

STARDATE 59036.6

Blake Adams had just finished reporting all the details of the Nu-Tirath mission. He took a sip of his Vanilla Coke and set the glass on the desktop. He leaned back and smiled at his friend sitting on the other side of the desk. “So, Rob, what’s my next assignment?”

Commodore Rob Stuart took a sip of hot tea and leaned forward to set the cup down. “Well, we received a request from Pelax just yesterday. It seems they want to consider strengthening formal relations with the Federation, but they have some questions.” Rob paused to take another sip of tea.

“I’ve been trying to catch up on reading about some of the planets in this area of responsibility, and I noticed that the Pelaxian government has been friendly toward us.” Blake tried to remember the Pelaxian leader’s name. “King Moof...”

“Moaph,” Rob corrected as he smiled. “His name is Moaph.”

“I was close,” Blake countered. “Anyway, King Moaph was last reported to be cautious about approaching the Federation.”

“He is cautious, but he is open-minded. So, our ambassador-at-large, Lirian Chen, will need a ride. She’s currently on Nazar Prime, so you need to pick her up and take her to Pelax.”

“How soon do I leave?”

“The ambassador has a few things to work out with the Nazar, so you can wait a couple of days before departure,” Rob said. “Let your crew have a few more days of shore leave.”

“They will appreciate that.” Blake took another gulp from his glass. “You ever think about our days on the *Providence* and the missions we had?”

“When it was just us and one ship opening up a new frontier?” Rob nodded and smiled. “I think about those days a lot. I think about the first *Providence* and how we lost her.”

“We barely knew her. She died long before she should have,” Blake suddenly felt sad. He loved flying that ship. It was unique from the other *Intrepid*-class ships—one of a kind. He had heard that there were a couple more variants that had been built with plans for a few more. “What if we had never received that distress beacon from the probe orbiting Trilarnex II?”

“Or what if I never would have ordered us to take the ship into the atmosphere?” Rob occasionally felt guilty about that decision even after five years.

“Don’t blame yourself, Rob. There was no way you or anyone else could have known that the atmosphere had an element that would eat the tritanium from the hull.”

“I should have been more cautious, Blake.”

“You were cautious, but our instruments did not detect it. History records that James Kirk told John Harriman of the *Enterprise-B* that risks are a part of sitting in the captain’s chair.” Blake shrugged. “You took a risk, and it didn’t go the way we hoped or planned. It happens sometimes.”

Rob rubbed his chin several times as he thought about the past. He tried to imagine a different outcome. “Blake, have you ever thought about what might have been if we would not have flown into the atmosphere?”

“There are all kinds of decisions that we could have made that would have changed our outcome. We might not be sitting here having this conversation if any one of a thousand decisions were made differently, Blake said. “What if we arrived somewhere earlier or later than we did? How would that have affected the outcome? Who knows where we would be right now?”

Commodore Rob Stuart smiled at his friend and said, “Well, Blake, I’ve heard about a theory that every different decision made might lead to a different timeline and that there are an infinite number of timelines that exist concurrently. Maybe there is another timeline where I made a different decision and...”

▲
To Boldly Go: What Might Have Been

An Alternate Timeline Story

By Cleve Johnson

▲
U.S.S. *Providence*, NCC-76037, Stardate 53372.8

The *Intrepid*-class variant starship approached Trilarnex II. Its long-range sensors detected a signal from the star system, and the ship dropped out of warp and made its way toward the alien world.

“Can the signal be a natural phenomenon?” Commander Leeson asked.

Lieutenant Commander T’Les continued to scan the anomaly. “The probability of this signal being naturally occurring is four thousand seven hundred ninety-six to one,” she stated. “I have not yet located the exact point of origin, but it appears to be coming from an orbital position.”

Captain Stuart rose from his chair and stepped down the steps toward the CONN station. “Standard orbital approach,” he said.

“Aye Skipper,” Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams replied. “I’m getting a card game together at 1900 hours,” Adams said invitingly. “Are you interested?”

Stuart patted Blake on the shoulder and smiled. “You know I’m not much of a poker player.”

“That’s why you’re invited,” Blake teased.

Leeson, sitting at the XO position, glanced at Adams. She tried not to smile, but Blake’s laid-back personality, his wit, and his boyish charm prevented her from remaining too stoic. Melanie Leeson had grown fond of Adams, even come to love him, in the past several months. And she knew that he had grown close to her. But on the bridge, the two Starfleet officers agreed to be completely professional toward each other. Almost. “Is that game open to anyone, Mister Adams?” she inquired stiffly.

“Absolutely, Commander,” Blake replied. “Come prepared to win but expect to lose.”
Leeson smirked. “I guess someone needs to take you down a notch.”

Blake Adams turned his chair to face Leeson. “You never know what might happen when fate deals the cards,” he said, winking at her.

Stuart watched his first officer and best friend spar words with each other. But they had work to do. “I think I might come just to watch the two of you,” Stuart said. “But right now, we have a mission to complete.”

Leeson’s face turned flush. “You’re right, Captain.”

Adams merely turned back to flying the ship.

