t sure that she wants children.”

“That’s too bad. From what I remember, James talked about wanting to be a father, and I think that he would be a good one.”

“I’m sure he would,” Stuart said. “It’s been several months since I sent a message to him. I should probably do that.”

“Would you ask him if he remembers me and send my regards?”

“I would be glad...”

“*Bridge to Captain Stuart,*” Commander Jeron Lexra’s voice came through the communication system.

“Excuse me, Counselor. Stuart. Go ahead, Mister Lexra.”

“We have come out of warp and are approaching the coordinates of the temporal anomaly, sir.”

“I don’t want to get too close. We don’t know enough about it or what might happen when the energy output peaks.”



“Understood, Captain. Mister Grezka agrees. His sensor scans show that the energy increase is still steadily rising at the same rate as before.”

“Time until the expected energy burst?”

“One hour, twenty-six minutes per Lieutenant Commander Grezka’s calculations.”

“I’ll be on the bridge in about twenty minutes. Stuart out.” He looked at the counselor with what she would interpret as a disappointment. “I guess I’ll try to make it to twelve kilometers another time.”



Commander Lexra, sitting on the edge of the command chair, leaned forward to discern the slight glow that had gradually appeared on the forward right portion of the main viewer. “OPS, center the image please.”

“Yes, sir,” Lt. Tharon Ch’Toriith said as he adjusted the image.

“Lieutenant J.G. T’Lan, the astrophysicist manning the Science I station, turned to face the center seat. “Commander, the energy level has increased by thirty-two point seven one percent in the last two point four minutes.”

“Readings confirmed,” the other astrophysicist at Science II, Lieutenant J.G. Belle Fontaine, said.

“Thank you,” Lexra replied. “Mister Barnsdale, raise shields and sound Yellow Alert.”

Lieutenant Commander Cooper Barnsdale acknowledged the order. “Shields up, sir.”

The turbolift doors parted, and Fleet Captain Robert P. Stuart entered the bridge. He made his way to the central command area. “Report, Commander.”

Lexra vacated the captain’s chair and faced Stuart. “Energy levels are beginning to spike. We just went to Yellow Alert and raised shields. We are holding position four hundred thirty-two thousand kilometers away from the anomaly.”

Stuart sat down and faced the viewscreen. “What’s that glow?”

“That is the energy building up. It was barely noticeable a few minutes ago, but it’s getting brighter,” Lexra said as he sat in the chair to Stuart’s right. “I suggest that we increase our distance from the anomaly, Captain.”

Stuart rubbed his chin as he watched the image glow even brighter. “Agreed. Make it so.”

Lexra turned his head to face forward. “CONN, reverse thrusters. Take us to one million kilometers distance.”

“Aye, sir.” Lieutenant Melissa Jones replied as she set coordinates and activated the thrusters.

“Captain, the energy readings are rapidly increasing,” T’Lan said. “I recommend that we increase speed to full impulse.”

“CONN, full impulse!” Stuart held his hand up to shield his eyes from the increased illumination on the viewer. “Darken the screen, Mister Ch’Toriith.”

The Andorian OPS manager quickly ran his fingers over his console, causing the brightness to be reduced. “The filter has been activated, sir.”

“Thank you.” Even with the filter engaged, the anomaly’s brightness still caused Stuart to slightly squint his eyes. “Can you lower the brightness more, Lieutenant?”

Theron Ch’Toriith’s antennae started to move forward as he said. “Yes, sir.”

Just then, the bright light on the screen became its brightest in a sudden burst of energy. Seconds later, the ship began to shake violently. When the shaking stopped, Stuart looked around the bridge. “Everyone alright?” He noticed all the people nodding in the affirmative. “Damage report?”

Lexra turned in his chair and started pulling up information on the miniature console to his right. “Shields down four percent. No damage reported. No injuries reported.”

“Sir, sensors have detected an object three hundred forty-two thousand kilometers to our port bow,” Fontaine said. “I am detecting two...no, five life signs. Three of the lifeforms appear to be in stasis. Sir, the lifeforms...are human.”

“Transfer the exact coordinates to the CONN,” Stuart said. “Lieutenant Jones, take us there; one-half impulse.”

“Should I hail them, Captain?” Lieutenant Commander Barnsdale asked.

“Please do so, Mister Barnsdale.”

The tactical officer tried to contact the other ship without success. “No response, Captain.”

“Keep trying.”

“T’Lan turned in her chair to face the captain. “Sir, the ship is of unknown design. It is capable of interplanetary travel only. It is equipped with a nuclear fission reactor for power and propulsion. It does have a communication array, but it does not have subspace communication ability,” she said. “Commander Barnsdale, try hailing low-band frequencies between forty and one hundred megahertz.”

Barnsdale nodded. “Thank you, Lieutenant.” The tactical officer tried again to hail the other ship. After a few seconds, he looked toward the captain as his lips turned upward. “Getting an audio response, sir.”

“On speaker,” Stuart said.

*“Houston, is that you?” A male voice said. “Thank God! We’ve been trying to reach you for hours. We were approaching Jupiter when there was a bright light, then the ship started shaking. Our radar went dark, and all of the other equipment blacked out. HAL is offline.”*

Stuart looked at Lexra. Both were puzzled as they tried to figure out what the voice was talking about. None of it made sense to them. Stuart nodded to Barnsdale to indicate to open the transmission. “This is Captain Robert Stuart of the Federation starship U.S.S. *Republic*. We offer our assistance.”

There was a pause from the other voice. “*Uh, this isn’t Houston Mission Control?*”

“No, I’m afraid not. May I ask who you are?”

“*This is Commander Ted Rickman aboard Discovery II. Can you tell me what is going on? We were en route to Titan to study the effects that it’s undergone because of Jupiter’s transformation.*”

“What transformation did Jupiter go through, Commander Rickman?”

“*Are you kidding me?*” Rickman asked. “*Haven’t you noticed the second star that showed up in the sky three years ago?*”

Stuart looked at the acting first officer to see if the Trill was as confused as he was.

“Sirs,” Lieutenant T’Lan interrupted. “I have made a complete scan of the other ship, and I have determined that the technology is a product of early Twenty-first Century Earth.”

“There are no records of any ship that looks like that in the history books or databases,” Stuart said.

“I have also detected a variance in the ship’s temporal and quantum signatures.”

“Which means?” Lexra asked.

T’Lan continued. “It appears that the ship has not only come forward in time but also from an alternate universe.”

“From a parallel Earth,” Stuart whispered to himself. “Thank you, Lieutenant.” Stuart focused his attention on the viewscreen. He looked carefully at the ship that grew larger on the viewer as *Republic* continued to approach. It was very small in comparison to the *Seeker*-class vessel—only one hundred sixty meters in length. The other ship had a spherical forward section and a box-like engine section with three large hexagonal engine exhaust thrusters at the rear. The two sections were connected by a long thin neck with multiple cargo containers surrounding it. A communications antenna was attached to the neck with the dish pointing aft. Stuart assumed that the sphere was where the crew lived and controlled the ship. He addressed the person from the other ship once again. “Commander, I think that we should meet face-to-face to see if we figure out what happened and if we can get you back where you belong.”

“*Where we belong?*”

“This may be hard for you to hear, Commander Rickman, but you have traveled more than three hundred years into the future and hundreds of light-years from Earth.”

Silence permeated the bridge as Rickman failed to reply.

