

STARDATE 58881.5

Fleet Captain Robert Patrick Stuart entered his quarters. As soon as the door slid shut behind him, his wife Jan came out of the bedroom and smiled. They walked toward each other and embraced.

Jan stepped back and looked at her husband. "You look like you had a bad day."

Rob shrugged and smirked as he let out a subdued laugh. "I'm just tired. I heard from Storan today, and there hasn't been as much progress as I had hoped on getting that portal open."

"You can't blame yourself for what happened, Rob." Jan placed her hand on his cheek. "Don't give up hope." She knew that Rob had blamed himself when Thomas Granger and the *Solar Flare* slipped through the vortex into another universe. She knew that he had blamed himself for the loss of the *Raleigh* and its crew even though Rob was light years away from *Raleigh's* location when the Vendoth attacked it. She had watched her husband withdraw within himself during the last few months.

Rob reached up and touched Jan's hand and gently rubbed it. He stepped back and looked toward the couch. "Join me?"

Jan nodded and wrapped her hand around his as they walked toward the couch and sat down. She watched him closely as he leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Admiral Montoya is due to arrive tomorrow," Rob said.

"What's the occasion?"

"An admiral doesn't need a reason," Rob said, "but he said that he was tired of just reading reports and wanted to get the information straight from the horse's mouth."

"Let me guess. You're the horse."

Rob opened his eyes and turned to face Jan, who shot him with a mischievous grin. "Replicated oats will be on the menu from now on." He smiled. "He contacted all the 3rd *Exploratory Group* ships and ordered them here."

"Why would he do that?"

"He didn't say, but it must be something important to break protocol." Rob rubbed his head. "I'm sure he'll tell me when he gets here."

"I have a surprise for you, and I'm supposed to keep it secret, but I think you need some good news for a change," Jan said.

"Oh?"

"Blake is on his way here."

Rob perked up and sat up straight. "He is?"

"He arrives in a few hours, but you need to act surprised."

Rob nodded. "I can do that. And it will be good to see the crew of the *Providence* again."

“Well, that is another part of the surprise,” Jan said. “Blake has been promoted and is the captain of the U.S.S. *Swift*.”

“That explains a lot,” Rob replied.

“What do you mean, Rob?”

“Admiral Montoya mentioned in his communique that the *Swift* and another ship were being assigned to me, and he said that the details were... forthcoming.” Rob smiled as he shook his head. “I guess the admiral was in on the surprise, too.”

“Blake never made me aware of it,” Jan said as she got off the couch. “Now that you know, are you feeling better?”

Rob nodded his head. “Just a bit.”

“How about dinner?” Jan walked toward the replicator and turned to face her husband.

“I’m not too hungry, but a turkey sandwich sounds good.”

Jan turned back to face the computer console. “Computer, one turkey sandwich on whole wheat bread with provolone cheese, lettuce, and mayonnaise.” The replicator alcove came alive with energy to produce the requested sandwich. She retrieved it and handed it to her husband.

“Thank you, honey.” Rob took the plate from Jan’s hand. “When did you say the *Swift* is due to arrive?”

“A few hours from now. But don’t expect to see him before tomorrow,” Jan said. “He won’t come by when he knows we’re asleep.”

“I’m not so sure. This is Blake that we’re talking about.”

“I’m sure. I told him that if he woke up the kids, he would stay up with them all night.” Jan winked.

Rob smiled. “Do you think that would deter him?”

“If he knows what’s good for him,” Jan said as her eyes brightened. “You know what his first words to you will be, don’t you?”

“I have a good idea and a good idea what he will do.” Rob grinned as he used his mind’s eye to visualize the meeting. “He will shake my hand, embrace me, and say, ‘Good to see you again, Skipper.’”

Jan started laughing. “Yes, that’s how I see it.”



To Boldly Go: Still the Skipper

A 3rd Exploratory Group Story

By Cleve Johnson



Captain Blake Adams entered the bridge of his new ship. It was nearly identical to the *Trailblazer's* bridge, but the paint on the turbolift and other exit doors was red instead of gray. As he walked toward the center, he said, "You're in my chair." Of course, he was smiling when he said it.

Commander Caleb Thorne slowly stood up and turned to face his captain. "Welcome back to the bridge, Captain."

"Thank you, Mister Thorne." Blake would have preferred to call 'Mister Thorne' by his first name; however, he had learned that a CO should have a little formality...at least on the bridge and in front of junior officers and crew. With time, as he and Caleb got to know the crew better, that would change.

Blake and Caleb Thorne met at Starfleet Academy and became good friends. They were in the same class, the class of '66, and went to different assignments. Blake had been assigned as a relief CONN officer aboard the U.S.S. *Thomas Payne*, and Caleb as a relief CONN officer on the U.S.S. *Salazar*. The following year, Thorne transferred to the starship *Thomas Payne* as an operations officer, so the two of them were reunited for a time until Blake left to become a CONN officer on the *Ambassador-class* U.S.S. *Republic*. Now, the two classmates had been brought together once more. "What is our status?" Blake asked.

"We are still on course to Starbase *Gateway Alpha* and should arrive in just under three hours."

"Very good, Commander. Care to join me in my ready room?" Blake turned and moved toward the door on the port side of the bridge."

"I'm right behind you, Captain." As the first officer started to follow Blake, he turned his head and said to the OPS officer on duty, "Lieutenant McCandles, you have the bridge." He entered the ready room and the door slid shut with a woosh. He saw Blake walking away from the replicator toward his desk.

Blake held two glasses and set them down on the desktop as he sat in his chair. He slid one of the glasses across the desktop toward the other side.

Caleb sat down across from Blake and picked up the glass. Taking a sip, his face took on a pleasant look. "I've not tasted that since we were on the *Thomas Payne* together."

"What happened to the replicator program after I left?"

"Remember the chief engineer?"

"Lieutenant Commander Crankshaft?"

Caleb let out a small laugh. "His name was Cranfield, and within an hour after you left for your next posting, he purged it from the main computer and replicator network," he said. "He said that Vanilla Coke was a vile drink and not fit for human consumption."