T’Les had ignored the illogical conversation as she continually scanned for the source of the transmission that they had intercepted. After several minutes she finally locked onto the signal’s source. “Captain, I have located the source of the signal,” T’Les informed Stuart. “It is coming from what appears to be a satellite that is alien to us.

Stuart started up the steps toward the center seat. “Blake,” Stuart said as he turned and sat down, “bring us within five hundred kilometers.”

“Aye, Skipper.”

“Captain,” T’Les said. “The satellite’s orbit is decaying. It has already entered the planet’s atmosphere.”

Stuart watched the image on the viewscreen begin to glow as it plummeted through the thermosphere. “Mary, get a tractor beam on it.”

Lieutenant Mary Goodman’s fingers played the OPS control panel like a virtuoso at the piano. “Unable to get a positive lock, sir,” she said. “Something in the atmosphere is interfering with the beam.”

Stuart’ gaze remained on the viewscreen as the alien transmitter continued to glow brighter and finally burned up in its fiery descent through the planet’s atmosphere.

Silence permeated the bridge. The mysterious signal had been traced to an alien object—a beacon of information forever gone.

Stuart looked toward the science station. “Were you able to analyze the signal, Commander?” he asked the Vulcan.

“The code is unknown,” T’Les stated. “I made a recording for further analysis.”

“Good work, Commander,” Stuart said. “Do you have any theories?”

T’Les checked several readings from the sensor scans that she had recorded. “I am not prone to making guesses,” she said, “but I believe that this may have been a ship’s emergency buoy, transmitting a distress signal.”

The bridge was silent. For a moment, no one let out a breath as the crew and duty officers looked toward Captain Stuart for his decision.

Finally, the captain spoke. “Full sensor sweeps. This may have just turned into a rescue mission.”

Leeson walked up to the captain. “Shall I prepare an away team to beam down?”

Rob rubbed his chin as he faced the image of the planet. “I’m not sure that beaming down would be a good idea until we have more information. If the tractor beam could not maintain a lock because of some atmospheric interference, then I don’t want to trust the transporter beam to keep you from being turned inside out.”

Leeson gently smiled. "I appreciate that, Captain."

"We could take the ship down to the surface, Skipper." Blake's enthusiasm for trying something new was almost infectious, but even though Rob was tempted, he was not sure if this would be the right situation to test the ship's landing capabilities.

"I'll think about it, Blake, but let's not be too hasty."

"That is wise, Captain since we do not yet have enough information regarding the origin of the satellite," Lieutenant Commander T'Les said. "I would ask that neither the ship nor an away team be sent to the surface until I can analyze the atmosphere."

Rob nodded to the science office. "Agreed. Run a full sensor sweep of the surface to see what's down there. I also want a complete atmospheric analysis."

"Yes, Captain," T'Les replied.

Blake turned in his chair. "Skipper, depending on the science officer's results, shouldn't I prep the ship for planetfall?"

Melanie Leeson shook her head. "No, I think that is premature. Captain, *if* it is warranted that we go to the surface, and if we cannot use the transporter, then I suggest that we prep one of the shuttles."

Rob considered the first officer's suggestion and saw that it made sense. "Good thinking, Exec." He turned his attention to the CONN. "Blake, have one of the shuttles prepped and placed on launch standby."

Blake's face showed some disappointment as he slowly turned to the console. He started entering the commands to transmit a message to the shuttlebay, but his frown turned to a grin at the captain's next words.

"If we go down, you can be the away team's pilot."

"Thanks, Skipper!"

Rob just shook his head and smiled as he thought how much of a 'little kid' Blake could be. His thoughts were interrupted by the science officer.

"Captain, I do not detect any life signs other than a few small avian species, several hundred mammalian species, and thousands of aquatic species. I have detected remains of what could be a space vessel of unknown origin; however, most of the hull is not intact. I estimate that it has been on the surface for one point seven millennia; possibly longer."

"Which would explain the presence of only primitive life forms."

"It is possible that if there were survivors, they might have been rescued a long time ago," Lieutenant Yoshi Nakamara, the tactical officer, interjected.

"Perhaps," Rob Stuart replied.

“Captain, I have determined that it would not be safe to send a shuttle for the same reason that the transporter would not be advisable.” T’Les turned her head toward the center of the bridge. “The upper atmosphere is extremely turbulent.”

“Could the ship handle the turbulence, Commander?”

T’Les paused as she considered the question. “I believe that it could; however, I do not recommend it. There are unknown gaseous elements in the atmosphere, and I cannot speculate on what effect they would have on the ship or our various species.”

“Thank you, T’Les.”

Rob turned his head slightly toward the CONN when he heard Blake whisper, “Party pooper.” Rob was certain that T’Les would have heard it, too. She probably would not know what it meant, but Rob was convinced that she would have heard it. He would talk to him in private about his remark, but for now, the *Providence*’s captain would continue to focus on the problem of whether to take the ship to the surface. On the one hand, it would be the only way to get a complete picture of the alien ship and what happened to it. On the other hand, there were too many unknowns. “Prepare a class III probe for atmospheric entry.”

“Probe is loaded and ready, Skipper,” Lieutenant Nakamara said.

“Launch the probe, Yoshi.”

The security/tactical officer worked the controls. “Probe launched, sir.”

