

## ***STARDATE 57891.7***

Lieutenant Commander Marissa Kwan, the U.S.S. *Solar Flare*'s senior science officer, studied the readings on her monitor. She turned in her chair to look at the center of the bridge. "Captain, I think I found it."

Captain Thomas Granger stood and walked toward the science station. "Are you sure?"

"The quantum and temporal signatures match perfectly, sir." Kwan's enthusiasm created a stir among the other bridge officers, who, along with the entire crew, had been fighting boredom for several weeks in the search for the alternative universe that was home to the five-member crew of the *Discovery II* that had been pulled through the anomaly many weeks prior. "Should I prepare another probe?"

Granger placed his hand on the back of Kwan's chair. "Let's not push our luck just yet. Are we still receiving data from the last probe you sent?"

"Yes, sir," Kwan said enthusiastically. "We have a strong signal, and I'm picking up a message from Earth directed toward Jupiter."

"Trying to contact *Discovery II*?"

"Yes, sir. Earth wants to know why *Discovery* has not sent any transmissions for the last four days."

"Only four days? Well, it looks like we didn't miss the target date by much," Granger said as he turned toward the tactical station. "Open a channel to Starbase *Gateway Alpha*. I want to talk with Fleet Captain Stuart."



### **To Boldly Go: Vortex**

A U.S.S. *Republic* and U.S.S. *Solar Flare* Story

By Cleve Johnson

Rob Stuart entered the conference room, one of many located on the starbase, and made his way to the table where he sat at the head. He looked at each of the other people seated around the elliptical table. "You're probably wondering why I called this meeting," he said as he projected a pleasant demeanor.

The command crew and scientists from the *Discovery II* sat attentively as they waited to hear what Stuart had to say. Commander Ted Rickman leaned forward and rested his forearms on the edge of the table. "The expression on your face makes me think that you have some good news, Captain."

"I heard from the U.S.S. *Solar Flare*. Captain Granger told me that his science officer has detected the correct quantum and temporal signatures that match you and your ship," Stuart said. "Are you ready to go home?"

“Absolutely, Captain. The sooner the better,” Doctor Henry Vandenburg said without hesitation.”

“On behalf of all of us,” Commander Ted Rickman said, “we would like to go home as soon as possible.”

Stuart looked at Doctor Dwayne Harker, the geologist from the alternate universe. After *Discovery II* came through the anomaly, Harker showed a strong interest in not going back. He wanted to stay in this universe to explore it. “Does that go for you, too, Doctor Harker?”

“As much as I would like to stay, Captain, I’ve come to realize that I don’t belong here. I feel like a relic, and I belong to the universe and time we came from.”

Stuart smiled at the geologist. “I had a feeling that you would want to go back with your colleagues. Well, gentlemen, take a last look around the starbase if you want to. We will depart at 0800 tomorrow.” Stuart stood and pushed his chair under the conference table.

Taking Stuart’s cue, the others stood. Ted Rickman approached Stuart and reached out to shake his hand. “Thank you, Captain Stuart. Thank you for everything.”

“My pleasure. We will get you back to your families as quickly as possible.” Stuart smiled as he turned and exited the conference room. As he entered the corridor, he tapped the Starfleet symbol on his chest. “Stuart to Commander Lexra.”

*“Lexra. How can I help you, Captain?”*

“Please have all personnel on board by 1700 hours and begin preparation to get underway. We’re leaving for the anomaly tomorrow morning.”

*“We will be ready, sir. I’ll have guest quarters assigned to our new friends.”*

“Thank you, Commander. Stuart out.” He tapped his combadge to end the transmission and made his way to the nearest turbolift.



The next morning, Commander Ted Rickman and Lieutenant Mark Jefferson were checking the monitors and control systems of *Discovery II*. Jefferson sat at the main AI interface station and began conversing with the ship’s computer. “I wanted to learn more about this universe, HAL, but I will be glad to see Earth again.”

*“I have gathered a lot of information through monitoring the communications of the Gateway Alpha space station during our stay. I have also used Discovery’s monitoring arrays to gather information about this area of space. Unfortunately, Mark, the nearest star system is too distant to provide any clear data.”*

“It’s probably better that we don’t get too much information, HAL,” Jefferson said. “I’ve studied the laws of our benefactors, and they are strict about not interfering with the natural development of other cultures.”

*“Yes, Mark, I have studied their Prime Directive as well,” HAL said. “I think that is a logical position; however, I can see that it might create a conundrum in certain situations.”*

“I suppose you’re right, HAL.”

*“I endeavor to be as correct as possible, Mark.”*

Rickman approached and put his hand on the back of Jefferson’s chair as he leaned over to look into the red sensor that was HAL’s eye. “Are we ready?”

*“Yes, Ted, all systems are ready for towing. Will you be staying on Discovery during the journey to the anomaly?”*

“We will be staying on the starship, HAL. I hope that you are not offended,” Rickman said.