*“Uh, you’re right. That is hard to believe.”* Another pause created more silence. *“If what you’re saying is true, are you saying that mankind has learned how to break the lightspeed barrier?”*

“That’s right, Commander,” Stuart replied. “And we have surpassed it beyond what you can imagine.”

*“Have you made contact with extraterrestrial life?”*

Stuart almost chuckled as he smiled. He could only imagine what it would be like for someone living in the time before humans had direct evidence of people from other planets. Stuart grew up with knowledge of extraterrestrials, and direct contact with them was commonplace. “Earth is part of an interstellar alliance known as the United Federation of Planets. We live and work with hundreds of other species—many are similar to humans. Earth has established many colonies on other worlds...but again, I would like to meet in person and discuss the details.”

*“Well, I’m open to that, but HAL is offline, and my colleague would have to stay behind to manually operate the pod door so I could come over to your ship.”*

“We have developed a device that can transport you onto our ship. The trip only takes a few seconds.”

*“Uh, is it painful?”*

“Not at all, Commander.”

*“Okay, I will take your word for it. What do I need to do?”*

“Not a thing. Just stand still while we lock on and beam you over.” Stuart arose and started toward the Turbolift. “Commander Lexra, please join me. Mister Barnsdale, you have the bridge.” Stuart and Lexra entered the turbolift and went to Transporter Room One located on deck three.



The captain and acting first officer entered the transporter room and stood beside CPO Miguel Cardona. “Please beam our guest aboard, Chief.”

“Aye, sir.” the transporter chief said as he started to set coordinates and waved his hand over the three light panels on the console.

Moments later, the sparkling transporter effect activated and coalesced into the human from the other ship. “Woe, that was a weird feeling.”

“Welcome aboard, Commander Rickman.” Stuart, with an outstretched hand, approached the newcomer.

“Thank you,” Rickman said as he slowly stepped down from the transporter platform. He shook Stuart’s hand. “I wanted you to meet my colleague, Lieutenant Jefferson, but he stayed behind to work on restoring HAL and the other systems.”

“You have mentioned Hal before. Who is he?” Lexra, having been quiet up to this point, stepped closer to Rickman.”

“HAL is our...” Rickman noticed that the man had spots on the sides of his face that ran down each side of his neck.

Stuart smiled as he said, “You asked if we had contacted extraterrestrials. This is Commander Jeron Lexra from the planet Trillius Prime.”

“Glad to meet you,” Lexra said.

“I...I expected that aliens would be a lot different than humans, but other than your spotted skin, you look just like us.”

“Our two species have a lot in common, but external differences aren’t the only ones.”

“Oh?”

“He has a big worm living in his belly,” Stuart said.

“A symbiotic lifeform,” Lexra quickly added. “My planet has two different species. One is humanoid, and the other—symbionts—live in underground pools. Some of my people have been chosen and trained to be joined together. I am the fifth host to the Lexra symbiont, and I carry the memories and life experiences of the previous hosts as well as my own.”

Rickman just looked at Lexra for a moment. “That’s...interesting.”

“If you think that’s interesting, two of my previous hosts were women.”

Before Rickman could say anything, Stuart joined back in the conversation. “Let’s not scare him, Commander. The matter of how to get him and his crew back to his home and the proper time takes precedence. Let’s adjourn to the conference room and we can discuss your situation and what to do about it. If you will join us?” Stuart led the way as the three exited the transporter room.



The turbolift halted, and the doors opened to the main conference room. Stuart, followed by Rickman and Lexra, took the steps down to the main floor of the conference room located aft of the bridge. Rickman looked out the large overhead curved windows to see the stars. He was amazed that he had seen more than a dozen people in the corridors en route to the elevator, or turbolift as Stuart had called it. Rickman faced Stuart and asked him directly, “How big is this ship? How many are in your crew?”

“This class of ship is almost three hundred meters long. It has ten decks and a crew of...” Stuart looked at Commander Lexra.

“One hundred sixty-four currently,” Lexra finished. “And this class is considered to be a light explorer. The longest ships are almost seven hundred meters. The most massive are the *Galaxy*-class starships with forty-two decks and crews of over a thousand people each.”

Rickman's mouth dropped open as he stepped back and took hold of the edge of the conference table to steady himself.

"You might want to take a seat, Commander Rickman," Stuart said. "I know that this must be overwhelming for you."

"That's an understatement, Captain Stuart," Rickman said as he sat down. "How many...starships...does your Federation have?"

"Starfleet has hundreds of starships plus a few thousand shuttles and other small craft. There are probably a couple thousand civilian and privately owned vessels"

"What year is this again?"

"On Earth's calendar, the year is 2380." Stuart sat at the head of the table.

"Everyone I knew is dead, then."

"Maybe not, Commander," Lexra said. "We scanned your ship, and it appears that the readings indicate that you came from an alternate universe or possibly another dimension. The two universes may coexist simultaneously but with each one existing in a different time."

"I cannot fathom that," Rickman said. "I just want to get back to my wife and kids."

Stuart understood what the man felt. "I'm a family man, too, Commander, and I can imagine how I would feel in your situation. How many children do you have?"

"Three with one more on the way." He folded his hands as he leaned his arms on the table. "Be honest with me, Captain. Can you get me and my crew home?"

Stuart glanced up at Lexra, who was still standing and looked back toward Rickman. "I don't know, but we'll do whatever we can to find out if it's possible. If it is, then we'll try our best."

Rickman peered into Stuart's eyes and decided that the captain was telling the truth. He relaxed and sat back in the chair. "Thank you, Captain, for your honesty."

"Can I get you something to eat? Drink?" Lexra asked.

"I don't think I can eat right now, Commander Lexra, but I could use a stiff drink." He started to laugh. "But I'm sure that your ship, like mine, doesn't carry alcohol."

"The Starview Lounge does stock some genuine alcoholic beverages, but synthehol comes in many forms to simulate various beverages."

"Synthehol?"

"Tastes like an alcoholic beverage of your choice but without the negative effects," Stuart said.

"I think I might need the negative effects before this is over, so I'll wait. May I have a glass of ice water?"

Lexra turned and walked toward the replicator. He stopped and said, “Computer, one glass of water with ice; four degrees Celsius.”

Rickman’s eyes went wide as he watched the alcove in the wall produce the glass of water out of thin air. When Lexra brought the water to him, Rickman accepted it and took a sip. “It’s like magic.”

“Not magic, Commander. Just advanced technology,” Lexra said.

Stuart wondered how he would react if he were in Rickman’s place. He also was curious about the other Earth and its differences. More than that, he wanted to know more about Jupiter’s transformation. “You mentioned that Jupiter had been transformed. What did you mean?”

Rickman took another drink. “It became a second star in the solar system. That didn’t happen in this universe?”

“No, it didn’t,” Stuart said. “Do you know what caused the transformation?”

“It was some form of advanced intelligence,” Rickman said. “It started with the discovery of an alien obelisk on the moon in 2001. Shortly after, my ship’s predecessor, *Discovery I*, was sent to Jupiter to investigate...”