Blake laughed and took a sip from his glass. He set the glass down and looked at his first officer. “Well, there is a standing order as of right now that anyone who purges my Vanilla Coke program from the computers of *this* ship will be jettisoned from the nearest airlock...without a spacesuit.”

Caleb smiled and nodded his head. “I’ll carry out *that* order without hesitating.” He took another swig from his glass. “So, Blake, I know I’ve thanked you before for requesting me to be your executive officer, but I never asked you why you asked for me.”

Blake shrugged and cocked his head to one side. “Well, I heard that you had been the second officer on the *Regulus* for more than three years, so I told myself that the next time I needed a new exec, I was going to ask for you. I remembered all the good times we had at the Academy and how we worked well together on the *Thomas Payne*.”

“I appreciate it, Blake, more than you know.” Caleb’s face became serious. “My career seemed like it was at a dead end under Captain Franke after an away mission that went wrong.”

“I looked up your record and read the mission logs,” Blake said. “Everything looked like you were cleared and did nothing wrong.”

“The captain disagreed with the JAG officer’s finding and made it clear that I shouldn’t expect another promotion for a long time...at least on *his* ship.”

“I’m glad that I was able to help you get out of that situation,” Blake said. “Try to put it behind you, Caleb, and let’s talk about the future. We’re both new to the *Swift*, and the two of us have the same problem. Most of the crew served under Captain Stark and Commander Wang since the ship was launched. We need to get the crew used to us and mold them into what we want them to be.”

“It sounds like an opportunity, Blake,” Caleb said as he leaned forward and placed his forearms on the desktop. “This crew is already a team that seems to work well together. We each have a different command style than they are probably used to, but I’m sure they will adapt to us in time.”

Blake started nodding his head slowly. “Sounds simple...in theory.”

“Let’s prove our theory.”

“Any suggestions?”

“Well, you like to have fun, and you like parties,” Caleb said.

“That’s right! A party can solve most problems.” Blake smiled at his Academy classmate. “Caleb, you are the first officer, so I am counting on you to plan the best party that you can. Get whomever you need to help.”

Caleb leaned back in the chair and took a deep breath. He blew it out as he tried to think might be the best person or people on the ship for the undertaking. Then it dawned on him. “You know that we have a Risan on board, right?”

“Lieutenant Eshali?”

“That’s him,” Caleb replied. “I’ve heard some murmurings that he wasn’t too happy that he didn’t get a promotion to the senior flight controller position because you brought an outsider to fill that position.”

“Yes, Lieutenant Kelly. Next to me, he’s the best starship pilot in Starfleet.”

“I see that you are still as humble as always,” Caleb said.

“I didn’t want to disappoint you, but let’s get back to the point.” Blake rubbed his chin for a few seconds and his eyes brightened. “This is perfect! Caleb, if Eshali agrees to help you, I will put him in for an immediate promotion to full lieutenant and give him a new job.”

“New job?”

“I think the *Swift* needs a full-time dedicated recreation officer,” Blake said. “We have more flight officers than we need, and if he is typical of other Risans I’ve met, he is the right person to oversee the crew’s recreation activities. It will boost morale.”



Rear Admiral Montoya sat alone in the main observation conference room. He enjoyed the solitude as he read reports from the different missions assigned to the starships of the 3rd *Exploratory Group*. All the current missions were important, but only one had high enough priority to justify not pulling it off its current mission. The rest of the ships’ crews had been working hard for a long time, so they deserved some R and R back at the home port. And what Montoya had in mind would give them all the chance to have time to relax and wind down for at least a short time. He had never superseded Fleet Captain Stuart’s authority over the exploratory group’s assignments, but this was a special situation.

The communications system chimed in, and Montoya pressed the touchpad on the conference desktop. “Montoya. Go ahead.”

“Admiral, we received confirmation from Lieutenant Commander Baker to let us know that all ships assigned to Fleet Captain Stuart have either arrived at Gateway Alpha or are en route except for the U.S.S. Eclipse. Captain Storan will take a shuttle and rendezvous with the starship Balboa.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Montoya closed the communication and resumed reading the logs on the display monitor built into the conference table.



Rob thought that he heard whispering, but he was still groggy from a restless night’s sleep. He still had dreams about Commander Thel facing him. “Why didn’t you help us?” Rob had dreamt the same thing every night for several weeks. And the dream always ended the same—a loud explosion and *Raleigh*’s bridge erupting in flames that engulfed Thel and the other members of the bridge crew.

Rob continued to hear the whispers of his wife and children. The twins’ verbal skills had been developing quite well now that they were almost two and a half years. He was able to make

out enough to know that they were up to something, so he slowly opened his eyes and rolled his head, still on the pillow, in the direction their whispers came from.

Kelly, followed by her brother Kevin, saw their father start to open his eyes, and they ran toward the bed and jumped on it. They each made one bounce before tackling Rob. “Dadda,” Kelly screamed, and then Kevin repeated the same maneuver.

“Umph!” Rob had the air knocked out of him as the kids got him in the midsection, causing him to double up and draw his knees to his abdomen. He loved his kids and loved playing with them, but he was unprepared for the latest attack. “Hey, not so rough,” he said, trying not to laugh, which would encourage more roughness. He saw Jan standing in the doorway grinning.

“Kids, don’t hurt your father.” Jan started laughing.

“You guys are getting to be too much for me,” Rob said. “Are you two practicing to become security officers?”

Jan’s laughter subsided quickly as she shot her husband a look to not even joke about it. She didn’t mind if the children wanted to join Starfleet someday, but she did not want them to be part of the security section. “Bite your tongue, *Fleet Captain*.”

Rob smiled as he tussled with the kids a few moments longer before getting out from under them. “Okay, it’s time for Daddy to get out of bed.”

“More, Dadda! More!” Kelly was the apparent leader of the two, but Kevin showed some strength of character in a quieter way. Even so, Kevin laughed right along with his sister as he tried to tackle his father again. “More, too, Da.”

Rob wrestled with them and allowed them to get the best of him for a few seconds, and then he turned the tables on the twins by tickling them until they laughed so hard, they couldn’t stand it. As they were laughing, he slipped out of bed and stood smiling at them.

Kevin recovered from his ‘tickle fit’ first and stood on the bed and took a running leap toward Rob, who caught him. Kevin smiled at his father. “Dadda caught me.”