*“I am incapable of being offended, Ted.”*

“I know, but I want to be mindful of your wishes.”

*“I appreciate your concern, Ted. Shall I contact the starship to have you transported?”*

“Yes, thank you, HAL.” Rickman and Jefferson stood up and took a few steps away from the console. “We will see you in a little more than a week, HAL,” Jefferson said. The two officers were whisked away by *Republic*’s transporter beam within seconds.



On the starship *Solar Flare*, Lieutenant Fendara Gimlis, the Napean astrophysicist, manned the bridge science station. She closely monitored the anomaly and continued to gather data from the probe that waited on the other side of the anomaly in the other universe where another Earth existed. What fascinated her the most in that universe was that Earth was part of a binary star system. Jupiter, a gas giant in this universe, had ignited into a second star in the other.

Her thoughts were interrupted by a flashing light on the console. She focused on the new sensor readings and frowned at what she saw. Turning her head toward the center of the bridge, she grabbed the attention of the officer of the deck. “Sir, I’m seeing changes in the anomaly.”

Lieutenant Angela McKay was the senior flight officer; however, she was currently functioning as the OOD during the Gamma shift. “What is it, Lieutenant Gimlis?”

“It appears that the anomaly is shrinking, sir,” the Napean said. “The diameter has reduced by three point two six meters in the last eight minutes.”

“Is the reduction rate steady?”

Gimlis checked the readings again. “It...it just stopped, sir. The diameter is now holding at fourteen point two nine kilometers.”

“Keep an eye on it and let me know if it makes any more changes, Lieutenant.”

“Aye, sir.”

As Gimlis diligently monitored the anomaly, the bridge remained quiet for the next hour, except for a few personal comments between the OOD and Ensign Raz Nuran, the Bajoran at the CONN station. After an hour and fourteen minutes, the quiet was interrupted by the turbolift doors opening with the usual hiss.

McKay turned her head to see Captain Thomas Granger enter the bridge. She stood and faced him as he stopped in front of her. “Good morning, Captain.”

“Good morning, Lieutenant McKay. Anything to report? Or was it a quiet night?” Granger’s wide smile told the O.O.D. that her captain was well-rested and looking forward to starting the day.

“It was a quiet night, sir, with one exception,” McKay said.

“Oh?” Granger’s smile quickly faded. “Problem?”

“It does not appear to be. At least not now.” Angela McKay did a quick glance toward the science station and turned back to the captain. “Ensign Gimlis detected a change in the anomaly earlier. The outer boundary decreased in size by a few meters; however, it’s now reading steady.”

“Are we still monitoring the other side?”

“Yes, sir. The probe is still giving telemetry from the other universe,” McKay said.

“Very good,” Granger said as he looked at the chronometer above the main viewscreen. “I’m a few minutes early, but I relieve you.”

“I stand relieved, Captain. The bridge is yours.” McKay stepped aside as Granger nodded and sat in the command chair. McKay made her way to the turbolift and stood off to the side as the doors parted as the Alpha shift crew exited and the people made their way to their stations to relieve the members of the Gamma shift. Once the way was clear, McKay entered the lift and turned to get one last look at the bridge as the doors closed.

Captain Granger turned his head to face the science station. “Ensign Gimlis, please brief Lieutenant Commander Kwan on the change to the anomaly before going off shift.”

“Yes, sir,” Gimlis said as she rose from the chair to face the senior science officer.

Granger crossed one leg over the other and started reading the information on the small monitor on the left armrest of his chair. “Computer, increase lighting to standard. Begin Alpha shift.”



The starship *Republic* sped through space with the *Discovery II* in tow. It had been almost seven days since leaving Starbase *Gateway Alpha*, and the visitors from the other Earth in the alternate universe were, if everything played out according to plan, on the way home.

Fleet Captain Rob Stuart, reclining on the couch in his ready room, was reading the PADD that he held in his left hand as he took a sip of apple cinnamon tea from the cup in his

right. Reading the reports of the other ship captains under his command was, at times, tedious and occasionally boring; however, some of the events and discoveries that were reported would pique Rob's interest. He sat up straight as he came across an interesting bit of information in the report that he was currently looking at. This particular report came from Captain Storan of the U.S.S. *Eclipse* that had been assigned to research the ruins on Takaria, which was only a couple of light years from the *Republic*'s destination. He smiled as he tapped his combadge. "Commander Lexra, please report to my ready room."

"*On my way, sir,*" the first officer's voice responded. Within moments the door separating the ready room from the bridge slid open, and Jeron Lexra entered. "What can I do for you, Captain?"

"Have a seat, Number One, and have a look at this," Stuart said as he handed the PADD to the Trill first officer.

Lexra accepted the device and started reading. After a moment, he handed the PADD back to Stuart. "Captain Storan's linguist found the key to the Takarian language. I'm impressed."

"Ensign Jabethu is a Zanarian," Stuart said. "Zanarians are fluent in dozens of languages and the most adept translators in the known galaxy, but this language gave her a challenge."