Rickman shared what he knew about the failed mission and the loss of the crew as well as the last transmission from Commander Dave Bowman. He shared what he knew about the *Leonov*’s journey with a joint American-Soviet crew to find out the previous ship’s fate. The tale of the thousands of alien obelisks that appeared in Jupiter’s orbit and subsequently entered the gas giant’s atmosphere, which initiated the nuclear ignition that turned the largest planet in the solar system into a second sun. And there was the mysterious transmission that encouraged the people of Earth to work together in peace to use the moons orbiting the new star for their benefit. All of these worlds were for Earth’s people...except for Europa. There was an ominous warning to leave Europa alone. And that brought about more questions. More mysteries.

“In a way, the alien intelligence behind those events may have saved the United States and the Soviets from going to war and destroying the world,” Rickman said.

“On our Earth, the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991,” Stuart said. Unfortunately, our world suffered a third world war about sixty years after that. The world finally started working toward unity after the Vulcans made first contact with humans after a man named Zefram Cochrane broke the lightspeed barrier in 2063.”

“Sir, I hate to change the subject, but...”

“You’re right Mister Lexra.” Stuart nodded to the acting first officer to signal for him to add to the conversation.

“Commander Rickman, I am wondering about these alien obelisks your people encountered. Any idea where they came from or who sent them?” Lexra asked.

Rickman shook his head. “Not a clue.”

“And you say that it was *Discovery I*’s AI—HAL—that killed four of the crew before Commander Bowman was able to disable it?” Stuart was trying to contemplate how an AI from the early Twenty-first Century could be so advanced as what Rickman had described. “And you still use the same AI for your ship?”

“Not the same. *Discovery I* had the HAL-9000 model,” Rickman said. “*Discovery II* is equipped with HAL-9300, which Doctor Chandra programmed with better safety protocols to prevent it from harming the human crew.”

“Everything that you have told us is amazing, Commander Rickman.” Stuart knew that he wanted to find out more about the universe that Rickman and his colleagues came from—their history and technology. He also knew that he should reciprocate, but since that other ship came from not only another universe but also an earlier time, it would be prudent to limit how much information should be shared. It could alter the other universe’s timeline. Since Rickman’s people were human, it could be argued that the Prime Directive did not apply, but Temporal Investigations would most likely be very unhappy with Stuart if he shared Twenty-fourth Century tech with Rickman. The least he could do would be to authorize a brief tour of the ship’s non-technical areas and amenities. “Commander, I would like to invite you and your crew to dinner and offer to help you a team of engineers to help you bring your ship’s AI and other systems back online.”

Rickman, for the first time since coming aboard, smiled. “I would appreciate that, Captain Stuart. Thank you.”

“It’s our pleasure, and I hope that you would be willing to allow us to study your ship a little closer in the process, but I understand if you decline.”

“I have no problem with that, Captain, but your tech is hundreds of years beyond our ship, I’m surprised that you would want...or need to.”

“Well, you are from a different universe, and our technology from the same period that you are from was not as advanced as yours.”

“Fair enough,” Rickman said. “As for my crew, three of them are in cryosleep, but once our other systems are online, we can wake them.”

“Very good.” Stuart looked to the acting first officer. “Commander Lexra, will you take Commander Rickman along with an away team to assist him?”

“Yes, sir.” Lexra nodded his head and motioned to the turbolift. Commander Rickman, after you.”

Rickman, followed by Lexra, entered the turbolift as Stuart watched.



Commander Anne McDougall hovered over the ‘pool table’ master control station in the engine room. She viewed the sensor scans of the other ship and realized that there was a slight problem towing the other ship away from the anomaly as the captain suggested might be necessary should the temporal and/or quantum energy readings start to increase again.



Just then, Stuart entered engineering and approached the chief engineer. “Commander McDougall, I wanted to see how your analysis is progressing.”

“Sir, that ship is ancient by our standards, and the main problem with towing it would be a strain on its hull. *Discovery II* does not have a structural integrity field.”

“That is a problem, isn’t it?”

“A small one, Captain,” McDougall said. The woman’s face around her eyes began to show a few wrinkles as she smiled. “It’s nothing we can’t handle. We can manufacture and install some SIF generators in key areas of the ship in case we might need to tow it at warp.”

Stuart was not an engineer, but he had enough general knowledge to understand what needed to be done. “I assume that ship doesn’t have inertial dampers either.”

“Correct, Captain. We can install a few IDF generators as well.”

“Make it so, Commander.”

“Yes, sir.”

Stuart started to turn but he stopped as the chief engineer called to him.

“Sir?”

“Yes, Commander?”

“I looked over the file that you gave me the other day, and as you suggested, I contacted Commander Li, on the *Monarch* to talk to him about Lieutenant Tamar. Once he heard that you recommended the lieutenant, he allowed me to interview her after he briefly told me how much of an asset that she is,” McDougall said. “After hearing his assessment, along with your recommendation and the interview I had with her, I’d like to have her on my team. I hope you don’t mind, but I offered her the position.”

“I hoped that you would. What did she say?”

“She wanted some time to think about it.”

“She tends to look at all her options before making decisions,” Stuart said. “Did she give you an idea about when she would decide?”

“She said that she would contact me within three days regardless of the answer.”

“If she says ‘yes,’ have her put in the transfer request. I will contact Commander Li and Captain Grey with my approval.”

“Very good, Captain.”

Stuart nodded and turned to leave engineering, confident that Lieutenant Elima Tamar would be a welcome addition to the new *Republic*’s crew.



Lieutenant Mark Jefferson, former naval aviator, astronaut, and second-in-command of *Discovery II*, watched the people from the futuristic starship curiously as they helped work on the *Discovery*'s electronics. He wasn't prepared to have extraterrestrials on board, even though he was certain that life from other planets had to exist since *that* question had already been answered with the events of the last few years. These aliens, however, did not seem that much different from humans: a man with spotted skin, a bald woman, a man with upswept eyebrows and pointed ears, a woman with the same eyebrows and ears as well as similar spots just like on the man in charge. There was also a bald man with blue skin who had a raised ridge that ran along the center of his neck, chin, mouth, nose, and entire head to the back of his neck. The most unusual alien also had blue skin, but he had white hair and two antennae sprouting from his cranium. A few humans were present as well.

After Jefferson recovered from the initial shock of seeing a variety of extraterrestrials, he found that he liked the idea of a diverse group of species working together. He wanted to know more about this United Federation of Planets. These aliens were less of a mystery to him than the mysterious obelisk that was found on the moon in 2001 and the unknown number of larger obelisks that showed up in Jupiter's orbit only a few years later. He was still trying to get his head around the events leading up to Jupiter becoming a second star in the solar system.

As Jefferson contemplated the revelations that faced him, he noticed as one of the pointed-eared aliens—Chief Petty Officer Silna—approached him. “Your computer system has been repaired and is ready to be reinitialized, Lieutenant Jefferson.”

“Uh, thank you, uh, Chief.” Jefferson smiled, but the person in front of him wore an emotionless countenance. “I have been working for hours to reboot HAL, but you were able to get him up and running in under fifteen minutes. I'm impressed.”

“The power supply had been subjected to an overload, which damaged one of the main processors. Once I detected and replaced the processor, the rest of the damage was negligible.”

Jefferson wondered why Silna seemed standoffish. “Well, thanks again.”

“You are welcome.” The Vulcan started to turn to go back to the console. “If you come with me, you can begin the startup procedure to bring your AI back online.”

Jefferson followed Silna and sat down at the HAL 9300 console and switched on the power. When the screen appeared, a blinking cursor waited for his identification number and password, which he entered using the keyboard. Within a few moments a domed glass ‘eye’ turned from black to red. “HAL? Are you functioning?”

