

STARDATE 58906.6

Commodore Robert P. Stuart and Captain Blake Adams were having lunch in the officer's dining room on deck 7 of Starbase *Gateway Alpha*. Blake had only arrived a few weeks earlier, and the two men tried to spend as much time together as they could, renewing their long friendship after nearly three years and hundreds of light years apart, before the U.S.S. *Swift* departed on its first assignment.

Rob finished his sandwich and moved his plate to one side. "That was good. It was a nice change to eat something that wasn't replicated."

Blake nodded as he finished off his chicken noodle soup and crackers. "It's kind of unusual for a Starfleet mess hall to serve real food, isn't it?"

The Mess chief insists on cooking as much as possible, but he has a lot of critics when it comes to serving 'animal flesh,' Rob said. "Truthfully, I like an occasional *real* steak but don't tell anyone. Especially don't tell Jan!"

Blake's mischievous grin revealed that he had something to blackmail Rob with if he so chose; however, Blake would never do that to his friend. He stopped grinning and changed the subject. "So, tell me about these Tirathians. What can I expect?"

"They're feline. They literally personify the idea that the lion is the king of beasts."

"A monarchy form of government?"

"Yes, and the current king's dynasty goes back several hundred years," Rob said. In fact, one of the major festivals celebrates the first king of his dynasty, who led the planet to a unified planetary kingdom."

"So, do they like parties?"

Rob smirked. "You might say that, but I have only a little information to go on. From what I'm told, their festivals would not be what we would refer to as a party. You will see for yourself because you will be there a day or two before the high festival starts." Rob handed Blake a PADD. "This has all the information we gathered during first contact. You want to be careful not to offend them because they have strict laws against certain violations of their...taboos."

"I will definitely do my homework and take the proper precautions."

"Good. Cowboy diplomacy will not work on this assignment." Rob smiled; however, his eyes showed the seriousness of what he had said.

"Maybe you shouldn't send Adams if you don't want a cowboy."

Rob and Blake turned in the direction of the voice and saw another officer approaching their table. Rob stood, shook the man's hand, and turned his head toward his still-seated friend. "Blake, let me introduce you to..."

"Rick Justice." Blake smiled widely as he interrupted his friend.

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To Boldly Go: Last of the Space Cowboys

A Personal Story

By Cleve Johnson



“So, how have you been, Ricky?”

“I’ve been well, Adams,” the newcomer stated unemotionally. His face remained stoic. “I’m surprised that you’re a captain now. The last time I saw you, I didn’t expect that you would rise above lieutenant. I’m surprised that you’re still in Starfleet.”

“You two know each other, I see,” Rob said as he tried to deflate what he sensed as rising tension between the two men.

“We were on the *Thomas Paine* together...,” Blake said. “...for a short time.”

“Not short enough,” Rick replied. “Are you still as irresponsible as you were back then?”

“I was never irresponsible, Ricky. I just liked having fun when I did my work *and* while off duty.”

“At my expense, as I recall.”

Rob observed the banter, but he was not sure if it was in fun or if there was some bad blood between the two men. “Well, gentlemen, let’s not have a scene.” He smiled when he said it, hoping that the two were just teasing one another. “How have you been, Captain?”

Rick Justice’s expression softened as his lips turned upward, even though he did not quite allow himself to smile. “I’m fine Commodore. Congratulations on your promotion, by the way.”

“Thank you.” Rob was still getting used to his new rank and preferred to talk about it as little as possible, so he quickly changed the subject. “How are the new cadets handling their first year?”

“They show promise, sir. They are all looking forward to the semester break once finals are completed.”

“I remember looking forward to semester breaks,” Rob said.

“It sounds like you’re one of the professors at the Academy’s extension campus,” Blake said.

“I’m the commandant,” Rick replied smugly as he looked directly at Blake.

“I’m able to assist in flight operations classes if you need another teacher.” Blake smiled, expecting a negative response. He was not disappointed.

“Don’t count on it, Adams.” Rick turned his attention back to Rob. “Sir, I need to get back for a staff meeting, but I just wanted to stop to offer my congratulations. If you will excuse me?”

“Of course, Captain Justice. I look forward to seeing you again.”

“Thank you, sir.” Rick looked at Blake and became stoic once again. “Maybe I will see you around, Adams.”