Jan smiled again and retrieved her son from Rob, taking the little boy in her arms. “Yes, Daddy caught you.”

“Me turn, Dadda,” Kelly said. “Me turn.” She didn’t wait for Rob’s response but followed her brother’s example and ran and jumped into her father’s waiting arms.

“Daddy needs to get ready, Kelly.”

“No!”

Rob looked toward his wife. “That was emphatic.” He turned his gaze to look into his daughter’s eyes. “Now what did I tell you about saying that to me?”

Kelly averted her eyes from her father’s stare. She was perceptive, even at a young age, and seemed to know when she had crossed the line. “I sorry,” she said.

Rob gently gave her a grin. “I forgive you. We can play later, okay?”

Kelly perked up. “Otay.”

Rob ran his fingers through her hair as he set her feet first on the floor. “That’s my girl. He patted her shoulder and pointed her toward Jan and Kevin. He watched as Kelly ran across the room and took her mother’s hand.

After Jan took the kids into the living area, the bedroom door slid shut, and Rob made his way to the head to get ready for the day.

After a quick shower, he put on a clean uniform and entered the main part of his and Jan’s quarters. He went to the replicator on the wall and requested his usual hot drink—apple cinnamon tea. He sat down next to Janice, trying to coax the twins into eating the scrambled eggs she had replicated for them. Rob took a sip and set the cup down on the table. “Do you want me to take the kids to the childcare center before I meet Blake?”

“I decided to take the day off. Doctor Barnard was gracious enough to cover for me, so I thought that I would spend the morning with the twins and take them to the center. After that, I intend to spend some time relaxing on a holodeck.”

Rob smiled as he lifted the cup to his mouth again to take another sip. “I’m glad that you’re taking the day off. It seems like you’ve been on the go for a couple of weeks without a break.”

“My staff told me the same thing,” Jan replied. “They barred me from entering any part of any medical facility on the station for at least twenty-four hours...unless I’m in need of medical assistance, that is.”

Rob smiled at his wife. “Good for them.” He finished his tea, pushed himself away from the table, stood, and took his cup back to the replicator where he set it in the alcove. “Computer, recycle.”

Jan stood and took Rob’s hand. She kissed and hugged him. “Enjoy your breakfast with Blake and tell him to join us for dinner tonight at Club Archer.”

“Will do.” Rob kissed Jan once more and turned to kiss each of his children, who had finally settled into eating their eggs. Kevin, not bothering to use his toddler-sized utensils, just scooped the scrambled eggs up with his hands and shoved them into his mouth as his sister giggled. Rob exited the quarters and set off for the Warp Core Café to meet his best friend.



Rob entered the eating establishment and saw Blake sitting at a table with a woman. They both were talking between taking sips of hot coffee. He smiled as he started toward the table.

Blake’s eyes shifted as he saw someone approaching in his peripheral vision. He quickly stood and rushed toward Rob and hugged him tightly. “Skipper!”

“It’s good to see you, Blake,” Rob said as he struggled to breathe and started to clench his teeth together. “But you’re hugging me too tight!”



Blake let go and started to laugh. “Sorry, Skipper.” His apology was not sincere. “I thought you would never get here. It seems like I’ve been sitting at that table for hours.”

“Less than ten minutes, Captain.” The woman, still sitting, gave Blake a hint of amusement as her eyes softened and the corners of her lips moved slightly upward.

Blake turned to face her and shrugged as he placed his hand on Rob’s back to lead him to the table. “I want you to meet someone, Rob. This is Commander Jada Lightfoot, my former first officer, who is now my successor.”

“Successor?” Rob started to realize that if Lightfoot was his successor, that meant...

“She’s the new CO of the U.S.S. *Providence*, which has now been assigned to the 3rd *Exploratory Group*,” Blake announced. “Surprised?”

Rob smiled widely. “The *Providence* is here?”

Lightfoot stood and approached the two senior officers as she reached out her hand. “It’s a privilege to meet you, Fleet Captain.”

Rob shook her hand. “For me as well. I knew that another *Ericsson*-class scout was being assigned, but I had no idea it would be...this explains why Admiral Montoya was not forthcoming with the name of the other ship that would be arriving along with the *Swift*.”

“I would have been here a couple of days ago, but I had to keep the speed down so Jada could keep up.”

“Now, Blake, you don’t need to start bragging about how fast your new ship is.” Rob winked at him.

“I know I don’t have to, but I want to make sure that everyone knows that the *Swift* will live up to its name.”

Jada tried not to roll her eyes, but it was a struggle that did not go unnoticed by either man. “Sirs, I need to get back to *Providence*, and I know that the two of you want to catch up.”

“Thank you, Commander,” Rob said. “I’ll be taking Blake on a tour of the command deck and other areas of *Gateway Alpha* later to meet the starbase commander and some other key personnel. I would like you to join us. Can you meet us at 0930 hours?”

“I will be glad to, Fleet Captain,” Lightfoot said. “Where should I meet you?”

“We’ll start the tour at my office on deck six. I’ll let my aide know to expect you.”

“I will see you then, sir.” Jada nodded and walked toward the exit.

Rob and Blake sat across the table from each other. Rob kept smiling. “I’m glad that you have been assigned to the 3rd,” Rob said.

“You mean you didn’t ask for me?” Blake pretended to be hurt.

“Admiral Montoya probably remembered that a couple of years ago, I mentioned how nice it would be if the *Providence* was part of the 3rd *Exploratory Group*,” Rob said. “He told me

I couldn't keep all my friends close, but he must have changed his mind. So, how are James and Mary? How's the rest of the crew?"

"Everyone is fine. Yoshi is the first officer now, and Lieutenant Allen has taken over OPS," Blake replied. Lieutenant Patrick is the new security chief and tactical officer."

"How's Mac?"

"Mac is with me on the *Swift*. So is Eric, who is now a full lieutenant," Blake said. I wanted James and Mary to join me, too, but they decided to stay on the *Providence*."

"What about T'Les?"

"She was promoted and has been assigned to command the *Epsilon Gamma* science outpost."

"Well, I can't think of anyone else more suited for that job," Rob said. "Who took her place?"