“Hello, Mark,” a soothing male voice replied. “It seems that I have been offline. May I inquire how long and what caused me to shut down?”

“We encountered some type of spatial anomaly that overloaded our systems,” Jefferson said. “You have been offline for almost three hours.”

“I see. Did my absence create any problems with the cryogenic tubes or other systems?”

“Fortunately, cryogenics switched to backup power. Our navigational and communication systems have been damaged, but they are being repaired.”

“Who are these people, Mark? Some of them do not appear to be human.”

“They are our rescuers. They are helping us repair our systems.”

Silna raised an eyebrow. “Fascinating,” he said and walked away to assist one of the engineering technicians with the ship’s navigational controls.

“That was Chief Petty Officer Silna from the spaceship that came to our rescue. He repaired you.”

“Has the mission been canceled, Mark?”

“Not officially, but we have encountered a few problems.” Jefferson sighed as his shoulders dropped. “HAL, we are no longer heading for Titan. In fact, we are not in our solar system any longer.”

“I find that answer unlikely, Mark.”

“Sorry, HAL, but it’s true,” Commander Rickman said as he approached Jefferson at HAL’s master station. “From what we have been told, we have traveled hundreds of light-years from Earth and about three hundred seventy years into the future. It also seems that we are in an alternate universe or possibly another dimension.”

“Do you realize how absurd that sounds, Ted?”

“Yes, I do, HAL, but until we have evidence to the contrary, I am prepared to accept that explanation.”

“Do you mind if I conduct additional research into this matter, Ted?”

“Not at all, HAL.” Ted Rickman looked toward Lieutenant Mark Jefferson and back to the red eye. “I think that is a great idea. I only ask that you keep your mind open to the possibility.”

“I always consider all possibilities, Ted.”

“I know you do, HAL.” Rickman gave a half-grin. “In the meantime, I want you to run diagnostics on all systems. Our new friends have completed repairs, but I will feel better after you give your stamp of approval.”

“I will make system diagnostics a priority, Ted.”

“Good.”

“Commander Rickman?” Jeron Lexra sat at one of the consoles almost directly above Rickman and Jefferson. Unlike Federation starships, *Discovery II*, like its predecessor, produced artificial gravity with a rotating centrifuge housed in the sphere of the ship. Lexra felt a little odd as the centrifuge rotated at a speed that was not quite enough to mimic gravity on Trill, Earth, or most M-class worlds that he had been to. “I think that our people are almost done with repairs.

Our ship's chief medical officer has requested that you and your crew undergo complete physical examinations. Do you have any objections?"

"I think it would be a good idea. I will have HAL awaken the others."

"With your permission, we can transport them directly to our sickbay."

"Is it safe to do that, Commander Lexra?" Jefferson asked. "Bringing people out of cryogenic sleep can be pretty tricky and it takes a while to remove them from the tubes."

"It's your decision, but I can assure you that it will be perfectly safe if we use the transporter."

Jefferson cocked his head to one side as he looked skeptically toward Rickman. "I don't know about this advanced tech, Ted."

"I've used this transporter device twice now, and I am still here."

"What does it feel like?"

"It's a tingling sensation. It sort of tickles." Rickman places his hand on Jefferson's shoulder. "It will be fine." Looking up toward Lexra, Rickman said, "You have my permission, Commander."



Joran Lexra entered the bridge and walked behind the curved wooden rail that separated the command and VIP chairs from the engineering and auxiliary subsystems stations at the rear of the circular room. He went around the railing and sat in the chair to the captain's right. "Are you ready for my report, Captain?"

"If you are ready to give it, Commander." Stuart, displaying a look of anticipation, turned his head toward Lexra.

"*Discovery II* is fully operational with all systems online. The five members of the crew are in sickbay undergoing physical exams, including the three that were in stasis." Lexra started to frown.

"What's wrong, Mister Lexra?"

"Are we going to be able to send them back to their time and universe in that primitive ship? Everything has been repaired, but you felt the effects of the energy wave from that anomaly. I'm not sure the *Discovery's* hull will survive another ride through it."

"Mister Grezka has his best people analyzing the data. The fact that they are here suggests that they can go back. At least in theory." Stuart paused and considered the various possible consequences of the situation. "Commander, please have Mister Grezka, his team, Commander McDougall, and our five guests meet us in the main conference room in one hour."

"Yes, Captain." Lexra immediately stood and made his way to the turbolift.



The turbolift doors opened and the chief of security, Lieutenant Commander Brian Kilrain, and two enlisted members of security led the five guests into the conference room. The two security crewmen stood off to the side of the turbolift to allow the others to walk down the steps and approach the table where Captain Stuart and Commander Lexra were seated as well as a previously unseen alien that seemed to be covered with hair. Standing at the opposite end of the table from Stuart were two women—one with pointed ears.

Stuart stood and faced the five. “Welcome, gentlemen. Please have a seat.”

Three of the guests—Commander Ted Rickman, Lieutenant Mark Jefferson, and one of the others who had been previously in cryogenic sleep sat on the same side of the table as Commander Lexra. The other two sat on the side of the table where the hairy alien was seated.

Stuart sat down at the head of the table and smiled at the guests. “Commander Rickman, would you like to introduce your colleagues?”

“Certainly. Next to Lieutenant Jefferson is Doctor Henry Vanderburg, and across the table are Doctors Dwayne Harker and Gerald Reynolds.”

Each of the men nodded to Stuart. One of the scientists, Doctor Reynolds, smiled as he started to speak. “Ted has brought us up to speed on what appears to have happened and where we are. I, for one, am looking forward to learning about this Federation of yours and even more about the many intelligent species that humans have encountered.”

Rickman smiled. “Please forgive Doctor Reynolds’ enthusiasm. He’s a biologist who is very curious about the possibility of life developing on other planets.”

“Nothing to forgive, Commander,” Stuart said. “Everyone on this ship is out here to satisfy their curiosity as well.”

“Captain, we are all curious about the mysteries of the universe,” Doctor Vanderburg said, “but the one thing on our minds is wondering if we can get back home to our Earth.”

“Speak for yourself, Henry,” Doctor Harker said. “We’re here now, so let’s take the opportunity to explore this new universe. We can worry about getting home later.”

“Typical of you, Dwayne. You don’t have a family to go home to,” Vanderburg said harshly as he tried not to clench his teeth together.

“You don’t have to be cruel, Henry.” Harker frowned at the other scientist. It was true that Harker chose not to pursue marriage or children so that he could concentrate on his career as a geologist and a professor at Harvard University. His parents had both passed away, and he was an only child, so whatever caused *Discovery II* to transport to another universe where Earth had progressed centuries beyond the world that he knew was a dream come true. “If you all want to go back, that is your choice. I want to stay and learn all that I can.”

“It is possible that none of you will be able to go back to your universe,” the hairy alien said.

Stuart used his head to nod to the alien seated at his left. “This is my senior science officer, Lieutenant Commander Grezka.”

“What do you mean that we might not be able to go back home?” Rickman asked.

“I will let Lieutenant T’Lan explain since she is our resident expert in spatial phenomena.”

T’Lan stepped closer to the table as all others looked in her direction. “I do not discount the possibility of your return to your universe, but I do not want to disillusion you, either,” the Vulcan said. “We do not yet know enough about the anomaly that brought you here to predict when it will activate again. Even if we could, we cannot control how it will react or if we can open a doorway back to your universe and time. We continue to scan the anomaly to increase our knowledge and analyze the data.”