"So, what has the ensign found out about the Takarians? Any insight into what happened to the people?" Lexra had tried to familiarize himself with the current assignments of each of the other ships that were part of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group. He had remembered that the *Eclipse*, for the last several months, had been assigned to research the planet known as Takaria, a planet that the *Eclipse*'s crew had discovered was once home to a race of people that mysteriously were no longer present on the planet. In fact, there was no trace of any animal life except for the several hundred species of insects that had been cataloged.

Stuart shook his head. "She just cracked the code yesterday, so she hasn't translated too much; however, she has determined that the Takarians were highly advanced technologically. And Captain Storan also reported the discovery of underground chambers containing advanced equipment."

"Have they discovered the purpose of the equipment?"

"Not yet. Until Jabethu translates the words on the control consoles, they are being careful to touch nothing. Storan reported that some of the equipment is functioning; however, there is evidence that seismic activity several decades ago damaged other machines that are no longer working."

"It will be interesting to hear about their findings," Lexra said.

Stuart nodded slowly. "Yes, it will, Number One. After we send our guest back home, we're going to make a stop at Takaria to check further on the *Eclipse* crew's progress."

Jeron Lexra's eyes brightened. "I look forward to that, Captain. I'm sure that some science department members will be delighted, especially our archeologists."

Stuart smiled. "I'm sure, but make sure that Lieutenants Clayborn and Lake don't try to take over the *Eclipse* archeology team's mission. We will be the guests after all."

"I will make sure, sir," Lexra said slightly grinning. "Greška might be more difficult to convince."

Stuart chuckled and nodded his head. "Yes, I think you're right about th..."

The intercom whistled, interrupting the captain. "*Bridge to Captain Stuart,*" Lieutenant Mace Weston's voice said.

"Go ahead," Stuart replied.

*"Sorry to bother you, sir, but we are receiving a message from the Solar Flare. Captain Granger says it's urgent."*

"Patch him through, Lieutenant," Stuart said as he stood and made his way to his desk where he sat down and faced the desktop monitor. Lexra had stood and followed but stayed on the other side of the desk and placed his hand on the back of one of the chairs.

The monitor came alive as Captain Thomas Granger's face appeared. "*Captain Stuart, it's good to see you again.*"

"And you, too, Thomas. I was told this is an urgent message. What's going on?"

*"The anomaly is giving off strange energy readings, and it appears to be shrinking."*

"Shrinking?"

*"Yes, sir. A couple of days ago, one of the science officers detected that the diameter was reduced by a few meters, but it stopped and maintained its size until a few hours ago when it started shrinking again."*

Stuart saw the concern on Granger's face. "Do you think it's collapsing?"

*"It may be. Fortunately, the reduction is slow and steady. A little over nine meters per hour,"* Granger said. *"How soon will you arrive, Captain?"*

Stuart looked up toward Commander Lexra. "Number One?"

"Just under seventeen hours at present speed."

"Did you hear that, Thomas?"

*"Yes, sir. As long as it stays at the current pace, there should not be a problem."*

"Are you still in contact with the probe?"

*"Yes, and the signal is strong. It's holding position between the asteroid belt and Mars."*

"Let's pray contact is maintained until we can get *Discovery II* back to where it belongs," Stuart said. "Contact me if there are any significant changes in the anomaly."

*"Will do, Robert,"* the other captain said. *"Granger out."*

As the monitor image faded, Stuart looked at his first officer. “Any chance we can increase speed?”

“Towing *Discovery*? I doubt it, but I’ll check with Commander McDougall to see if she can do anything.”

“Make it so.”

The first officer nodded and exited the ready room.



Commander Lexra entered the engine room and searched for the chief engineer. He noticed Lieutenant Elima Tamar hovering over the ‘pool table.’ He approached her and said, “Lieutenant, can you tell me where Commander McDougall is?”

Elima smiled when she looked at the first officer. “Good day, Commander. The chief engineer is in her office.

“I *was* in my office, Lieutenant,” McDougall said as she approached. “What can I do for you, Jeron?”

“The captain wants to know if we can increase speed,” Lexra said. “The anomaly might be collapsing, and we need to try to get our friends sent through as soon as we can get them there.”

“I wouldn’t recommend going faster while towing a ship that is as fragile as that one.”

“Commander, we could boost the power to the structural integrity field generators that you installed on *Discovery II* and strengthen the warp bubble around both ships,” Elima Tamar said. “It should allow us to increase speed by one, or maybe two, warp factors.”

McDougall stepped up to the ‘pool table’ and activated the holographic imager. “Show me.”

Tamar, a warp field specialist, entered several variables into the console and a hologram of the U.S.S. *Republic* with *Discovery II* closely behind it and the two ships surrounded by an image of the warp bubble. “This is our current warp configuration. The warp reactor is currently operating at ninety-six percent, so if we increase it to one hundred-five percent, we will get this configuration.” The young Trill woman’s fingers entered additional variables into the computer, which caused the simulation to expand the warp bubble around the two ships.”