The captain and bridge crew watched the viewer at the front of the bridge. The probe sped toward the planet and entered the atmosphere. Stuart turned toward the science station. He did not say anything but waited patiently for the science officer to report the sensor’s readings.

T’Les closely monitored the readings coming into the console. “Various gases, similar to most M-class worlds, are present. Four distinct gases are unknown. As previously determined, the upper atmosphere is showing signs of violent turbulence. The telemetry signal is losing cohesiveness...I have lost the signal, Captain.”

“I’m showing that the probe has been destroyed, sir,” Yoshi added.

“I would like to get a probe to the surface, Rob said.

“We could install a micro shield generator into another probe, Captain,” Leeson said.

“Good thinking, Exec. Mister Nakamara, how long will that take?”

“Less than thirty minutes with Lieutenant Sales helping me.”

“On your way, Yoshi,” Stuart said as he touched his combadge. “Bridge to engineering. Mister Sales, please report to the torpedo maintenance bay.”

“Acknowledged, Captain.”

Stuart looked at his first officer. “Exec, please join me in my ready room. Blake, the bridge is yours.”

“Aye, Skipper.”

Melanie Leeson followed Stuart into the ready room. She waited for Rob to walk around his desk and sit down before she sat in the chair on the other side of the desk from his. After both took their seats, the first officer noticed that the captain seemed unsure of the next steps.

Stuart crossed his arms and stared at the ceiling for several seconds before he revealed what was on his mind. He blinked and lowered his eyes to meet Leeson’s. “My curiosity is pushing me to take the ship down, but my science officer recommends against it. I would like the first officer’s opinion.”

“I’m not afraid to take a risk, Captain, but what we know so far...?”

“You’re concerned that the risk isn’t justified.”

Leeson nodded slowly as she said, “With the information that we have at this point, I’m going to agree with T’Les.”

“Thank you, Mel,” Stuart said. “There’s a mystery down there that I would like us to solve, but as I said before, my curiosity is trying to assert itself to the point that I might not give as much weight to the risk involved. That’s why I needed your input.”

“That’s why we work so well together, Captain,” Leeson said. “But the final decision is yours, sir.”

“It would be more clear-cut if we detected any survivors, but all we have is a derelict ship that has been there for centuries.” Stuart rubbed his chin. “Maybe the next probe will give us more information.”

“Or enough information to satisfy your curiosity,” Leeson added.

Stuart smiled at the first officer. “Let’s hope so.”

The bosun’s whistle came through the speaker.

“Stuart. Go ahead.”

“*Captain, the probe has been modified and is ready for launch,*” Lieutenant Nakamara said.

“We’re on our way, Yoshi.” Stuart stood and looked at Leeson. “Well, Exec, here we go.”

Stuart and Leeson left the ready room and entered the bridge. Both took their seats in the command alcove and faced the main viewer. “Mister Nakamara, launch the probe.”

“Probe launched,” the tactical officer said as everyone on the bridge watched it getting smaller on the viewscreen. “The shields have been activated. Three seconds until it penetrates the atmosphere.”

“T’Les?”

“We are receiving telemetry, Captain.” The Vulcan focused on her instruments and started analyzing the incoming data. “The atmospheric turbulence is sporadically affecting the shield frequency, so the probe is taking minor damage; however, it is still transmitting data.”

“Shields are down to seventy-two percent, and the probe is still passing through the upper thermal layers,” Nakamara said. “I estimate that the probe will exit the thermal layers in less than two minutes, sir.”

“One minute, fifty-two point seven seconds,” T’Les added.

Stuart and Leeson waited for the probe to pass through the upper atmospheric layers and hopefully, descend through the smoother layers until it reached the surface. The probe was programmed to soft land close to the wreckage of the alien spacecraft.

“Shields are now at fifty-five percent and still falling,” the tactical officer stated.

“Time to surface?” Leeson asked.

T’Les checked her monitors. “Three minutes, four point two seconds.” After a short pause, the science officer gave another update. “The probe is out of the thermal layers. Shields are at forty-nine percent and starting to increase strength.”

Stuart turned his head toward the science station. “It should be smooth sailing from now on, Commander.”

“I believe that the probe’s data collection will increase once the shields are turned off, Captain.”

“How soon can we turn off the shields?”

“It’s safe to turn them off now, sir,” Nakamara said.

“At your discretion, Yoshi,” Stuart said.

“Shields are down, Skipper.” Yoshi turned and saw the captain looking back. “Sorry, Captain.”

“No need to apologize, Mister Nakamara,” Stuart said. “You have been influenced by our second officer, so I’m blaming him, not you.”

Yoshi started turning a slight shade of red. He knew it because he felt heat in his cheeks. He looked at the CONN station where Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams displayed a wide grin.

“Lieutenant Commander T’Les, report.”

“The probe has landed approximately four hundred thirty-seven meters from the bulk of the wreckage. Data is coming in now.”

“Now can we take the ship down?” Blake asked.

Stuart shook his head. “Let’s wait to see what information we can get from the probe.”

Lieutenant Mary Goodman, the ship's OPS manager had been monitoring the probe as well. She noticed an anomaly as she ran a check on the probe's casing. "Captain, I have a strange reading of the probe's outer skin. It's barely noticeable, but I think that we need to keep an eye on it."