“We will work to find a way for you to go back, but we have no guarantees to offer,” Stuart said.

“If you do find a way to send us back, what if some of us don’t want to go?” Harker asked.

Stuart felt all of the guests’ eyes bearing down on him. He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms. “That is a discussion for another time, Doctor.”

Doctor Vanderburg started tapping his finger on the conference table. “Despite Doctor Harker’s fanciful wishes, I suspect that the rest of us would prefer to return to Earth—*our* Earth! So, what can you do to help us get there?”

“As Lieutenant T’Lan said, we need to study the anomaly closely and continue to scan it. We need to understand how it works and, if possible, control it.” Stuart turned his head toward the Vulcan astrophysicist. “Lieutenant, please continue.”

“Thank you, Captain. Lieutenant Fontaine and I will work with engineering and tactical to modify some of our probes with quantum and temporal amplifiers to launch into the anomaly. We will see if the probes arrive in the correct time and universe that *Discovery II* came from. We will use the probes to map the quantum corridor as well as take readings of the anomaly’s structure to determine if it will be safe for *Discovery* to traverse it.”

“But the assumption is that the probes will find the correct time and universe. Correct?” Commander Ted Rickman said.

“I make no assumptions, Commander,” T’Lan replied. “We may need to launch several probes before we discover if we have found the correct universe or not. Theoretically, there might be an infinite number of universes, so the odds that we find your universe are incalculable.”

Stuart thought about the Vulcan’s proposal and considered other options. He looked to the senior science officer. “Mister Grezka? Your thoughts?”

The Xindi Arboreal, in a low baritone voice, said, “I concur with Lieutenant T’Lan; however, we will probably exhaust our supply of probes and still not find the correct universe.”

Stuart turned his head to face the acting first officer. “Mister Lexra, please have manufacturing start replicating probe casings and components.”

“Anyone else?” Stuart looked around the room and focused on the guests’ facial expressions. He could see uncertainty and fear in the eyes of two of the scientists and Rickman. He noticed that Doctor Harker’s and Lieutenant Jefferson’s body language seemed more relaxed than their colleagues. After several moments of silence, Stuart stood and turned to face the security chief standing next to the other two members of his department that were in the room. “Mister Kilrain, assign our guests to quarters and have the quartermaster provide them with suitable clothing.”

“Aye, Captain,” Kilrain said in his thick Irish dialect. “Gentlemen, if you will follow me, I will set you up in all the comforts of a grand hotel.”

The three scientists, Commander Rickman, and Lieutenant Jefferson rose from their chairs and followed the security chief into the turbolift. After the double doors slid shut, Stuart looked at T’Lan and Belle Fontaine, still standing at the other end of the conference table. “Well, Lieutenants, you have your work cut out for you. Carry on.”

The two young officers nodded and simultaneously said, “Yes, Captain.” They quickly made their way to the turbolift.

“Gentlemen,” Stuart said as he started toward the door that led to the bridge; Grezka and Lexra followed Stuart out of the conference room.”



Rob Stuart had made a habit out of eating his evening meals in the Starview Lounge to mingle with various officers and enlisted crew members. He wanted to correct his mistake of not getting to know the members of his last ship’s crew, other than the senior officers that he encountered almost daily. Today, however, he decided to eat in his quarters while mulling over what to do about the people from Earth in the other universe. Unfortunately, evidence had been gathered over the years to indicate that other universes existed—possibly hundreds or thousands of other universes. Ever since James T. Kirk and a few of his senior officers were accidentally transported to what had been designated as the ‘Mirror Universe’ during an ion storm, scientists have tried to theorize how to travel between different universes, dimensions, and planes of existence at will. Deep Space Nine personnel, according to classified reports that Stuart had access to, had been involved in at least three occasions where people from our universe had traveled to the ‘Mirror Universe’ and vice versa. Stuart hoped that in the search to find a way to return Rickman and his crew to where they came from, he would not be responsible for opening a Pandora’s Box.

Stuart finished his dinner and returned the empty dishes to the replicator for recycling. He went to the work desk and sat down, activating the monitor. “Computer, contact Starbase *Gateway Alpha* and patch me through to Doctor Janice Stuart.”

After several seconds, the computer responded. “*Doctor Stuart is not currently available. Would you like to record a message?*”

Stuart looked at the chronometer embedded into the semi-clear desktop. He thought it odd that she would not be in their quarters at this hour. “Yes, computer. Begin recording.”

*“Acknowledged. Please begin.”*

“Hi, Jan. I’m sorry I didn’t catch you at home. I just wanted to say that I miss you and the children. The *Republic*’s maiden voyage is running longer than I expected, but I hope to be back with you soon. Contact me when you can.” Rob stood up and started toward the door to the lavatory. “Computer, end recording and transmit.”

After Stuart exited the lavatory, he changed into civilian clothes and sat on the couch. He picked up the book from the end table that he had been reading during his spare time and turned to where the bookmark indicated his last stopping point. As he started reading, the computer interrupted before he could get past the first paragraph.

*“Incoming transmission from Doctor Janice Stuart. Do you wish to accept?”*

“Yes. Activate the desk monitor,” Stuart replied as he closed the book and placed it back on the table. He quickly got up and walked to the desk. Sitting down, he activated the monitor. “Jan!” He noticed that his wife looked tired. “Is anything wrong?”

On the monitor, the image of Janice Stuart smiled although her husband thought it was forced. *“Hi, Rob. Nothing wrong. It’s been a long day.”*

“Want to talk about it?”

*“Not much to tell,”* Jan said. *“Sickbay has received several Bolian patients with Rathar Syndrome today, so my staff and I have been pretty busy.”*

“Sounds serious.”

*“The name makes it sound worse than it is. It’s similar to the flu with a few additional symptoms, but it’s not dangerous. The Bolians consider it to be the worst disease imaginable, but you know how some people tend to exaggerate. It generally will be out of their systems within three or four days.”*

“When I left, you seemed like you weren’t busy enough.”

*“Well, I’m busy enough now. When do you think that you will be back?”*

“I wish I could say, Jan, but we made a discovery. It seems that the temporal anomaly spit out a three hundred seventy-year-old ship from Earth, but there’s a catch.”

Jan frowned. *“Oh?”*

“It’s from an Earth in another universe.”

*“Rob, are there people aboard?”*

“Five. They’re currently in guest quarters,” Rob said. “We are trying to figure out if we can find the universe they came from and send them back. Unfortunately, it might take a while.”

*“I understand, but I hope it doesn’t take too long. I miss you, and so do the kids.”*



“I miss you, too.”

Jan yawned. *“Listen, I hate to do this, but I need to get the kids from Child Care and take them home. I hope they will be tired enough to go to bed early tonight.”*

Rob smiled. “If they do, they will probably wake up early, too.”

*“Oh, don’t even think that!”* Janice shook her head.

“Get some rest, dear. I will contact you tomorrow evening. I love you.”

*“I love you, too, Rob, and I’m sorry that we can’t spend more time talking tonight.”*

“Don’t worry about it. Get some rest.”

Jan smiled as her face was replaced by the Federation logo.



After his duty shift concluded, Commander Jeron Lexra went to the Starview Lounge and made his way to a table where Commander Anne McDougall, the chief engineer, waited for him. He smiled and sat across the table from her. “Thanks for coming Anne.”