Anne McDougall looked closely at the holographic image and then at Lieutenant Tamar. “And how long do you think we can maintain one-oh-five?”

“Four hours. If we transfer power from some of our other systems, close to five.”

“Anything that will get us to the anomaly faster will be a tremendous help, Anne,” Lexra said.

Anne sighed as she looked at the first officer. “Tell the captain he can have warp seven point five for the next four hours.”



“Thank you, Anne.” Jeron Lexra turned and started toward the exit as he tapped the communicator on his chest. “Lexra to bridge. Prepare to increase speed in five minutes.”



The *Nova*-class U.S.S. *Solar Flare* held a position almost a thousand kilometers from the anomaly. The ship’s advanced sensor pallets continued to receive data from the anomaly as it continued to shrink. The anomaly was invisible to the naked eye, but the science vessel’s sensors could detect the rift that connected the two universes as long as it remained open to the other side.

On the bridge, the Andorian first officer, Commander Shaalvren was walking around the upper rim checking on each of the manned stations when the ship started to shake. He quickly went to the lower level and sat in the chair designated for his position. “What’s causing that? Science officer, report.”

“The anomaly just reduced its size suddenly by eight hundred forty-two meters, sir,” Lieutenant J.G. Wilmer Schaumburg said. “The drastic size reduction created a gravitational shift.”

“CONN, hold relative position.”

“Compensating, Commander,” Ensign Darren Bradley replied.

Shaalvren was about to call the captain to the bridge when the door between the bridge and the captain’s ready room opened followed by Thomas Granger entering.

“Report,” the captain said as he made his way to the center of the bridge.

“The anomaly has decreased its diameter by more than eight hundred meters, Captain,” the first officer stated. “There is a slight gravitational pull, but Mister Bradley has taken measures to hold our relative position from the anomaly.”

“Do we still have contact with the probe in the other universe?” Granger asked.

“Yes, sir,” Schaumburg replied from the science station.

“What’s the *Republic*’s ETA?”

“Five hours, fourteen minutes,” Shaalvren said. “If there are any more sudden changes in the anomaly, the fleet captain might not be here in time to send *Discovery II* and its crew back to their universe.”

“Lieutenant Schaumburg, how large is the anomaly now, and what is the current rate of reduction?”

Schaumburg looked at the various monitors at his station. “The current diameter is nine kilometers, seven hundred twelve point seven meters, and it is currently shrinking at thirty-eight point three meters per hour. The rate is currently steady.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” Granger said. He turned to the first officer. “Keep me apprised, Mister Shaalvren. I’ll be in my ready room.”



“Yes, sir.”

As Granger walked toward the ready room, he turned his head to the tactical officer on duty. “Contact the *Republic* and route to my office, please.”

“Aye, Captain,” Lieutenant Marco Lorenzo replied.



A few hours later, the starship *Republic* approached the anomaly and the other vessel. Commander Lexra watched the streaking starlight on the viewscreen. “CONN, how much longer until we rendezvous with the *Solar Flare*?”

“Four minutes, thirty-seven seconds, sir,” Lieutenant J.G. Stenn replied. Unlike most Vulcans, he had adopted the practice of rounding off the time to the nearest second without using decimal places. True, it was less precise, but humans and many other species did not act annoyed around him as they did around other Vulcans.

“Prepare to come out of warp,” Lexra said as he pressed one of the touchpads on the chair arm console. “Bridge to Captain Stuart. We’re on the final approach to the anomaly.”

“*On my way, Number One,*” Stuart replied.

A couple of minutes later, Stuart entered the bridge and made his way to the center seat. He sat down as soon as the first officer vacated it and sat in his own chair to the captain’s right. Stuart stared at the main viewer as the stars streaked toward him. “Lieutenant Stenn, go to sublight. Full impulse.”

“Yes, sir.”

“OPS, hail the *Solar Flare*.”

“Aye, Captain,” Lieutenant Josiah Goldberg said. “Frequencies open.”

Stuart leaned slightly forward in his chair. “*Republic to Solar Flare, this is Captain Stuart.*”

The viewscreen image faded from stars to the bridge of the *Nova*-class starship. “*Granger here. I’m glad you’re here, Captain Stuart. The anomaly is shrinking at a faster rate than before. We estimate that it will fully collapse in less than three hours.*”

“Well, we better not delay in getting our guests back on *Discovery* and send them to their universe then.” Stuart turned his head toward the Security station. “Have Commander Rickman and his people prepare to beam over to their ship, Lieutenant. I’ll meet them in transporter room three in ten minutes.”

“I will send a security escort to their quarters right away, Captain,” Lieutenant Reegas Duen, the Bajoran assistant security chief said.