"Do you remember Maria Gonzales?"

"Yes, she's a fine officer and scientist as I recall. Planetary science?"

"With a specialty in geology. T'Les recommended her for the position, and Jada was in complete agreement."

Rob nodded. "Sounds like several people got the benefit of you leaving." He smiled at his friend. "Tell me about your new crew, Blake."

"Can we get some breakfast first?" Blake looked toward the entrance to the kitchen and motioned to one of the waiters, who quickly came to the table.

"Ready to order?"

"Yes, I'll have two pancakes with two eggs over easy and another cup of coffee," Blake said.

"And for you, sir?"

"Two eggs over medium, a side of fried potatoes, and a glass of ice water," Rob said.

"I will be back shortly," the waiter said as he turned and left.

Blake leaned back in his chair. "Okay, my crew. Most of the crew I inherited from the previous captain. I already told you about Mac and Mister Kelly. My first officer is an old friend that I met at the Academy, and we served with each other on the *Thomas Payne* for a couple of years before I transferred to the *Republic*. His name is Caleb Thorne."

Stuart nodded his head as he seemed to recollect the name. "Ah, yes, I remember you talked about him when you first came on board the *Republic*. I look forward to meeting him."

The two continued talking until breakfast was served. While eating, they continued to catch up with each other's lives and key missions. After more than an hour had passed, Rob and Blake left the restaurant to go to Rob's office on the command deck.



Rob and Blake entered the outer office where his aide, a Vulcan junior grade lieutenant, sat behind his desk, reading something on the desktop computer monitor. Rob stopped as he nodded to the officer. "Lieutenant Sokal, this is Captain Blake Adams, the CO of the starship *Swift*."

Sokal stood and placed his hands behind his back. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Captain Adams."

Blake nodded. "Likewise, Lieutenant." Blake did not waste smiling at the young Vulcan.

"Commander Jada Lightfoot of the U.S.S. *Providence* will be arriving at approximately 0930," Rob said. "Please direct her into my office when she arrives."

"Of course, sir."

Rob turned and led Blake through the office door that had automatically opened as the two approached. After the double doors slid closed, he directed Blake to the couch. "Have a seat," Rob said as he walked to the replicator. "What would you like to drink?"

"I don't suppose you have my favorite drink in the whole galaxy, do you?"

Rob smiled at his friend and turned his head to face the replicator built into the wall. "Computer, one glass of Vanilla Coke with ice and one glass of ice water." He retrieved the glasses and joined his friend on the couch, handing Blake the Vanilla Coke as he sat next to him.

"How did you get that program?"

"You gave it to me," Rob said. "Don't you remember?"

"When you left to take command of the *Monarch*." Blake shook his head. "I thought you would have thrown the isolar chip in storage and forgotten all about it."

"I did...but I thought that you might have a chance to visit me one day, so I dug it out and installed it here in my office and on the replicator in my quarters." Rob lifted his glass in a mock toast. "I'm glad you're here."

"I'm glad to be here, Skipper," Blake replied. "What's my first mission?"

"Do you like cats?"

"Cats?" Blake scrunched his eyes together and cocked his head sideways. "I suppose cats are okay, but I never had one for a pet."

"We recently made first contact with a felinoid race on a planet called Nu-Tirath," Rob said. "I will brief you and provide you with all the information that we have, but that can wait. I want you and your crew to get familiar with the starbase and some of the people. I imagine that your crew would enjoy some R and R after the long trip to get here."

"I appreciate that, and I'm sure they will," Blake said. "Any chance Mel will be around before the *Swift* ships out?"

Rob smiled. "I wanted to surprise you at dinner tonight, but I might as well tell you now. Mel and the *Trailblazer* are due to arrive this afternoon."

Blake's eyes lit up as he thought about Melanie Leeson. Their relationship was difficult to describe. They had become close friends, and they seemed to both want their friendship to develop into something of a romantic nature, but the complications of being hundreds of light years apart did not create an ideal situation for them, but now that they were both commanding ships in the same area of responsibility, perhaps there might be a chance for them to get together. "How's she doing?"

"She's doing fine," Rob said. "She had an incident with some hostiles not long ago, but she can tell you about it."

"I can't wait to see her, Skipper. I'm hoping..."

The door chime interrupted Blake's thought.

"Enter," Rob said as he shifted his attention to the door as it opened. He saw Lieutenant J.G. Sokal standing there in front of Commander Jada Lightfoot.

"Commander Lightfoot has arrived, sir." Sokal stepped aside to allow *Providence's* commanding officer to enter. "Admiral Sjögren would like to see you in his office in ten minutes."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Rob replied. "Please let the admiral know that the three of us will be there." After the door closed, Rob smiled as he stepped toward the replicator. "Would you like something to drink before we start the tour, Commander?"

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

"Well then, let's start. This is my office when I'm at the station. And you have met my aide. He will know how to reach me most of the time." Rob started toward the door to the outer office, followed by Blake and Jada. Rob pointed to another office door. "Through that door is Lieutenant Commander Richard Baker's office. He is our strategic operations officer, so he will be your main point of contact for all assignments. You will send your logs and reports to him. He's in CIC right now, so I will make sure that I introduce you to each other."

"When can we expect our first assignment, Fleet Captain?" Jada faced Rob; her curiosity was clearly visible.

"As I told Captain Adams earlier," Rob said, "I would like you and your crew to familiarize yourselves with *Gateway Alpha* and get some rest and enjoyment before you ship out again. Once you do, it might be months before you return. It's been almost a year since the *Balboa* has been back."

"The *Balboa* is another *Ericsson*-class scout, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes, it is, Commander Lightfoot," Rob replied. "I'm looking forward to introducing you to Commander Morgenstern. I think he will give you some helpful pointers about this area of space."

“Skipper, isn’t there another one of *Providence*’s sister ships a part of this outfit?” Blake asked.

Rob lowered his eyes momentarily before looking back up. He started to open his mouth but hesitated, finally saying, “There was.”

Blake read the sadness in his friend’s facial features. Blake knew then that something had happened. Something tragic. He placed his hand on Rob’s back. “Skipper, what happened?”

Rob shook his head. “Remember the Vendoth?”