“I’ll be around another few days, Ricky. Have a good day.” Blake picked up his glass of water and took a sip. He noticed the inquisitive look on Rob’s face. “Captain Justice. Sounds like the name of a comic book superhero.”

Rob was only vaguely familiar with Blake’s terminology. He knew that his friend had collected ancient ‘comic books’ as a boy. “What’s the story between you two?”

“Nothing really other than he has no sense of humor.”

“And you served on the *Thomas Paine* together.”

“He was one of the flight control officers, and he had been a member of the crew for almost two years before I arrived,” Blake said. He was always serious. Even when off duty.”

“And being who you are, you took it upon yourself to try to help him overcome his serious outlook, which means that you played some practical jokes on him.”

“Exactly. I was an ensign, and he was a J.G., so I made sure I didn’t go *too* far.”

“What did your captain think about playing jokes on fellow officers?”

“As far as I know, the captain didn’t know about it, and neither did the first officer.” Blake started smiling as he recalled the memory. “The senior flight controller, however, thought the jokes were hilarious. But unlike Ricky, she had a sense of humor.”

“Did you play any jokes on her?”

“I wanted to stay on her good side, so no, I didn’t,” Blake said. “But Ricky...he just didn’t know how to have fun or appreciate humor.”

“You have matured, at least a little bit, since those days, Blake. Maybe if you met with Captain Justice and let him get to know you better, he might see it.”

“After his reaction to seeing me just now, it seems to me like he probably would not see it.” Blake ran his hand over his hair and leaned against the back of his chair. “No, I think his mind is made up that I am the same young ensign fresh out of the Academy that he knew fifteen years ago.”

Rob crossed his arms. “It sounds like you have made up your mind about him, *too*.”

Blake straightened himself in the chair and took on a more serious demeanor. “Maybe you’re right, Skipper. Maybe I should contact him and meet so we can get to know each other better.”

“He spends most of his time in his office on deck four,” Rob said.

“I think I’ll make a point of seeing him.”

“You might make an appointment with his yeoman, first, especially if he is as by the book as he appears.”

“Good advice, Skipper.” Blake nodded to his friend. “So, tell me more about the Tirathians.”



Hours later, Blake entered the commandant’s office. He still had reservations about this ‘get together’ but knew that he should at least give it a try as Rob had encouraged him. The skipper was a good friend and had always given Blake good advice. He walked up to the yeoman’s desk.

The young woman stood to greet Blake. She appeared to be in her mid-twenties, and she seemed pleasant. “Good afternoon, sir. You must be Captain Adams.”

Blake smiled at the yeoman as he tried to find something witty to say, but for the first time, he could not think of anything. “I am he.”

“Captain Justice is expecting you, sir. He’s right through that door.” She pressed her finger on the LCARS pad on her desk. “Captain Adams is here, sir.”

“Send him in, Yeoman.”

Blake nodded his appreciation to the young woman and turned to walk toward the door, which slid open upon his approach. He entered the office, subtly observing the décor, which was less spartan than he had expected. A collection of various small models of starship classes sat on the shelves of a bookcase against one wall. Another wall had a large painting of a *New Orleans*-class starship. Blake walked up to it and looked at it closely, as he assumed, the name on the hull belonged to the ship that both men had served on in their early careers. He approached the desk and stood in front of it as the other captain sat reading the PADD he held. Blake waited to be acknowledged before speaking. He was curious about how long Rick Justice would make him wait. Fortunately, it was less than a minute.

“Adams. Have a seat.” Justice did not look up as he continued reading the PADD.

Blake sat in one of the chairs that was opposite Justice’s chair on the other side of the mahogany desk. “Nice painting of the *Paine*.”

Justice finally sat the PADD on the desk and looked up to face Blake. “Thank you, Adams. Out of five ships I’ve served on, it was my favorite.”

“Your first assignment,” Blake said. “Mine too, but as many good memories as I have while serving on her, she wasn’t my favorite.”

“And what ship was your favorite?”

“*Providence*. Not the current one, but the *Intrepid*-class variant,” Blake said. “It was a shame that I didn’t have more time aboard her.”

“I heard she met an untimely demise,” Justice said. “Was that due to your wild cowboy style of flying?”

There was the jab Blake had expected. He thought about different ways that he could answer, but he decided to take the least confrontational. “No, we picked up some sort of tritanium-eating element while entering a planetary atmosphere. It was not detectable to the sensors.”