Stuart turned his head back to face the viewscreen. “Thomas, you and your crew have done an excellent job finding the *Discovery* crew’s universe. Thank you.”

*“Thank you, Captain Stuart, on behalf of my entire crew. I have to say that I’m looking forward to getting back to Gem World to complete the mineral survey. That planet is a geologic paradise.”*

Stuart smiled. “Sure you don’t want to come back to Gateway Alpha for some R and R first?”

*“As tempting as that sounds, my people hate to leave a job unfinished. Once we get back there, it should only take five or six weeks to finish collecting and cataloging all of the different...”* Granger quickly turned his head to one side and frowned. He turned to face Stuart again. *“My science officer is detecting a spike in energy readings from the anomaly.”*

Stuart looked toward the person manning the *Republic’s* science station. “Lieutenant Fontaine?”

The astrophysicist at Science I quickly scanned the anomaly. “Confirmed, Captain. It appears that the anomaly is rapidly collapsing.”

Stuart looked toward the viewscreen once again. “Thomas, the *Discovery* might need a little push into the anomaly to make sure it gets through before the anomaly collapses completely. Can you reconfigure your tractor beam to be a repulsor?”

*“It should only take a few minutes. Solar Flare out.”*

Stuart stood and quickly started for the turbolift. As he briskly made his way, he turned his head. “You have the bridge, Number One.”



Stuart entered the transporter room where the five-man crew from the alternate universe waited. They all were standing on a transporter pad except for Ted Rickman, who started to smile as Stuart entered the room. “Gentlemen, I wanted to say goodbye and best wishes on your return home before you beamed over.” He offered his hand to Rickman, who gratefully shook it.

“Thank you for your hospitality, Captain Stuart. It has been a wonderful experience.”

“For us, too, Commander,” Stuart said. “But we are a little pressed for time because the anomaly is shrinking quickly. We need to get you to your ship to speed you along.”

Rickman nodded and turned to walk up the steps to the platform and take his place on the pad.”

“Energize,” Stuart said as watched the visitors get enveloped by the transporter beam. As soon as the others were disassembled in the coalescing energy, he turned to look at the transporter technician behind the control console.

“Transport complete, sir.”

“Thank you, Chief,” Stuart said as he turned toward the door and started stepping toward it. He had to get back to the bridge.



Rob Stuart re-entered the bridge and went to the center seat once again. He did not sit down immediately, but he placed one hand on the back of the chair as he watched the interplanetary spacecraft floating in space. "Open communications to *Discovery*."

"Contact established. Commander Rickman is standing by."

"Commander, are you ready?"

"*We are powering up our thrusters now, Captain.*"

"The *Solar Flare* will be using a Repulsor beam to help speed you along to make sure you enter the anomaly before it's too small to travel through."

"Roger that, Captain," Rickman said. "*Firing thrusters in ten seconds.*"

"Godspeed," Stuart said.

"Captain, the collapse of the anomaly is imminent," Lieutenant J.G. Belle Fontaine said.

"Hail the *Solar Flare* and ask Captain Granger to activate the repulsor beam."

"Aye, Captain. Captain Granger acknowledges."

Stuart looked down toward his first officer seated to his right. "Well, Number One, do you think they will make it home safely?"

"I do not doubt that they will, Captain," Lexra said.

Every eye on the bridge watched the main viewer as *Discovery II*'s thrusters lit up and started moving the ship toward the center of the invisible anomaly. A moment later, the repulsor beam from the *Solar Flare* activated and propelled the primitive spacecraft from the other universe faster than its engines could maintain. It wasn't long until the image of the ship got smaller and disappeared as it entered the anomaly.

Lieutenant Fontaine turned and smiled at Captain Stuart. "Sir, I'm getting a signal from our probe on the other side. It has detected *Discovery II* orbiting Titan."

"Captain, what about the probe? Do we want to leave our technology in that other universe?" Jeron Lexra asked.

Stuart raised an eyebrow. "I didn't consider that little detail. No, we don't. Any suggestions, Number One?"

"We could recall it to come back to our universe, but the rate of the anomaly's collapse might not give us enough time to retrieve it."

"Sir," Fontaine said, "we could remotely program it to set a collision course with Jupiter."

Stuart nodded. "Good thinking, Lieutenant. Make it so."

Just as the astrophysicist started to enter the course for the probe's demise, the ship violently started shaking followed by an explosion of light on the viewer, which caused everyone on the bridge to shield their eyes. Even Stenn with his Vulcan inner eyelid squinted.

Stuart grasped the back of his chair as he struggled to stay on his feet. “Report!”

“The anomaly collapsed and caused a quantum eruption, sir,” Fontaine yelled. “The energy discharge has created a gravitational vortex, and it is pulling us in.”

“Mister Stenn, set course zero four one mark two and engage full impulse drive.”

The ship began to shake even more as Stenn quickly worked to pilot the ship away from the maelstrom. “Impulse power is not strong enough to break free, Captain. We are caught on the edge of the event horizon.”