Blake’s mouth dropped open. “I thought they were wiped out.”

“So did I, but...I’ll give you access to the reports about the incident,” Rob said.

“Excuse me, Captain, but the admiral expects you to arrive in three point six minutes,” Lieutenant Sokal interrupted.

Rob, Blake, and Jada all turned their heads toward the Vulcan. Rob gave the Vulcan a slight smile. “Thank you, Lieutenant.” Rob looked at Blake and Jada. “Well, we better be on our way,” he said as he led them into the corridor.



“Enter,” Rear Admiral Erik Sjögren said in response to the door chime. He stood as three officers entered through the door. “Welcome Robert. And who do we have with you?”

“Erik, I want to introduce you to Captain Blake Adams and Commander Jada Lightfoot.”

“Please come in and have a seat,” the admiral said as he directed the three officers to the area of the office where the relaxing furniture was arranged in a semicircle. “I hope that Robert has given you the full tour.”

“He got as far as his office area and pointed out the conference rooms as we passed them on the way here,” Blake said as he smiled.

The admiral looked at Rob and smiled. “He is forthright, isn’t he?”

“And a bit cheeky,” Rob added.

“Me?” Blake tried to act innocent, but the admiral saw through him. And Rob knew him well enough to know that Blake wasn’t innocent. Blake knew it, too.

Rob smiled at his friend and turned to face the admiral. “Erik, I assume that there is something going on that you needed to discuss?”

“Well, *I* don’t have anything to discuss, but there is something going on,” Sjögren said, “but someone else will brief you on that in a few minutes.”

“Oh? Am I in trouble?”

“Not at all, Robert. Far from it. I thought that I would take Captain Adams and Commander Lightfoot to tour CIC and the rest of the command deck for you while you are in

your meeting with..." Sjögren stopped short of finishing his sentence as he smiled and tapped the Starfleet insignia on his uniform chest. "Captain Ivanov, you can send our guest in."

"*Da, Admiral,*" Yuri Ivanov, *Gateway Alpha's* XO, responded from the other side of the office door that separated Sjögren's office from the command center.

Rob's attention was on the door as both panels disappeared into the walls. He saw Ivanov take a sidestep and raise his arm to direct an unseen person to enter.

Rear Admiral Luis Montoya entered and started toward the others in the room. He smiled as he greeted the other admiral, who was now standing, and walked toward Montoya. "Erik, it is good to see you again."

"The pleasure is mine, Luis." As the two admirals shook hands, Erik stepped back and turned toward the other officers, who stood up. "I'll let Robert make the introductions."

Rob nodded to the flag officers. "Of course. Admiral Montoya, I present to you Captain Blake Adams of the U.S.S. *Swift* and Commander Jada Lightfoot of the U.S.S. *Providence*."

"It's good to meet both of you," Montoya said as he shook each of their hands. "I'm glad that you and your ships have been added to the 4th Fleet and specifically the 3rd *Exploratory Group*." Montoya then reached toward Rob to shake his hand. "Good to see you again, Robert."

"And you, sir. Would you like to go to my office to talk?"

"You're welcome to use mine for as long as you need, Luis," Sjögren offered.

"Thank you, Erik." Montoya sat down on the couch opposite the one where Rob stood, a coffee table separating the two.

Erik motioned for Blake and Jada to follow him. "I'll give them back after you two are finished, Robert."

Rob nodded and sat down again, facing Luis. He waited for the admiral to start the conversation.

Montoya leaned back and crossed one leg over the other. "Robert, I'm going to dispense with the usual small talk and get to the point. You're probably wondering why I called all the ships under your command back to the nest."

Rob, his face neutral, nodded his head once. "Yes, sir."

"You have done an outstanding job during the last two to three years, and you have been noticed by several influential people at Starfleet Command." Luis uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. "Remember a few months before this assignment started what I told you? That you were on a path that would lead to the admiralty?"

Rob wore a blank stare. His stomach tightened when he realized that Montoya was about to say something that he did not want to hear. Rob did not feel worthy of what he believed was about to happen. "Sir, I've worked hard, but I am not doing it to get noticed by Starfleet. I work

hard because it's the right thing to do. I take my duties seriously. *And* I must pass on most of the credit to the captains and crews of those ships that make up the 3rd *Exploratory Group*."

Luis smiled. "Of course, I know it's a group effort, but your leadership is what ties all the others together to successfully complete the overall mission. And *that* is what gets you noticed." He paused as he studied Stuart's face. "I put you in for a promotion, and it was approved. Approved faster than any promotion that I ever heard of."

Rob took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Admiral, I appreciate the thought, but I don't deserve it."

"Yes, you do," Luis countered.

"Sir, I am responsible for the loss of two ships within the last few months. I shouldn't be rewarded for that!"

"Robert, you were not responsible for either of those tragedies."

"With due respect, Admiral, Starfleet Academy drills into every command school cadet and officer that a commanding officer is responsible for everything that happens on his or her ship."

"That is true to a point, but that mantra does not pertain to you in either of those events," Montoya said firmly. "First, you were not in command of either ship. Second, you were unaware of *Raleigh*'s demise until after it happened. You had no knowledge that a Vendoth battleship would drop out of some temporal phenomenon they use to travel through. Third, the U.S.S. *Solar Flare* isn't lost."

"Well, technically..."

"They are alive, and you are doing everything in your power to get them back home," Montoya said. "I know that you feel responsible for that incident, but Captain Granger made a choice to push the *Republic* out of harm's way. I'm sure that he did not intend for his ship to get sucked into that other universe, but it happened. I hope that the *Eclipse* crew can get that machine to work and reopen the door to the other universe, but you need to make peace with yourself no matter the outcome."

Rob closed his eyes. When he opened them, the admiral's firm demeanor had softened. "Admiral..."

"You need to start using my first name, *Commodore*."

Rob finally lowered his guard and started to smile. "Luis, I'm grateful, but do I have to accept this promotion right now? The timing doesn't feel right."

"Regardless of how it feels, it is the right time." Luis stood and walked to the replicator "Black coffee; hot." As the steaming cup of coffee appeared in the alcove, Luis turned his head to look toward Rob. "What would you like?"