"Thank you, Mary. Keep monitoring it." Stuart realized that in a few months since the ship was launched, the crew had learned how to work well together. He had felt as if the senior officers had started to feel like a family of sorts. He realized that his mind started to wander away from the task at hand and refocused himself. "T'Les?"

"This is curious, Captain. My initial assessment of the age of the alien spacecraft may have been incorrect."

"Why is that?" Leeson had not known T'Les to ever be wrong in her analysis in the time that she had known the Vulcan.

"The decay of the ship's hull I assumed, incorrectly, had taken centuries; however, the readings from the probe show that the decay has happened in less than thirty Earth years."

Stuart clenched his jaw tightly, trying to understand how that could have happened. "How do you explain that, Lieutenant Commander?"

"It appears that there are only small traces of tritanium in the wreckage, but I suspect that the vessel's hull may have incorporated tritanium just as our ships do."

"Sir," Mary Goodman said. "That is consistent with what I am seeing with the probe's outer casing, which is made up of a tritanium/duranium composite. The tritanium is starting to break down."

"Fascinating," T'Les said.

"What could have caused that to happen?" Leeson asked.

"I surmise that one of the unknown elements in the atmosphere may be the cause. It appears that it acts similarly as oxidation."

"But much faster," Goodman added.

Stuart looked at the CONN station where Blake had turned in his chair to pay attention to the conversation. "Now aren't you glad we didn't take the ship into the atmosphere?"

Blake tried to be nonchalant, but he learned a lesson in not rushing into a situation without checking out as many variables as possible. "I'm big enough to admit that I was wrong, Skipper."

Stuart held up his hand, palm facing his friend. "Twenty minutes ago, I was anxious to give the order to fly the ship down to the surface, so don't feel bad."

The captain instructed T'Les to get as much information as she could as long as the probe continued transmitting data, which it continued to do so for another fourteen hours before the unknown element ate a hole through the casing and started to play havoc with the internal

components that included tritanium parts. Before leaving Trilarnex II, Stuart ordered a communication buoy to be left in high orbit to continuously transmit a quarantine warning about the dangers of entering the atmosphere.

If Stuart had decided differently and ordered the ship to land on the surface of Trilarnex II, the *Intrepid*-class U.S.S. *Providence* would have met its demise within a short time; however, that fate had been avoided. Or had it merely been postponed to a later date? What if a different decision prevailed? Maybe in another reality, another timeline, a different decision was reached. One may not know the answer to that question, but for now, the starship left orbit and sped toward its next encounter with the unknown.



U.S.S. *Providence*, NCC-76037, Stardate 53641.4

The Vendoth came from the Kalium Galaxy on a mission to subjugate all the races of the Milky Way to serve them and force every race to assimilate into their way of life. A way of life that would mean subservience for all life forms that called the Milky Way home. The Vendoth seemed particularly interested in conquering Earth and the Federation. The reason was not clear, but in the heat of battle, discovering the reason was secondary to survival.

The starship *Providence*, followed by the other starships—except the U.S.S. *Exploration*—comprising the task force sped around the moon. The six ships began firing phasers and quantum torpedoes simultaneously at the enemy vessels as they converged together. Several other Starfleet ships were pounding away at the Vendoth shields, weakening them with each succeeding blast of weapons fire.

The enemy ships fought back, firing their weapons with a vengeance. Weapons fire hit *Providence* and hit it hard. The vessel shook violently as one of the nacelles was hit followed by another hit on the main hull.

“We have hull breaches, sir!” Lieutenant Mary Goodman said as she fearfully raised her voice.

Leeson focused on the readouts on the station between her and the captain. “Dispatching damage control teams. Casualty reports starting to come in.”

“Keep firing,” Captain Stuart ordered as he leaned forward, sitting on the edge of his command chair.

“The Klingons are getting in their licks, too, Skipper.” It was Blake Adams who had spoken.

Leeson studied her console. “The fleet is getting low on torpedoes, sir,” she said.

“What about the Klingons?” the captain asked.

The first officer looked again at the console. “They’re getting low, too. And the Vendoth ships are almost at optimal firing position in Earth orbit,” she added.

Stuart clenched his fist, turning the knuckles on his left hand white. “Fire everything that we have left, Mr. Nakamara,” he said.

From every Starfleet and Klingon vessel, phaser beams and the few dozen torpedoes lanced through space toward the Vendoth command ship. The barrage of energy continued for several seconds. Then the torpedoes stopped coming.

“We have expended all torpedoes, Sir,” Nakamara stated.

Leeson looked from her control console to the main view screen. “It looks like all the other ships have expended theirs as well, Captain,” she said. “And phasers alone won’t penetrate Vendoth shields.”

Stuart nodded. “Then our only option is to ram them,” he said.

There was silence on the bridge. Rob Stuart did not have a reputation for being rash or suicidal. But ramming the Vendoth ships seemed like the last chance of taking them out—the last chance to save the billions of lives on Earth.

“Stuart to engineering,” the captain said.

“*Engineering. This is Lieutenant Sales.*”

“Prepare to overload the warp engines on my mark,” Stuart said.