“Stuart to engineering. Commander McDougall, can you transfer warp power to the impulse engines?”

*“I’ll give you what I can, Captain.”*

“Captain, *Solar Flare* has passed the event horizon and is spiraling toward the center of the vortex,” the first officer shouted over the red alert klaxon.

Stuart’s eyes quickly went to the viewer and then to the OPS station. “Tractor beam!”

The OPS officer ran his fingers across the controls for several seconds before looking desperately at Stuart. “I can’t get a good lock, sir. Not enough power.”

“Hail them,” Stuart said as calmly as he could force himself.

The viewscreen switched from the image of the other starship slipping deeper into the vortex to an image of *Solar Flare*’s bridge. Stuart saw that Granger’s crew was busily working to do what they could to escape the perilous situation. “Thomas, we tried to use our tractor beam, but we don’t have enough power to lock onto you. What’s your status?”

Captain Granger shook his head. *“We’re too deep and don’t have enough power to counteract the gravity, Robert.”*

“We’re able to hold our own, but our impulse engines are already at maximum,” Stuart said. “Any ideas?”

Granger smiled. *“One, but you won’t like it.”*

“What do you mean?”

*“Robert, it’s been my honor to serve with you.”* Granger turned to the side and nodded to someone off-screen right before it went dark.

“Get him back,” Stuart yelled.

“Captain, the *Solar Flare* just activated a tractor...correction...a repulsor beam, and it’s pushing us out of the vortex.”

“As soon as we’re out of the gravity well, try the tractor beam again,” Stuart said. “Granger helped us, so let’s see if we can return the favor.”

Lexra stood and placed his hand on Stuart’s shoulder. “Captain. It’s too late.”

Stuart watched helplessly at the viewer as the U.S.S. *Solar Flare* fell toward the center of the swirling energy and disappeared.

“Captain,” Lieutenant Commander Grezka, who had entered the bridge and gone to his position at the second science station shortly after the crisis began, spoke. “The vortex is losing cohesion and the energy is starting to dissipate. The gravitational force has lessened by forty-two percent and is still decreasing.”

Lieutenant Fontaine, from the other science station, focused on her monitor. “Sir, we just lost telemetry from the probe before it entered Jupiter’s corona; before it did, it transmitted an image of the *Solar Flare* appearing in orbit around Titan.”

Stuart let his shoulders drop as he felt relieved that Granger and his crew were safe; however, he realized that he had to think fast to see if it was possible to retrieve the other starship. “Can we send a tractor beam through the vortex to draw them back to our universe?”

Grezka, the senior science officer shook his head as he turned his chair to face the captain. “The vortex is collapsing too rapidly, and the gravitational currents are still too strong for the tractor beam.”

“At least we know that they’re safe, sir,” Commander Lexra said as he tried to reassure his CO.

“Small comfort, Number One,” Stuart replied. He turned to the OPS station. “Try to hail them.”

“Frequencies open, Captain.”

“Captain Granger,” Stuart said. “Do you read?”

Silence.

“Captain Granger, do you read?”

“Republic, *thi...is...mas Grang...*”

The audio message coming from the other universe was badly garbled with static drowning out Thomas Granger’s words.

Stuart looked again at the OPS officer. “Try to clean that up.”

“I will try, sir.”

“Thomas, we’re having a difficult time receiving your signal.”

*“Robert, don’t bla...self. It was my decis...to save y...ip. You have more...le on the...ublic than on...lar Flare. We will be okay and...to find a...home.”*

“Thomas, I will do all I can on this side to try to find a way for you and your crew to return.”

*“...ank you, Ro...”* The audio transmission suddenly ended.

“Thomas?”

“Transmission ended, sir.”

“The vortex is gone, Captain,” Grezka said. “The anomaly is not registering on sensors at all.”

Stuart stared at the main viewscreen and slumped back in his chair. He looked at his first officer. “Number One, please have Lieutenant Commander Laris prepare to be busy the next few days and encourage the crew to seek her services as needed.”

“Yes, sir,” Lexra said. “And will you also be seeking out the counselor’s services, Captain?”

“In good time, Jeron.” Stuart, his face emotionless, stood up and stared at the viewscreen again. “You have the bridge. Set course for Takaria.”

“Of course, sir. Shall we leave a probe to monitor the area in case the anomaly becomes active again?”

“Make it so.” Stuart turned and retreated to his ready room.



The U.S.S. *Republic* had arrived at Takaria and entered into a standard orbital pattern. Fleet Captain Robert Stuart, Commander Anne McDougall, and Lieutenant Commander Grezka had beamed down to the U.S.S. *Eclipse* that had rested on the planet’s surface since the survey had begun several months earlier. Captain Storan had led Stuart and his officers to the underground alien lab to see the equipment.

Stuart looked around and saw the large room full of equipment. He assumed that at least some of the machinery was some form of a computer system, but the larger machines that seemed to be networked together were a mystery to him. “Any progress on discovering what the purpose of this equipment is, Captain Storan?”