"Hot apple cinnamon tea. Thank you."

The admiral retrieved both drinks and returned to the couch, handing Rob his cup. “The promotion is yours, and we will make it official at a special ceremonial dinner tomorrow at 1730 hours.”

“If I have to accept the promotion, can’t we just keep it a quiet affair?” Rob was not fond of a lot of pomp.

Luis shook his head. “Sorry, I have already sent out the invitations.”

“Sir, please.”

Luis contemplated Rob’s reluctant attitude and decided to compromise. “Your one vice is underestimating yourself, Robert.”

“It’s not that I underestimate myself, sir; I just don’t like to call attention to myself.”

Luis sighed heavily “Alright, I will be at your office at 0800 tomorrow to read the orders in an informal ceremony, but I want you to ask your wife to be there to witness it. I will ask Erik to join us, too.”

“Thank you, Luis.”

Luis nodded. “In addition to your duties as the CO of the *3rd Exploratory Group*, you will also be the *4th Fleet*’s executive officer after Commodore Rhoades retires in a couple of months. I hate to lose him, but he wants to go back to Earth and spend time with his grandchildren.”

“I can understand his motives,” Rob said. “I’m not afraid of the added responsibilities, but are you going to require that I relocate to Starbase 214?”

“I don’t think that is necessary, Robert.”

“Good. I’m not sure that would go over well with Janice,” Rob replied.

Luis smiled at Rob’s reply. “The other reason that I have called in every ship under your command is twofold. I want to honor them for the outstanding jobs that they have done since the unit was formed, and I want to memorialize the crew of the *Raleigh* and others who have lost their lives in service to Starfleet and the Federation,” Luis said. “I understand that most of the ships already have arrived,” Luis said. “We are just waiting for the *Monarch*, the *Balboa*, and the *Trailblazer*.”

“*Monarch* is due to arrive in the morning,” Rob said. “*Trailblazer* and *Balboa* will be in later today.”

Luis stood and smiled as he offered his hand to Rob. “Robert, I won’t take up any more of your time so that you can get back to Adams and Lightfoot. I will see you in the morning.”

Rob stood up and accepted the handshake. “Thank you, Luis.” Rob smiled as he started toward the exit to the corridor.



After Rob’s meeting with Admiral Montoya, he went to his quarters to tell Jan the news of his promotion and when the ceremony would be held. He asked her to keep it to herself until

he could tell their closest friends. After Jan congratulated her husband, Rob went to the communication panel and composed a message to his uncle, Admiral Robert Hathaway. After sending the message, Rob kissed his wife, left their quarters, and met up with Blake and Jada to continue to show them some of the main areas of Starbase *Gateway Alpha*—the botanical garden, holodecks, replimats, civilian-run shops and dining facilities, theaters, Starfleet Museum Annex, and various other key areas designed for off-duty enjoyment. The two ship captains had met the strategic operations officer, Lieutenant Commander Baker, when they were in CIC with Admiral Sjögren. The tour took more than three hours, but the entire station would take more than a day or two to see the main areas of every deck.

Jada thanked Rob and went back to Docking Port Four where *Providence* had docked the previous evening. Blake remained with Rob after he checked in with his executive officer to let him know to start shore leave for the crew.

Rob and Blake went to the Stuarts' quarters where Blake met his non-biological niece and nephew. As soon as Rob and Blake entered the quarters, the twins ran up to Rob with open arms and simultaneously jumped up to attack their father. Fortunately, Rob was prepared and was able to reach out and grab one in each arm and draw them both to his chest. He let out a sound as if the air was pushed out of his lungs, which made both kids start to giggle. This time, Rob was pretending.

“You are not going to be able to take that much longer,” Jan said.

“Not the way they’re growing,” Rob replied as he looked to his wife and used his head to point to Blake, who stood just inside the door. “Look who I found wandering around the station.”

Jan gave Blake a huge smile and quickly walked toward and wrapped her arms around him. “Blake, it’s good to see you!”

Blake kissed Jan on the cheek as he returned the embrace. “You, too! Have you been keeping Rob in line?”

“It’s difficult to do, but I’ve been successful most of the time.” Jan walked up to Rob and hugged him along with the twins that he was holding. She took Kevin from Rob’s arm as she saw that he was having difficulty holding on to both kids.

“Thank you,” Rob replied. He looked his daughter in the eyes and took her toward his friend. “I want you to meet your Uncle Blake.”

“Hi there, little one,” Blake said as he reached toward her and took her from Rob’s arms.

She smiled and wrapped her arms around his neck. “Hi, Uncle Bwake.”

Rob and Jan started to laugh but neither of them corrected Kelly. She was still working on her verbal skills.

Blake tapped her nose gently with his index finger. “What’s your name?” Blake already knew her name, but he thought a ‘proper’ introduction was necessary.

“My name is Kewwy Sturt,” the toddler said. “Daddy says you his friend.”

“That’s right, Kelly. Your daddy and I have been friends for a long time.”

Kevin, in his mother’s arms, started rocking his body back and forth to get Jan to move closer to Blake, so she complied. “How come you not come round before if you Daddy’s friend?”

“Well, Kevin, I’ve been a long way from here.”

Kelly looked slightly cross at her brother. “Mommy and Daddy told us that, *brudder*.”

All three of the adults started to laugh at Kelly’s response but were interrupted when Kevin spoke again. “Uncle Bwake, how many wight years were you away?”

Blake was surprised that the little boy knew what a light year was, but he looked into Kevin’s eyes and pretended to be serious. “Well, Kevin, it’s a very long distance. It took me several weeks to get here.”

“Oh,” Kevin replied, and that seemed to satisfy his curiosity about the subject as he squirmed to get out of his mother’s arms. His message must have been clear because Jan bent over and let his feet touch the floor. “Thank you, Mommy.”

“You’re welcome, Kevin,” Jan said as she patted him on the head and let him run off into the nursery.

Kelly smiled at Blake. “Time to pway. You put me down, Uncle Bwake?”

“Sure, darling.” Blake set Kelly on the floor, and she was off after her brother. “They are full of energy, aren’t they?”

“They keep us hopping,” Rob said. “Can I get you anything?”