But before Stuart could give the order, a brilliant light filled the viewer, temporarily blinding everyone on the bridge.

“What happened?” demanded Commander Leeson.

T’Les swiftly ran her fingers across the science console. “The Vendoth command ship has been destroyed,” she stated. “The explosion destroyed the remaining enemy ships along with the mother ship.”

“Look!” exclaimed Adams from the CONN position. “There’s a ship coming through the debris.”

As the remains of the Vendoth fleet dispersed, a *Sovereign*-class starship could be seen speeding through it. Sunlight glistened on the hull, illuminating the name of the ship that made the fatal blow to those who would enslave the Federation. It was *Enterprise*!

Starfleet had prevailed. Unity proved stronger than the superior technology of the invading Vendoth.

Rob Stuart closed his eyes and sighed his relief.



Stuart and Benjamin Goodman walked through the Academy parade grounds. They stopped and looked around the campus, remembering their time as cadets.

“The place hasn’t changed that much since we were here, has it?” Stuart asked.

Goodman shielded his eyes from the sun as he turned toward Stuart. “Not that much,” he agreed. “I hear Starfleet may graduate some of the cadets early to help get the fleet built back up.”

Stuart nodded. “We were hit hard,” he said. “I hope that we won’t regret sending them out before they’re ready.”

“I hope so, too,” Goodman replied. “So, what plans do you have for the next few days?” he asked his friend.

“I thought I would go to Dublin to see my father and brother,” Stuart replied. “It will probably be a while before I have the time to spend with them again afterward since I will be busy trying to get my ship back in ship-shape.”

“Mine, too, but I don’t think the *Avenger* took as much damage as *Providence* did,” Goodman said.

Rob Stuart remembered how bad his ship had looked when he took out a shuttle to inspect the damage. One of the nacelles had been sheered completely from the support pylon,

decks twelve and thirteen had multiple hull breaches, and the main deflector dish was damaged beyond repair. Several ships were lost and damaged to the point that Starfleet's strength was significantly reduced. The fleet was still rebuilding after the Dominion War, and now the Vendoth invasion. Rob figured that if the Federation was not lacking ships, his would probably be scrapped due to its condition.

Admiral Hathaway approached from behind the two captains. "May I join you gentlemen?" he asked.

Rob and Ben turned around to face the admiral. "Certainly," Rob said.

The admiral folded his hands behind his back. "I wanted to let you know that a memorial service for those who lost their lives will be held tomorrow at 0900 hours," he stated. "I understand you have recommended Captain Jomrel for the Medal of Honor."

"That's right," Stuart replied. "He gave his life to defend the Federation...and Earth."

Hathaway nodded. He looked toward Goodman. "Could I have a few minutes alone with my nephew, Captain?"

"Yes, sir," Goodman replied. "I need to meet up with my kid brother anyway. Good to see you again, Admiral," Ben Goodman said as he walked away.

"Don't forget you're buying dinner," Stuart called after Goodman, who raised his hand in a friendly wave.

Hathaway watched Captain Goodman leave and placed his hand on Rob's shoulder. "It's good to have friends, Robby."

"That it is, Uncle." Stuart faced the admiral. "What can I do for you?"

"I wanted to know how you are doing after..."

"I'm...okay," Rob said. "I was more fortunate than some of the other captains."

"I haven't seen all of the casualty lists yet."

"We lost twelve people," Rob said. "Twenty-seven injured. Most of the injuries are minor, but Janice said that even those with the worst injuries should recover."

"I'm sorry for your losses, Robby." Admiral Hathaway had commanded starships in his day, and now he was the Chief of Starfleet Operations. He knew what it felt like to lose people under his command. He also how losing a command might affect a leader's confidence. "Robby, I have more bad news."

"My ship can't be saved, can she?"

"She can be refit, but it will take time," Hathaway said. "With all the ships that need to be repaired, I would estimate close to two years. It would be less if Utopia Planitia hadn't taken so much damage."

Stuart sighed. "I suppose I'm looking at either a desk job or teaching at the Academy until it's repaired."

"Or you can accept a new command."

“I figure that new commands will be at a premium right now considering the condition of the fleet,” Stuart said.

“I can’t argue with that, but there is a new *Nova*-class science vessel that just happened to be on its shakedown cruise when the *Vendoth* attacked. It hasn’t been assigned a permanent crew yet, and a good portion of your crew can stay together *if* you agree to be its captain.” Hathaway knew his nephew well enough to know that a science vessel would appeal to him. “The ship will be assigned to the same sectors that you have been exploring before this conflict started.”

Stuart thought about it and realized that this would be an excellent opportunity for him and his crew. He certainly wanted to keep his crew, at least most of them, together if possible. They had formed a bond in a short time, and he did not want to start over from scratch. He especially wanted his senior officers to stay together. “Okay, Uncle Bob, I accept your proposal.”

“I’m glad to see you’re not reluctant like you were when I offered you command of the *Providence*.”

“I’ve gotten used to command, Uncle,” Stuart said. “So, tell me about this new ship.”

“She was christened the U.S.S. *Starquest*.”

“After the first ship you served on,” Stuart interjected.

“Yes, my first deep space assignment as a young engineer,” Hathaway said, beaming with pride. “I expect you to take care of her.”