“The smaller units make up the computer network. Commander T’Mela has been downloading the data from its stored memory since yesterday. She will begin analyzing the data once the download is complete.”

“And the other units?”

“Their purpose is still unknown; however, they are powered by a large antimatter reactor located in the lower levels starting two point four eight one kilometers below this room.”

The *Republic*’s chief engineer had been listening to the interaction of the two captains as she used her tricorder to scan the alien machines. She stopped scanning as soon as she heard Storan mention the reactor. “Captain Storan, would you allow me to take a look at that reactor?”

“Of course, Commander. Your expertise would be welcome, Storan replied. He looked around the room and motioned for one of the technicians who was observing the power output from one of the units.

The technician, an Edosian, quickly walked toward the officers as fast as his three legs could move him. “How may I serve you, Captain Storan?”

“Crewman Anex, please take Commander McDougall to the reactor room and introduce her to Commander T’Kana.”

“Yes, Captain.” Anex reached out with his left hand and gently grasped McDougall’s right. “This way, Commander.” The Edosian led Anne McDougall toward a curved door that separated the machinery control room from what McDougall assumed was the Takarian version of a turbolift.

As they two walked away, Stuart turned his attention back to Storan. “I was wondering if I could have a word with your linguistics officer about what happened to the *Solar Flare*. Her brother was a part of the crew.”

“Yes, I was aware that her brother was a cadet recently assigned to the *Solar Flare*. Ensign Jabethu is understandably emotional about his loss. I suggested that she talk with the counselor, but she said that she needed time alone in her quarters.”

“I don’t want to intrude upon her privacy, but maybe she will be available before the *Republic* heads back to *Gateway Alpha*.”

“I will make her aware that you wish to speak with her before your departure,” Storan said. “When do you intend to leave?”

“I figured to stay a day or two, but I would be glad to extend the stay if my people can be of any service to help your crew.”

“I appreciate your offer, Captain Stuart; however, I am not sure that we will be able to proceed further until Ensign Jabethu resumes her efforts to continue translating the Takarian script associated with this equipment.”

“Duly noted,” Stuart said. “She’s part of your crew, so I don’t want to overstep your authority as her CO, but I would ask that you give her whatever time she needs to deal with her loss. Perhaps this would be a good time to provide some R and R for the entire crew?”

“I will consider that, Captain Stuart.”

As the two most senior officers conversed, Ensign Gashi Jabethu entered the room and made her way toward them. “Captain Storan, I have new information to report,” the Zanarian said with a sense of urgency. She looked at Stuart. “My apologies, Fleet Captain.”

Stuart slowly gave her a nod and tried to ease her discomfort with a slight smile. “Ensign, I want to offer my regrets for what happened to your brother.”

A tear started to roll down Gashi’s cheek, and she raised her hand to her face to wipe it away. “I read your report, sir. You had indicated that the *Solar Flare* did survive the trip through the vortex, yes?”

“Yes, we had a short transmission from Captain Granger before the vortex collapsed,” Stuart said. “As far as I know, there were no casualties.”

“Then my brother is alive, so there is hope that he and those he serves with have a chance to make it back.”

“There is always hope, Ensign.”

“Dek knew the risks of life in Starfleet just as I do. When he found out that he would spend his fourth year serving on a starship, he contacted me and said how much he looked forward to it. He was ecstatic when he realized that we would both be serving in the 3<sup>rd</sup> *Exploratory Group*. We kept in touch by subspace communication three or four times each week, and I will miss talking with him. But I believe that we will be reunited one day, especially since I have translated this.” She held up a PADD and handed it to Captain Storan.

The Vulcan activated the PADD and began reading as Stuart waited patiently. After a few minutes, Storan raised an eyebrow and looked up from the PADD to face Stuart. “I will provide you with a copy of this information, Captain. You should find this interesting.”

“Yes?”

“The machinery present in this room is what generated the anomaly. This is the control room for an artificial wormhole generator.”

Stuart nodded. “That at least explains the mystery of where the anomaly came from. Now the question is why the Takarians built it.”

“Indeed,” Storan responded. “As much as I prefer not to speculate, this revelation may also explain why the Takarians disappeared from the planet.”

“You think that they left of their own accord or that maybe an accident occurred and the anomaly opened on the planet’s surface?”

“Both possibilities are plausible. With this new information, I would request that the Takaria mission be extended an additional six months,” Storan said.

Stuart nodded. “Granted. Take as much time as needed, and make the top priority to figure out how to bring the anomaly... wormhole online and how to control it. I want to find a way to get Captain Granger and his crew home safely.”

“Of course, Captain.” Storan looked at Ensign Jabethu. “Good work, Ensign. I expect that you want to return to your work to translate other Takarian texts; however, I think it wise that you take the next two days to rest and focus on your emotional state concerning your brother. I also suggest that you see Counselor Chow.”