“What’s so urgent, Jeron?”

“It’s nothing urgent,” Lexra replied.

“Your voice sounded like it was.”

“I’m sorry if I gave that impression.” Lexra paused as he looked down at the table momentarily and back to face the engineer. “I need your advice, Anne.”

“Professional or personal?”

“Maybe a little bit of both.”

“I’ll help in any way that I can, Jeron.”

“I have had the opportunity to command many starships during their shakedowns during the last few years, and I hope to have a more permanent command someday.”

“Nothing is permanent in Starfleet,” Anne said.

“True. But my goal is to get a...long-term command. However, the more time I spend on this ship, I find myself considering applying for the first officer position. Would that be a step back?”

Anne thought a moment to consider how to answer. After a few seconds, she said, “I don’t think that is a step back. If you want to earn a command of your own, then it only makes sense to serve as a first officer to gain command experience.”

“I have command experience.”

“But as you said, Jeron, that experience is on short-term shakedown missions to test new starships and their systems. You need to have experience out in the depths of space working under an experienced ship’s captain to prepare you for your *own* command.”

“So, you think that I should apply for the position?”

“What I think doesn’t matter,” Anne said, “but for the record, I think that you would be perfect for the job.”

“Thank you for that.” Jeron began to relax. “And for the record, your opinion *does* matter...to me. My concern is that Captain Johnson won’t agree to the transfer.”

“Why wouldn’t he?” Anne asked. “He approved my transfer request.”

“And that’s why he might not approve mine. Losing two senior officers in that short of a time...”

Anne interrupted by saying, “I’ve been a part of Captain Johnson’s team for a lot longer time than you, and I know him well enough to say that he would not hold anyone back from working toward career advancement.”

“But I hate to leave him shorthanded.”

“Jeron, you are one of a dozen systems test supervisors.” Anne smiled. “Frankly, you’re probably the best one he has working for him, but you will not be letting him down by taking another position.”

Jeron started nodding his head, realizing that Anne was right. “Okay, I’m going to apply for the position. I will contact Captain Johnson to let him know my intentions first, and then I will talk with Captain Stuart.”

“Glad to hear it, Number One.” Anne moved her head to one side. “That has a nice sound to it.”

“As your people say, don’t jinx it.” Jeron smiled as he stood and pushed the chair under the table. “Thank you, Anne.”

The chief engineer held up her glass to toast Jeron’s success as he turned and walked toward the exit.



The next morning, Jeron Lexra entered the bridge and approached the center seat. “Good morning, Mister Barnsdale.”

Barnsdale, the senior tactical and second officer, stood and snapped to attention. “Good morning, sir.”

“Anything to report?”

“It has been a quiet night, Commander. The captain is in his ready room and requested that you join him.”

“Thank you, Mister Barnsdale. I will relieve you after I meet with the captain if you don’t mind staying on as the O.O.D. a little longer.”

“My pleasure, sir.”

Jeron Lexra nodded and started toward the port side. As he took the steps to the lower level, he noticed the turbolift doors open to deliver Lieutenant Commander Grezka, Lieutenant Commander Brian Kilrain, Lieutenant Tharon Ch’Toriith, Lieutenant Commander Axred Nulan, Lieutenant J.G. T’Plees, and Lieutenant J.G. Leesa Morse to take their stations and relieve the Gamma shift officers. Lexra glanced at the chronometer above the main viewscreen. *Thirty-two seconds ahead of schedule*, he thought. *Good for them*. He looked at the door that led to the ready room and took a deep breath. He exhaled as he pressed the LCARS touchpad to signal the captain of his arrival. When Lexra heard Stuart’s voice say ‘Come,’ the double doors parted, and he walked in and approached the desk. “You wanted to see me, sir?”

Stuart looked up from the PADD that he was reading and set it down on the desktop. “Come in and have a seat, Commander.”

Lexra sat in one of the chairs across from Stuart. He waited for what seemed like several minutes for the captain to say something; however, less than ten seconds had passed. He started to open his mouth, but Stuart started speaking before Lexra had the chance to.

“Commander, I want you to know that I appreciate your willingness to act as the first officer for this mission.”

“It has been my pleasure, Captain.

“I know that we have already been out here longer than I expected, so I wanted to apologize for delaying your return to Utopia Planitia.”

“About that, sir, I planned on approaching you today...”

Stuart held his hand up to stop Lexra from continuing. “Please let me finish, Mister Lexra.”

“Of course, sir. I apologize.”

Stuart continued. “I would like to ask if you would consider making your assignment here more...permanent. I have pulled your file and been studying it. I would like you to be my first officer.”

The Trill officer smiled widely and said, “Actually, Captain, I was planning to talk to you about that and submit my application for the position.”

Stuart also smiled. “Good. We are on the same wavelength.” Stuart leaned back in his chair. “I will get the paperwork ready for you to sign, and we will send it through channels. Do you think that Captain Johnson will have any problems with letting you go?”

“I sent him a message yesterday evening about my desire to apply for the position, and his reply was waiting for me when I woke up this morning. He told me that he would not only approve the transfer but would also send a letter of recommendation to you.”

Stuart stood and reached his arm across the desk. Lexra also stood and accepted Stuart's handshake. "Congratulations, Commander Lexra."

"Thank you, sir. I look forward to working with you, and I promise that I will serve you and this ship to the best of my ability."

"I have two questions for you. First, do you prefer to be called Exec or Number One?"

"Uh, I don't have a preference, sir."

"Okay, then expect either one depending on my mood. Secondly, will you challenge me when you think I am making a wrong decision?"

"I will. Within the bounds of protocol, of course."

"Good. We should work well together." Stuart walked out from behind the desk and patted his new first officer on the back as they moved toward the door.

The two officers entered the bridge and walked up the steps to the upper level and toward the command chairs. Barnsdale stood and faced Stuart and Lexra. "Let me have your attention," Stuart said. "Mister Ch'Toriith, I want to address the entire ship."

The Andorian activated the intercom so that the entire crew would hear what the captain had to say. "Intercom open, Captain."

"Attention all hands, this the captain. I would like to announce that Commander Jeron Lexra has accepted the position of first officer. That is all."

"Intercom closed, sir," Ch'Toriith said as he closed the channel.

Stuart nodded to the Trill first officer. "The bridge is yours, Number One."

"Thank you, sir," Lexra said as Stuart turned and returned to his ready room. After the doors slid closed, the first officer turned and faced Lieutenant Commander Cooper Barnsdale. "I relieve you, Commander."

"I stand relieved," the senior tactical officer said. "And congratulations, sir."

"Thank you." Lexra sat in the center seat and began perusing the information on the status display located on the left armrest of the chair as Barnsdale left the bridge. Lexra looked toward the science console. "Mister Grezka, any changes in the anomaly?"

The Xindi quickly swiveled around in his chair to face the center of the bridge. "No changes detected, Commander. Lieutenant T'Lan has reported that modifications to the first eight probes will be completed within the hour. Lieutenant Fontaine is analyzing sensor data of the anomaly and *Discovery II*. They plan to program the probes to search for the *Discovery*'s quantum signature once they are launched into the anomaly."

"Thank you, Commander. Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

The first officer turned his attention back to reading the status display as he settled into his new role.



Commander Ted Rickman looked out the windows of his assigned quarters contemplating whether or not he and his crew would ever see their friends and family again. He slowly turned to face the man that was standing by the door.