“You know I will, Uncle Bob.”

“She has several upgrades over and above previous *Nova*-class starships. She’s a little faster, and her shields and other defenses are rated higher.”

“Does she have a holographic cloaking device?” Rob asked. “The one on the *Providence* sure came in handy a few times.”

“*Providence* was an experiment, Robby.” Hathaway raised his eyebrow and started to smile. He always had a twinkle in his eye when an idea came to his mind. “It is possible to authorize the transfer of that piece of equipment to *Starquest* if its captain was to put in a request through official channels.” The admiral winked at his nephew.

“Well, I will make that request as soon as I have officially been assigned to be *Starquest*’s captain.” Rob started to chuckle. “Blake would never let me hear the end of it if I didn’t make that request.”

“Speaking of Lieutenant Commander Adams,” Hathaway said, “does he still dabble in holographic programming?”

“Yes, he does. It’s more than a hobby. Outside of piloting, holography is his passion,” Stuart said. “Why do you ask?”

“One of *Starquest*’s upgrades is that every part of the ship is equipped with holo-emitters for the EMH to function wherever he would be needed in case of a medical emergency. And

there is dedicated computer space for forty to fifty more holographic emergency crew supplements.” Hathaway smiled. “As of now, there are only two EMH programs currently included, and with what just happened, Starfleet will not have the people to worry about creating new programs. It’s not going to be a priority for quite some time.”

“Well, that will be something to keep Blake happy in his spare time.”

“It will also compensate him for not having as many auxiliary spacecraft.”

Stuart wondered what his uncle was alluding to, but then it dawned on him that the *Nova*-class ships had a smaller shuttle bay than most other classes. “I guess I won’t have a runabout at my disposal, will I?”

“Sorry. A runabout is too big to fit in the shuttlebay, but you will have a Waverider shuttle.”

“I hear they don’t have warp drive.”

“Yours will,” Hathaway said. “It’s another upgrade, and it has a maximum velocity of warp five.”

“Warp five is better than no warp at all,” Stuart replied. “What about other shuttles?”

“If memory serves, you will have a Type 6, two Type 8s, and two Type 9s. You will also have four workbees.”

“Good to hear. I think I will name the Waverider after Mother.”

Hathaway smiled. Rob Stuart’s mother was Hathaway’s sister. Elizabeth Hathaway-Stuart had been a science officer on the U.S.S. *Melbourne*—one of thousands of casualties at Wolf 359 almost ten years prior. Hathaway’s eyes started to glisten as he remembered his baby sister. “I think she would like that, Robby.”

Captain Robert Stuart’s combadge chirped. “Excuse me,” he said as he tapped the Starfleet emblem on his chest. “Stuart. Go ahead.”

“*Sorry to bother you, Captain,*” Commander Melanie Leeson said. “*The Corps of Engineers wants to take possession of the ship as soon as possible.*”

“Tell the crew to start packing, Exec. I’ll arrange for billeting at Starfleet.”

“*The entire crew, sir?*”

“The entire crew. Make sure they know to not leave any personal items behind because they won’t be going back,” Stuart said. “I’ll explain later, Exec. Tell the Corps of Engineers that they can take possession in...five hours. Stuart out.” He tapped the badge to close the transmission. Stuart looked at his uncle and shrugged his shoulders as he took a deep breath and sighed. “With your permission, Uncle Bob, I need to arrange quarters for my crew.”

Admiral Robert Hathaway smiled as he patted his nephew on his back. “I’ll get the orders prepared so that when *Starquest* returns from its shakedown, you will be able to take command right away.”

“Thank you, Uncle Bob, for everything,” Stuart said. “I better get going to make arrangements for my crew to have a place to stay.”

Hathaway reached out and shook his nephew’s hand. “I’ll be in touch.”

“I look forward to it,” Stuart replied.



U.S.S. *Starquest*, NCC-76382, Stardate 53684.0

The Alpha shift bridge officers were busy getting acquainted with their stations and preparing for the launch, which was planned for the next morning at 0830 hours. The entire crew anticipated going back to the Beta Quadrant to resume exploring an area previously unexplored by the Federation Starfleet.

Captain Rob Stuart entered the bridge and walked straight to the CONN station where Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams was conversing with first officer Commander Melanie Leeson. Rob looked over the console and then to the second officer. “Well Blake, you think you can figure out how to fly this ship?”

“Of course, Skipper. I need to make a few adjustments to the LCARS layout to suit my needs.” Blake smiled. “It’s not that different from the standard layout on an *Intrepid*.”

“As I remember, you reconfigured the *Providence*’s CONN, too.”

“It was more efficient, Skipper. I just thought I could make this one more efficient, too.”

“Are your quarters satisfactory, Captain?” Leeson asked.

“A little smaller than on the *Providence*, but they’re big enough,” Stuart replied. “Any complaints from the junior officers about sharing quarters?”

“I haven’t heard any...so far. But the day is young, Captain.” Leeson tried not to grin. She had a reputation for being serious, but she had learned that she could let herself relax more and still be good at her job as a first officer. “Did you hear that the Corps of Engineers has asked Lieutenant Salesh to transfer back to *Providence*? They want him to lead the refit.”