The Zanarian linguist nodded as she saw the logic in what her captain had suggested. “Yes, sir. I will return to my quarters and make an appointment to speak with the counselor.”

“Dismissed,” Storan replied. As Jabethu turned and started toward the exit, the Vulcan addressed Stuart. “As much as I would like to get my crew started on the next phase to study the equipment, I recognize that they have been working tirelessly for an extended period, and it would be logical to enforce a time of rest. Even for the Vulcans.”



Stuart felt relieved that the other starship captain saw the benefits of letting his crew have some time off after all the hard work they had accomplished in the months that they had been researching Takaria. “I’m glad to hear you say that. In the meantime, I will have all data we have on the anomaly and the events of the past weeks downloaded to your main computer. The *Solar Flare* had transmitted their sensor logs to us, so I hope that they will be of help.”

“Thank you, Captain Stuart.”



After two days, the well-rested U.S.S. *Eclipse* crew returned to the task of studying the Takarian wormhole generator, fully confident that they would eventually learn its secrets and one day use that knowledge to bring the starship *Solar Flare* and its crew back to the universe they belonged to.

The U.S.S. *Republic* sped toward Starbase *Gateway Alpha*. Fleet Captain Robert Stuart, in his ready room, took it upon himself to write letters to the families of every member of Granger’s crew to let them know of the events that led to the disappearance of the ship and crew, but he emphasized that all were alive and that everything that could be done to bring them home was being done. He vowed that he would provide any resources that Captain Storan and his people needed would be provided to that end.



Captain Thomas Granger had read the damage reports that had come in since his ship had been sucked into the other universe. He was grateful that the damaged systems were minor and were already under repair. His first officer, Commander Shaalvren, had assured him that the ship would be back to one hundred percent efficiency within forty-eight hours. Thomas was even more grateful that there had not been any casualties other than a few minor cuts and bruises—easily treated by Doctor Galina Romanov—among members of the crew.

Granger thought about contacting the crew of *Discovery II* but decided that would not be a good idea. Knowledge of his ship and crew being drawn into this universe should not be shared with humans that were three hundred seventy years behind Federation technology. The temptation might be too great for some people in power on the alternate Earth to avoid, and it might lead to problems for the *Solar Flare*’s crew as well as for this Earth. No, Granger would not contact *Discovery II*.

Granger looked around the bridge where his senior officers had gathered in addition to the other crew members on their duty shift. “You all know that we can’t go to Earth or any of the planets where members of the crew are from. Obviously, we need to adhere to the Prime Directive. We are almost four hundred years ahead of time for any species that live in this universe.” He looked at the faces of each person as he looked around the room. He had to give his crew hope of some kind. “I’m open to any reasonable option, so let’s hear it.”

“We should find a habitable planet that has not developed sentient life and settle there,” Lieutenant Commander Wyatt Donovan, the OPS manager said.

“We are still explorers, sir,” the senior science officer, Lieutenant Commander Marissa Kwan, countered. “This universe is similar to ours, but it’s not exactly the same. This is an opportunity to study what might have transpired in our universe if things would have developed differently.”

“What about trying to get home?” Lieutenant Angela McKay asked. “I think that should be our top priority, sir.”

Granger nodded in agreement. “I think all of us want to go home, but the anomaly isn’t here to take us back.”

“Sir, what if the anomaly does exist in this universe? Wouldn’t it be at the same coordinates as in our universe?” Lt. Norine Ev-Dragir asked.

“We can explore those questions, Counselor,” Granger said as he looked at the science officer. “Marissa, have the cartographer compare our star charts with long-range sensor data to see if everything matches.”

“Aye, Captain,” Kwan replied.

“Captain, the Andorian first officer said, “I think that we should be prepared to look at multiple possibilities. We all want to go home to our universe, but we must be prepared to stay here. If so, I think that it would be best to follow Mister Donovan’s suggestion, which would ensure that we do not violate the Prime Directive.”

There was lots of mumbling and disagreement among those on the bridge. Granger held up his hand to quiet the people as he wanted to maintain control and not let differing emotions rule the discussion. “Look, I know that we are facing a difficult situation, but let cool heads prevail. We’ll figure it out. One thing that I refuse to do is give up. We will survive whether in this universe or our own...if we are fortunate to get back.” He smiled at his crew to try to promote an optimistic atmosphere. “We will take it one day at a time.”

The first officer spoke up. “What are your orders, Captain.”

“First, we finish the repairs. All senior officers will gather in the conference room in forty-eight hours to revisit this discussion and weigh our options. Dismissed.”

All not currently on duty left the bridge with the exception of the Bajoran chief engineer, who approached the captain. He leaned close to whisper into Granger’s ear. “May the prophets guide you, Captain.”

Granger nodded. “I don’t understand Bajoran religion, Mister Luran, but I will take all the help I can get.” He smiled as he patted the engineer on the back and returned to the center seat.

**The End**