“Not right now, but thanks anyway.” Blake walked to one of the chairs and sat down without waiting to be offered. He and Rob were almost like brothers, so he felt like he could make himself at home and didn’t need permission. He was correct in that assumption.

Rob and Jan sat on the couch perpendicular to the chair. “So, how does it feel to be a captain?” Rob had asked the question, but he suspected he knew what his friend’s reply would be.

“About the same as being a commander, but with a bigger ship.” Blake was still Blake with his witty quips. “The trip here was smooth, but a few members of the crew seem to be...apprehensive.”

“That’s to be expected, especially when you inherit a crew from another captain,” Rob said. “I’ve been fortunate to command ships where I have been the first commanding officer, so I didn’t have to deal with your situation.”

“The way I remember it, Rob, you had a few people who seemed a little hesitant about you in the early days of the first *Providence*.” Jan placed her hand on her husband’s shoulder. “Melanie wasn’t sure about you at first.”

“I wasn’t sure about me at first either,” Rob quipped.

“How is Mel?” Blake felt something when he heard the sound of her name. He knew that he had missed her and hoped that they might have a chance to rekindle whatever they had once felt building between them before opportunities for both had taken them away from each other.

“She had an incident not long ago with a hostile species, and she sustained a few injuries, but she seems to be fine now,” Rob replied. “I know that she’s looking forward to the four of us getting together tonight.”

“I’m surprised that she hasn’t arrived yet,” Jan said. “The last I heard...”

The door chime sounded, interrupting Jan’s thought.

“Enter,” Rob said.

The door panels parted, revealing the topic of conversation. Captain Melanie Leeson stood smiling. “Mind if I drop in?”

Blake was the first to stand and face the newcomer. “Hi, Mel.”

Melanie, not understanding why, started to blush. She felt her cheeks start to get warm and her heart started to beat faster. “Hi, Blake.” Leeson walked into the Stuarts’ quarters and toward Blake.

Blake slowly moved toward Melanie. Both closed the distance between them and stopped within a couple of steps of each other. “How have you been?”

“I’ve been well. You?”

“Well.” Blake smiled as he studied Mel’s eyes. “I’ve missed you.”

If Melanie had not been blushing before, she certainly was now. “I’ve missed you, too, Blake.”

Rob and Jan looked at each other, smiling, and imagining what was going through each of their friends’ minds. Rob cleared his throat. “Good to see you again, Mel.”

Melanie took a couple of steps back to give some distance between her and Blake. “Sorry, Rob. It’s good to see you and Jan again.”

“I know it hasn’t been that long since the *Trailblazer* was here,” Jan said, “but we didn’t get a lot of time to visit then.”

“And I regret that, too.” Melanie offered a smile in her friend’s direction. “I had to oversee repairs...as much as my CMO would let me.”

“Have you fully recovered from your injuries?” Rob asked.

“Doctor Keegan said that I am ship shape, and Counselor Eedo is satisfied with my progress.” Melanie noticed Blake’s raised eyebrow. She turned to face him again. “I had a run-in with some unfriendlies.”

“Rob told me that, but he said you just had some minor injuries,” Blake said as his face showed a growing level of concern. “He didn’t say that you were under a counselor’s care.”

“I felt it best to set a good example for the crew to see the ship’s counselor after the incident, but...I can fill you in on the details later.” Melanie looked at Janice. “Where are the munchkins?”

Kevin and Kelly had heard Mel’s voice from their room and came rushing out. “Aunt Melly!” they yelled in unison as they both wrapped themselves around her legs, almost pulling her down.

“Careful, you two,” Jan said as she moved close to Melanie to try to steady her in case she started to fall. “You don’t want to hurt Aunt Melly.”

“It’s all right, Jan. They haven’t been able to pull me down yet.”

“It won’t be long before they do if they keep growing at their current pace,” Rob said.

“Come on, kids. Go back to your room and play,” Jan said. “Aunt Melly and Uncle Blake will be around for several days, so I promise you will get some play time with them.”

Kevin let go of Melanie’s leg first and smiled at her. He turned and rushed to the nursery. Kelly was more reluctant to let go, but when she did, her lower lip shot out. She quickly restored her joyful demeanor and rushed to join her brother.

“They are growing up too fast,” Melanie said.

“Before long, they will leave the nest,” Rob replied.

“Bite your tongue!” Jan was half-frowning at her husband but her eyes seemed to ‘smile’ as she wanted to convey an unspoken message that she was not serious—not completely.

Rob moved close and put his arm around his wife’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, honey, we will have lots of time with them before that happens.” Rob turned to his friends. “The four of us are having dinner at Club Archer at 1800.”

“Aren’t we fancy?” Melanie said.

“Special occasions require fancy dining,” Rob replied.

Jan stepped up and stood behind her husband and placed a hand on his shoulder. “There will be six of us. I hope no one minds that I invited the Goodmans to join us.”

“Not at all,” Rob said as both Blake and Melanie agreed with head nods. “It will be good to see them again.”

“I’m sure that they will be glad to see you, too,” Blake said.

“You don’t think they will be glad to see you?” Melanie turned her head to face Blake.

“I haven’t been away from them long enough to be missed yet.” Blake grinned mischievously.

Rob smiled as he realized that Blake still had the same sense of humor even though he seemed more mature. Rob could see that his friend had grown as a person as the responsibilities of command had tempered him. Rob also noticed how Blake and Melanie, once again, looked at

each other. “I don’t want to be rude and throw you out, but Mel, why don’t you show Blake around *Gateway Alpha*? I was only able to give him the abridged tour.”

“Just don’t be late for dinner this evening,” Jan added.

“Sounds like a plan.” Blake turned toward Melanie. “Lead the way, Captain Leeson.”

Melanie tilted her head in Blake’s direction as she smiled. “It will be my honor, *Captain Adams*.”

Rob and Jan watched their two friends exit their quarters.



Rob and Jan arrived at Club Archer, one of the finest restaurants on the starbase. It was 1752 hours; they had intended to be a few minutes early, thinking that as the hosts of the small reunion, they should arrive first. Rob stepped up to the *maître d’* standing next to a small podium at the restaurant’s entrance. “Good evening,” Rob said. “Stuart party of six.”