“He talked with me,” Rob said, “and I told him that the choice was his. He knows that ship better than anyone and would be an asset.”

“But what about this ship, Captain? We would be without a chief engineer.”

“I’m sure that we could find one pretty quickly.”

“What about that engineer that commanded *Starquest*’s shakedown?” Blake asked.

Rob considered the possibility. “If Mister Salesh decides to leave us, then I will be glad to talk to anyone interested in the position.”



Commander Melanie Leeson stepped up on the temporary raised platform. “Attention on deck,” she said, almost shouting to get the attention of everyone in the shuttlebay. It was one of

the few places on the ship where the entire crew had enough room to gather—barely enough. “Attention to orders.”

Rob Stuart, who had been standing behind his first officer, walked up to the podium as the crew stood at attention. Stuart picked up the PADD that had been waiting for him in the front of the room. He began to read the orders that had been programmed into the PADD’s memory. “To Captain Robert P. Stuart: You are requested and required to assume command of *U.S.S. Starquest*, NCC-76382 effective this stardate. Orders signed by Admiral Robert Hathaway, Chief of Starfleet Operations.”

The computer replied in its usual feminine voice. “*Awaiting authorization code to transfer command of U.S.S. Starquest.*”

“This is Captain Stuart. I hereby accept command of the *U.S.S. Starquest*, NCC-76382. Authorization code Stuart omega seven two alpha.”

“*U.S.S. Starquest is now under the command of Captain Robert P. Stuart,*” the computer stated.

The crew started to applaud, but the captain held up his hand. “Thank you. There are many things that I can say right now, but I want to commend all of you. Most of us have served together for nearly a year, and even though our ship was badly damaged we bravely fought to defend our homes and way of life—the principles that we adhere to. We lost friends, but we will continue to honor their memory as we continue to serve Starfleet and the Federation. We will continue to fulfill our mission to explore the vastness of space. We will continue to make discoveries. We will continue to boldly go forward where none have gone before.” Stuart looked at those gathered in front of him. “To those who have just joined this crew, I welcome you and look forward to serving with you and getting to know you. You will find that this crew is a family, and I’m sure that in time, you who have just joined us, will realize that you, too, are a part of this family.”

Stuart looked to his right where the senior officers were standing. He turned his attention back to the rest of the crew. “Now, with mixed feelings, I have an announcement. We were scheduled to leave orbit tomorrow; however, there will be a delay due to the departure of our chief engineer, Lieutenant Salesh K’Tok.”

Several members of the crew, especially those who were part of the engineering department, started to look at each other and whisper to each other. It was to be expected that this announcement would come as a surprise.

Stuart held up his hand again. “This was unexpected to all of us, and Lieutenant Salesh did not make his decision without careful consideration for his engineering team *and* for the entire crew as well as the effect that it would have on us. His absence will be felt for some time; however, our loss is a gain for the Corps of Engineers and our former starship. Mister Salesh will be assigned, once again, as chief engineer of the *U.S.S. Providence* to supervise her refit. And I cannot think of a better person for that task.”

The crew began to applaud. This time, Stuart let the applause continue for several moments and joined in with the rest to honor Salesh. When the applause faded, he smiled as he turned to face the engineer. “Congratulations, Mister Salesh.”

The Derkhanan gently smiled and nodded to his captain and turned to the gathered crew to nod to them as well.

When the applause ended, Stuart looked to his left and focused on an elderly man wearing the standard officer's duty uniform of fifty years earlier. "Now, I would like to introduce a special guest—Commodore Erik Sjögren! The commodore commanded the first U.S.S. *Starquest* for thirty years until his retirement and the ship's decommissioning." Stuart motioned for the man to come to the podium. "Commodore, please come and say a few words."

Again, the crew applauded to welcome Commodore Sjögren as he approached Stuart, who shook the older man's hand and backed a few steps away from the podium. The commodore faced the assembled crew and smiled. He appeared to be in his early eighties with thick gray hair and only a few wrinkles showing on his face. "It is an honor to be here today to dedicate this fine vessel as you prepare to go back to the stars. I remember the day that I took command of this ship's predecessor, so I know the excitement that you must feel right now. I don't want to bore you with a lot of my memories of days long gone, but I do want to say again that from what I can see, this is a fine vessel, and it has a good name."

Several people, including Stuart, started to chuckle and smile.

Sjögren continued. "I also noticed that the registry number honors my *Explorer*-class *Starquest* with the registry." He paused to allow his audience to realize the honor that this new ship bestowed on its namesake. The first *Starquest* had the registry number NCC-6382, and this new ship had been assigned NCC-76382. He suspected that his old friend Admiral Hathaway pulled some strings to make that happen as a nostalgic gesture. "Be good to her, and she will be good to you. Also, be good to each other." He paused again. "I had the privilege to tour the ship yesterday, and I noticed the quote on the bridge dedication plaque. The words are few, but they succinctly sum up the primary mission of this starship as well as all of Starfleet. In the words of a 20th-century educator and astronaut who is remembered for giving her life in pursuit of expanding humankind's knowledge of space: 'Reach for the stars.'"

The commodore stepped away and made his way back to stand next to a woman, who wore civilian clothes, and Admiral Hathaway. Both had served with the commodore on the first *Starquest* long ago.