“Well, what is your answer?” Doctor Henry Vanderburg asked impatiently.

“What do you want me to say, Henry? I don’t know if we can get home, and neither do our new friends.”

“Friends? We just met these people. How do you know they can be trusted?”

“It’s that kind of thinking that almost got us into a nuclear war with the Soviets. If it wasn’t for that message encouraging peace that was sent right after Jupiter ignited into another sun, Earth would probably be a burned-out cinder by now.” Rickman sighed as he shook his head. “Henry, we need to learn how to trust other people.”

“Trust is earned, Ted.” Vanderburg’s face turned red as he walked closer to Rickman.

Rickman nodded in agreement. “You’re right, Doctor. Trust is earned, but we need to give our benefactors the chance to prove that they are trustworthy, and that takes time. Stop jumping to a negative conclusion without giving them enough time to prove themselves.”

The fire began to lift from Vanderburg’s face as he softened his stance. “I’m sorry, Ted. I guess that I am...scared.”

“We all are, but you are the only one of us who has admitted it...so far.” Ted smiled.

“Harker and Jefferson don’t seem to show it, but Doctor Reynolds is scared.”

“He hasn’t said anything that shows it,” Rickman said.

“That is how I know that he’s afraid. He has been holding things in. He normally talks too much and wears his heart on his sleeve.”

“Do you want me to talk with him?”

Vanderburg shook his head. “No, I’ll do that. I’ve known him a long time, and I think I know what he needs to work through his fear.”

“I’ve heard that there is a psychologist on this ship. I think her title is ship’s counselor.”

“Human or alien?”

“Alien, I think.”

“Then it might not be a good idea.”

“Why?”

“I think that the sudden realization of the existence of aliens working with humans is part of his fear.”

“I thought that he was excited to study other species. He is a biologist after all.”

“He has always wanted to believe in extraterrestrials, but now that the reality of it has been placed in front of him...”

“It’s too overwhelming for him to process.”

“Exactly.”

“Alright, Henry, you do what you can to help Doctor Reynolds. I’ll talk with Captain Stuart to see if his people have figured out how to get us home.”



Rob Stuart was sitting on the chair located under the overhead window in his ready room as he took a sip of apple cinnamon tea. The chime alerted him to someone on the other side of the door. “Enter.”

The doors slid apart with a whoosh as the captain stood to welcome the new arrival. “Come in, Commander Rickman. Please have a seat.”

The commander of *Discovery II* walked to the couch against the back wall of the ready room and sat down. “Thank you for seeing me, Captain.”

“It’s my pleasure. Can I get you something to drink?”

“Uh, what are you drinking?”

“Apple cinnamon tea,” Stuart said. “It’s my favorite hot beverage.”

“I’m not much of a tea drinker, but do you have coffee?”

“Certainly. How do you like it?”

“Cream and sugar. I like lots of sugar.”

Stuart set his cup on the triangular table next to him, stood, and walked to the replicator built into the wall behind his desk. “Computer, one cup of hot coffee with cream and sugar, double sweet.” He retrieved the cup from the alcove and took it to the other side of the room and handed it to Ted Rickman before sitting down again. “How can I help you, Commander?”

“Well, sir, I wanted to thank you for your hospitality, but I also wanted to find out what progress your people are making on our dilemma.”

“I promise that I will let you know once I am informed of any changes.”

“I appreciate that, Captain, but I hope that you understand that my crew—most of my crew—are anxious to get home.”

“I and my people will do all we can to...”

The captain's words were cut off by the high-pitched communication signal. "*Lexra to Captain. I'm sorry to interrupt, but the modifications for the first six probes have been completed.*"

"Thank you, Number One. We will be right there. Stuart out." The captain looked at Commander Rickman. "Care to join me on the bridge?"

"Yes, thank you."

Both men stood and exited the ready room. Stuart made his way to the center and sat in the command chair already vacated by the first officer. Stuart motioned for Commander Rickman to sit in the empty VIP chair to his left.

"Mister Sims, prepare to launch probes," Stuart told the officer at the tactical station.

Lieutenant Julian Sims complied with the order and placed the launch controls on standby, awaiting the captain's order to launch. "Ready, sir."

Stuart noticed that Lieutenant J.G. T'Lan had entered the bridge and made her way to the second science station next to Lieutenant Commander Grezka. "Lieutenant T'Lan, begin scanning the anomaly."

"Sensors locked on, Captain," the Vulcan stated. "Each probe has been programmed to search for both quantum and temporal signatures that match *Discovery* and her crew."

"Mister Sims, launch the first probe."

"Aye, sir. Launching now."

Stuart and every person on the bridge had their eyes riveted on the main viewer as they watched the probe speed toward the anomaly. "Any change in sensor readings, Lieutenant T'Lan?"

"Not at present, Captain. The probe will reach the outer edge of the anomaly in sixteen point two nine seconds."

"What do you expect to happen?" Ted Rickman asked.

"I have no idea, Commander," Stuart answered. "I guess that we'll find out together."

"Captain, sensors detect an increase in tachyon particles. The tachyons are exponentially increasing as the probe draws nearer to the anomaly."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Stuart said as he continued to watch the probe. Suddenly, the probe disappeared as it reached the event horizon. "Lieutenant?"

"I still have contact with the probe. It appears to have passed through to another location and is analyzing the quantum signature." T'Lan studied the sensor readings as well as the probe data. "The quantum signature matches ours, so it did not enter another universe; however, the temporal signature indicates that it has traveled into the past."

"Can you determine how far into the past?" Commander Lexra asked.

“I cannot be precise, but the data suggests approximately three weeks.”

“Location?” Stuart asked.

“Twelve point four seven light-years from our present location at bearing zero nine four mark twenty-one, sir.”

“Mister Sims, launch another probe please.”

“Aye, Captain. Launching now.”

The second probe, like the first, entered the anomaly and caused another increase in tachyons. T’Lan turned her chair toward the center of the bridge. “Captain, the tachyon increase is greater than the first one. The signal from the probe indicates that it has arrived in another universe; however, the quantum signature is not the correct one. Also, the temporal signature is from one hundred twenty-eight point two years in the future.”

“Let’s keep trying,” Stuart said. “Mister Sims, launch number three.”

“Aye, sir.”

Each of the remaining probes was sent, but none found the universe or the time from where *Discovery II* had come from. Only two probes had traveled to the past, and only three reached other universes.

“Sir, there is no pattern to where the probes are emerging,” Sims said. “It’s completely random.”

“Agreed, Commander Lexra said. “I’m not one to give up easily, but we cannot depend on blind luck.”

Stuart turned to see that Rickman had dropped his head and closed his eyes in defeat. “No, Number One, we can’t depend on blind luck, but we can do whatever we can to create our own luck. Lieutenant T’Lan, please begin modifying more probes and see if you can alter the programming to seek out the quantum and temporal signatures that we’re looking for.”

“Yes, Captain. I believe that I can develop an appropriate algorithm to search for the specific quantum and temporal signatures once the probes enter the anomaly.” The Vulcan stood and made her way to the turbolift.



Rob Stuart enjoyed walking through the botanical garden as he spent time thinking about Rickman and the others from the other universe. He wondered how they felt about the possibility that they might not find their way home. He wondered what he would do in that situation. And he remembered *Voyager*. How did Janeway and her crew feel during the seven years that they were wandering through the Delta Quadrant?