“Of course, sir,” the head waiter replied as he picked up six menus. “If you follow me, I will lead you to your table.”

Rob and Jan followed the man to a round table in one corner next to a large transparent aluminum window with a beautiful view of distant stars. Rob pulled one of the chairs out from under the table for his wife and took her hand as she sat. He sat down next to her, smiling. “It’s not often that we wear civilian clothes. It’s nice for a change.”

“You look handsome no matter what you wear, Rob.” Jan smiled as she opened her menu.

“And you are as beautiful as ever,” Rob said. “I don’t think I tell you that as often as I should.”

Jan started to blush at the compliment. She was touched by what her husband had said, but she thought it would be a good opportunity to tease him. She gave him a playful look as she said, “You’re right. You should say it more often.”

Rob chuckled as his eyes brightened, something that Jan had not seen in him for a long time. “I’ll try to do better.”

“It’s good to see you like this again,” Jan said as she reached and took his hand.”

“Like what?”

“Like your old self.”

“So now I’m old?” Maybe it was seeing Blake again, but he did feel as if his spirits had been lifted more than he had felt for several months. His mood seemed lighter than it had for a long time, and his display of levity was refreshing.

Jan gave her husband a light slap on the arm. “Look at your menu.” She frowned as she turned her focus back to looking at what she wanted to eat, but the frown was just a pretense.

Rob continued smiling as he picked up his menu, but he quickly set it down again when he saw Blake, Melanie, James, and his wife Mary approach. Rob stood as they approached.

“Look who we found wandering around the station,” Blake said jovially, repeating what Rob had said in the Stuarts’ quarters earlier in the day when Rob had brought Blake to see her.

Rob stepped from behind the table and reached out his hand toward James. “James! Mary! It’s good to see you again,” Rob said as he shook James’ hand and then hugged Mary.

Jan stood and gave each of them a tight hug. “How have you been?”

“We’ve been well,” James said. “I understand that you are parents now. What’s it like?”

“It has its challenges, but most of the time, it’s wonderful,” Jan replied.

Mary smiled coyly as James pulled out her chair allowing her to sit. “Someday, we might try to see for ourselves.”

“Oh?” Rob looked surprised. “Are you...?”

“No, no, not at the moment,” Mary said.

“We are considering starting a family, but we want to wait another year until we can find planetary assignments,” James said. “We would like to raise our kids on the ground somewhere instead of on a starship.”

“Well, when the time comes, I might be able to recommend you to something back on Earth or Mars. Mary, if you wanted to serve at Utopia Planitia, my exec and chief engineer were recently stationed there. I could probably talk with their former CO. San Francisco Shipyards might be an option, too. James, as a counselor, you would have many options for a posting back home.”

James and Mary both smiled at their friend. “We may take you up on that, Rob. Thanks,” James replied.

“Well, why don’t we decide what we want to eat, and then we can catch up,” Janice said.

“Sounds like a good idea,” Blake replied as he and the others sat down and picked up their menus to see the various entrees and other options just in time as a waiter came to the table to take their orders.

After the waiter left, they began to talk about what had taken place during the past three years since they had seen each other. Of course, Rob, Jan, and Melanie frequently had opportunities to communicate with each other and occasionally get together. Blake, too, had only recently left *Providence*, so he and the Goodmans had been together up until a few weeks ago.

They shared more about their personal lives, thoughts, and feelings, but not too much about specific ‘work-related’ topics; however, Rob wanted his friends to know about his conversation with Rear Admiral Montoya earlier in the day. “I wanted to share some news with you before you hear it from someone else. I...I was informed this morning by Admiral Montoya that he is promoting me.”

“That’s great news, Rob!” Blake smiled widely.

“You definitely deserve it, Rob,” Melanie said.

Mary, as one who had been raised in England, was more subdued in her enthusiasm, but she felt extremely happy for her former captain and friend. “Congratulations, sir.”

James, sitting next to Rob, patted him on the shoulder. “Well deserved, Rob.” James, who was one-quarter Betazoid, immediately sensed Rob’s reluctance. “You don’t seem too excited about this promotion. Is everything okay?”

Rob forced himself to portray a relaxed demeanor and half-heartedly smiled at his friend. “I almost forgot that you had some empathic abilities, James. I guess there’s no hiding my feelings from you. The truth is...I’m not sure I deserve it.”

“Why not?” Melanie asked.

“I think you know, Mel, but the rest of you have not been briefed on what has happened in recent months.” Rob proceeded to briefly tell the incidents involving the starships *Solar Flare* and *Raleigh*. After the telling, Rob leaned back and crossed his arms. “And it happened on my watch.”

“It sounds like both of those things were out of your control,” Blake said.

“That’s what the admiral said.” Rob looked away momentarily.

Melanie gently wrapped her knuckles on the table, which drew Rob’s attention back to face her. “Admiral Montoya is not the type to hand out underserved promotions, Rob. You would not have this opportunity if he didn’t think you deserved it.”

“I keep trying to tell myself that, Mel, but I still feel like I should have been able to do something to avoid those losses.”

“Rob,” Blake said. “You and I both know that you have always been reluctant about accepting praise and promotions. You could have been a captain and had your first command probably five years before you did. You have always had a...tendency to sell yourself short.”

Rob thought about what his best friend pointed out, and he concluded that it was an accurate assessment, especially since, once again, Luis had said the same thing. Rob realized that he should probably be more objective in assessing himself regardless of his feelings. Sometimes, feelings can be trusted but not always.

“And,” Blake continued, “it doesn’t matter to me whether you’re a captain, fleet captain, commodore, or someday an admiral. To me, you’re still the skipper.”

Rob felt the weight lift. “Thank you, my friend.” He looked around at each person sitting around the table. “And thanks to all of you. You have always been the people that have supported and motivated me. Sometimes, you know me better than I know myself.”

“We’ve got your back, Skipper,” Blake said.

“The promotion ceremony will be in my office at 0800 tomorrow,” Rob said. “I would appreciate it if each of you would attend.”

“Count me in,” Blake replied, and each of the others also agreed to be there. Blake then noticed the waiter approaching with a large tray of food. “Ah, time to eat.”

The End