Justice did not show any sympathy. C. Blake Adams was, in Rick’s opinion, someone who did not take his duties seriously and would not ever climb up the ranks, but here he was—a Starfleet captain. Rick would have never imagined it. Was his assessment of Adams wrong, or did Adams change that much over the years? He remembered the practical jokes of years gone by, but he also remembered the Vulcan philosophy of IDIC—Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combinations, so he forced himself to conclude that perhaps...maybe...Blake had changed. Justice would keep an open mind, but he would remain cautious. “The unexpected happens. It’s a shame to lose a valuable resource like an *Intrepid*-class starship...or *any* starship for that matter.”

“That’s true,” Blake responded. “Where has your career taken you since you left the *Paine*?”

“I served on a few more ships, rising through the ranks, eventually getting a posting as the XO on the U.S.S. *Demeter*. Three years ago, I was asked to teach at the Academy, and I was chosen to be the commandant of *Gateway Alpha*’s extension campus a few months ago. This is our first class, and I’m glad that I can train future officers...”

“...to not be space cowboys like me?” Blake interjected.

Rick Justice looked at Blake, and for the first time that Blake had ever seen, Justice smiled. “Fortunately for Starfleet, I think you are the last of the space cowboys.”

Blake shrugged his shoulders. “Maybe so, but I have been mentoring my CONN officer for more than three years, and he shows *some* promise. At least when flying a starship. He’s not as willing to play jokes on people as I used to be, but we can’t all be perfect.”

“If that’s the case, then there is hope for him,” Rick said. He stopped smiling and looked directly at Blake. “Why did you want to see me, Adams?”

“I thought that you still saw me as I was fifteen years ago, and I wanted you to know that I have changed.” Blake smiled. “Don’t get me wrong. I still like to have fun, but I rarely play practical or impractical jokes on people. I’ve grown up. And I wanted to see if you had changed and lost some of your excessive...seriousness.”

“I don’t usually show it, but I have learned to be more relaxed...on occasion.”

“It’s good to know that we’re not the same people we were back then.”

“I agree,” Rick said. “Did you notice that I didn’t get upset when you called me ‘Ricky?’”

“I did notice. I remember when you would get so uptight about that.” Blake’s face morphed into a more serious and subdued expression. “If I went too far with my immature joking, I apologize. I hope I wasn’t the reason that you left the *Paine*.”

Rick pushed himself and his chair a few centimeters back from the table, taken aback by Blake’s apology. It was the last thing he expected. “Thank you for saying that. I think you mean it.”

“I do mean it.” Blake tried to read the other man’s expression and body language, but he was not able to. “Did I push you into your transfer?”

“No. I was requested by Captain Satar on the *T’Nepi*. He believed that humans were superior to most Vulcans in starship flight operations, and he had learned that I had an almost Vulcan-like personality, so he concluded that I would be a good fit for his bridge crew, especially since most of the crew was made up of Vulcans.”

“It sounds like it worked out for you.”

“I would say so, Blake.”

“You used my first name!” Blake perked up. “That’s the first time, you’ve done that, Rick!”

“And today is the first time you didn’t call me ‘Ricky.’ Maybe you have matured.” Rick smiled for the second time on the same day. “I want you to know something. I remember that misunderstanding we had with the Tholians. As hard as it is to admit, I’m glad that you were the one at the CONN. We needed a space cowboy that day. You probably saved the ship.”

“Thank you for that, Rick.” Blake was tempted to admit that he saved the ship, but he realized that it would sabotage the two’s progress. He decided it was best not to say more.

“I’m glad that you came, Blake. I think this meeting was good for both of us. Maybe we can have lunch sometime.”

“I would like that, Rick. I’m leaving soon on a mission, but I will let you know when I’m back on the station.” Blake pushed his chair back and started to stand when he felt something holding him down and then heard the ripping of cloth. “Whoa, what the...?”

For the third time, Rick Justice smiled and almost started to laugh, but he did not go quite that far. “So, how does it feel, Adams? I am the one playing a joke on *you* this time!”

Blake felt his face get warm as he plopped back in the chair. He looked up, smiled, and said, “It feels...drafty,” as he burst out laughing. “Yes, I guess we both changed after all. Good one, Ricky.”

The End