Stuart continued along the winding path until he saw Counselor T’Faaz Laris inspecting one of the trees. He approached and stood beside her. “Are those Kaferian apples?”



“Yes, and they are almost ripe,” The counselor said. “I estimate another two days until they’re ready to pick.”

“It’s been a long time since I have eaten Kaferian apples. I should come back in a couple of days and get one or two.”

“Have you ever had Kaferian wine, Captain?”

“Can’t say as I have, Counselor.” Stuart looked closely at the inviting fruit. “I take it the main ingredient is the juice from these apples.”

“After the apples are ripe, you can pick them and squeeze the juice into a container and add honey and a few ounces of enaberry juice. Let it ferment for eight days, and you will have a very tasty beverage; however, two-year-old wine is the best tasting. If it ages too long after that, it starts to become bitter.”

“It sounds to me like you know your stuff. You mentioned enaberry juice. I’m not familiar with that.”

“Enaberries are native to Betazed.” T’Faaz stepped a little closer to Stuart and lowered her voice. “Enaberries is what causes the Kaferian apple juice to ferment quickly, and it gives the wine a little more kick.”

Stuart smiled. “It sounds like you are experienced at brewing. Are you planning to make some of this wine?” he asked.

“Yes, I thought I would make two or three bottles to save for special occasions. Would you like to have one of them?”

“Thank you, Counselor. I would appreciate that.”

The counselor smiled as she raised one of her eyebrows. “You don’t have to accept out of politeness, Captain. I am not offended if you don’t want it.”

Stuart was taken aback by the counselor’s statement. He wondered if she was reading his mind. “It’s not that I don’t want one, it’s just that I…”

“…don’t usually partake in drinking alcoholic beverages.” T’Faaz smiled again. “I understand why you hesitated. I usually don’t either, but Kaferian Wine isn’t too potent.”

“Thank you for understanding. I will gladly accept a bottle from you.”

“It might be something to keep for when you entertain some admirals or other VIPs,” the counselor said.

“Admiral Montoya is due to visit *Gateway Alpha* in a few weeks, and he has no qualms about alcoholic beverages, so…”

“*Bridge to Captain Stuart,*” The intercom interrupted.

Stuart tapped his combadge. “Stuart. Go ahead.”

“*Sir, Doctor Stuart needs to speak with you. She says it’s highly important.*”

“Patch her through.” Stuart gave an apologetic look to the counselor as he resumed walking along the garden path. “What can I do for you, Jan?”

*“I’m sorry to bother you, dear, but I had to declare a medical emergency here.”*

“Medical emergency? What’s wrong?” Stuart’s forehead created wrinkles as his eyebrows drew tightly together.

*“I had to quarantine all Bolians and Andorians. Many are becoming ill, and one Andorian is in a coma with several others extremely ill.”*

“Do you know what is causing it?”

*“The Bolian Rathar Syndrome virus seems to have mutated and crossed species to the Andorians. The Bolians are recovering within a few days, which is normal; however, the Andorians’ lives are in grave danger.”*

Stuart could hear the barely controlled panic creeping into his wife’s voice. He wanted to do whatever he could, but he was not a doctor. “What do you need from me, Jan?”

*“I need Doctor Achebe. He interned on Bolarus and is more knowledgeable about Bolian illnesses than I am. Is there any way that you can bring him here as quickly as you can?”*

“I’ll do my best, but it will take about six to seven days,” Stuart said. “I will contact you within the hour to let you know our ETA.”

*“Thank you, and...I’m sorry to interrupt your mission.”*

“Think nothing of it, dear. I’ll talk with you soon.” Stuart tapped his combadge to end the transmission and tapped it again. “Stuart to bridge.”

*“Bridge. This is Lieutenant Commander Barnsdale.”*

“Please have Commanders Lexra, McDougall, and Doctor Achebe report to the main conference room in ten minutes. Also, have Commander Rickman join us as well.”

*“Aye, Captain.”*

Stuart tapped the communicator once more and made his way toward the nearest exit.



The first officer, chief engineer, and Commander Ted Rickman from *Discovery II* exited the turbolift and made their way to the conference table. Commander Lexra sat in the chair to the right of the captain’s chair at the head of the table where Stuart already sat. Anne McDougall sat to the captain’s left and Commander Rickman next to her.

“What has happened, Captain?” Lexra asked.

“Let’s wait for the doctor so I don’t have to repeat what I need to say.”

Just then, the turbolift doors parted, and Doctor Kofi Achebe entered and made his way to sit next to the first officer. “Captain.”

“Now that we are all here, let me say up front that I do not have very many details, but a few minutes ago I received a message from my wife. As you know, she is the CMO at Starbase *Gateway Alpha*,” Stuart said. “She informed me of an outbreak of some virus that affects Bolians and Andorians. She has requested that we get Doctor Achebe back ASAP.”

“Did she say what the virus was, Captain?” Achebe asked.

“Rathar Syndrome.”

“That isn’t dangerous. It just makes the Bolians extremely tired and miserable for a few days,” Achebe said. “Sometimes it causes a dark blue skin rash. And it has not been known to affect other species.”

“Jan said that the virus has mutated and has crossed over to Andorians. One is in a coma and several others are extremely ill,” Stuart said. “She has instituted a station-wide quarantine for all Bolians and Andorians.”

“I will contact her for more information after our meeting, sir.”

“Thank you,” Stuart replied. He turned his attention to the chief engineer. “Commander, what is the top safe speed we can go while towing *Discovery*?”

“We should be able to maintain Warp seven point five with the modifications that we made. Maybe we can make warp eight if we extend our shields around it.”

“Good.” Stuart looked at Ted Rickman. “I’m sorry that we can’t continue with our efforts to find your universe, but we will return and resume as soon as possible.”

“I understand, but why do we need to take *Discovery* with us? Wouldn’t it be better to leave it here?”

“*Gateway Alpha* has more resources to help modify your ship for the return journey through the anomaly—better than we have been able to do. And I don’t want to leave it drifting too near that anomaly in case it becomes active again.”

Rickman tilted his head slightly to one side in acknowledgment of Stuart’s reasoning. “I appreciate that, Captain. I don’t want anything to happen to HAL nor get stranded here.”

Stuart nodded and turned to face his first officer. “Number One, please contact the U.S.S. *Solar Flare* and fill Captain Granger in on our search for the *Discovery II*’s universe. Transmit all records, sensor logs, probe schematics and programming, and any other pertinent information. I want the *Solar Flare* to take over our efforts until we can return.”

“Aye, Captain,” Lexra replied.

Stuart lowered his voice and smirked. “Granger won’t like being pulled away from the mineral survey at Gem World, so you might have to emphasize that finding the *Discovery*’s universe is a higher priority.”

“I will do so, sir. Any other orders?”

“You should contact Lieutenant Commander Richard Baker at *Gateway Alpha* to let him know that I am rerouting the *Solar Flare*. Richard is the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group strategic operation officer, so he needs to know where all the ships are.”

“Agreed, Captain.” Lexra smiled and tried to, unsuccessfully, hold back his laughter.

“What’s so funny, Number One?” Stuart asked.

“The situation is not funny, but this is turning into an interesting first mission.”

Stuart nodded. “I can’t argue with that. Okay, everyone, let’s get going. I want to be underway within the hour.”

**To be continued...**