Captain Robert P. Stuart returned to the podium. "I know that we all have work to do to finish launch prep, but since the launch has been delayed until we have a new chief engineer, all shifts can take the rest of the day off to continue settling in, spending time on the holodeck, getting familiar with the ship, or just enjoying some down time."

Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams raised his voice as he took a step away from the other senior officers. "Let's hear it for Captain Stuart!"

All the crewmembers smiled, laughed, or cheered at the announcement.

Stuart turned and smiled at Blake and the other senior officers. Even T'Les, though straight-faced, clapped her hands together in human fashion. Stuart turned to face the rest of the crew and waited for the exuberant display to calm down before speaking. Finally, in a loud voice, he said, "Attention on deck!" He watched as all the officers and enlisted personnel snapped to attention and went silent. "Dismissed."

The crew dispersed as Stuart and his senior officers all started walking across the shuttle bay deck toward the guests of honor, in addition to Commodore Sjögren, Admiral Hathaway, who had served as an engineer on the 'old' *Starquest* during the first two years of its first deployment, and Noriko Ito, the chief engineer for the entire thirty years of the original

Starquest's service. Ito had stayed with Starfleet after *Starquest*'s decommissioning for a couple of years, assigned to the San Francisco Orbital Shipyards, but she retired after that to go back to her native Japan to enjoy her gardening hobby on a grander scale.

Stuart reached out his hand to the commodore. After shaking it, he said, "Thank you for coming, Commodore. It means a lot that the man who inspired me to get on the command tract is here to give us a proper sendoff." Stuart had accompanied his uncle to Sjögren's retirement party nearly seventeen years ago when Stuart was a science officer. Sjögren had suggested that Stuart consider going to command school, which he considered and decided to do just that not long afterward. Sjögren retired as a captain, but it was during the Dominion War that Admiral Hathaway had contacted him to come out of retirement to serve at Starfleet Command as a strategist, which proved helpful to eventually end the conflict. After the war ended, Hathaway convinced Sjögren to stay in Starfleet and promoted him to commodore.

"It's my pleasure," the commodore said as he turned toward his friend. "I want to introduce you to Noriko Ito. She was my chief engineer on the first *Starquest*."

Stuart shook the woman's hand. "It's good to finally meet you, Commander Ito."

"Noriko. Commander Ito retired and became a civilian." She smiled as she said it.

"Of course, Noriko. Uncle Bob has told me a lot about you."

"I can tell you many stories about him as well," Ito said as Hathaway's face started to turn flush.

"Please don't, Nori," Hathaway pleaded.

"Ah, you still have that boyish humility," Ito said. She returned her attention to Stuart. "I don't want to embarrass your uncle, but he was the most gifted engineering ensign I had ever met, and I knew that his career would flourish."

Hathaway smiled as he put his arm around the woman's back. "Thank you, Nori. I appreciate the compliment."

"I am only telling the truth, Robert."

Stuart smiled at the woman again. "I want to thank you for coming. But if you will all excuse me, I need to put some thought into recruiting a chief engineer" All of a sudden, a thought occurred to him. "Say, how would you like a job?"

"Oh, no," she quickly said. "My time on starships is long past. This is a time for the young to hop around the galaxy."

Stuart's smile broadened. "I thought I'd ask. Well, if you won't take the job, then I need to start looking for someone else, but please stay as long as you would like." Stuart walked away, leaving the three officers who had served on the 'old *Starquest*.'



The next day, Stuart was walking around the bridge, familiarizing himself with the various workstations. Tactical was on the starboard side, just like on *Providence*. OPS was on the port side. CONN's location was between the main viewer and the command chairs. Engineering, Science, and Mission Operation stations were along the curved back wall along with the Master Systems Display. The command section included two chairs—one for the captain or duty officer, and the other for the first officer. On *Intrepids* and *Novas*, it was typical for the captain to sit right of the first officer; however, Stuart preferred the left chair. It made more sense if the first

officer was to be considered the captain's right-hand man, or woman as was the case in the command structure on this ship.

The stations, except for OPS and CONN, were empty. He walked up to the CONN station when he realized that he did not recognize the young man sitting there. "Excuse me, Ensign?"

The young officer turned quickly in the chair and stood up. He immediately came to attention. "Sir!"

"At ease," Stuart said. "I haven't had a chance to meet all the new crew. I'm Captain Stuart."

"Yes, sir, I'm Ensign Eric Kelly, sir."

"Relax, Ensign. I don't bite."

Kelly's face turned a light shade of red. "Of course not, sir."

"Have you settled in okay?"

"Yes, Captain. I've been getting to know the ship and my main duty station."

"I assume that since you are here, you must be one of the relief CONN officers."

"Yes, sir. Lieutenant Commander Adams has assigned me to the Beta shift."

"I look forward to serving with you, Ensign. Welcome aboard."

"Thank you, Captain."

Stuart didn't want to cause the young officer too much distress, as he appeared to be nervous about meeting his CO. "Carry on, Ensign."

"Yes, sir." Kelly turned around and sat back at the CONN to continue getting to know his workstation.

Stuart went to OPS to check on Lieutenant Mary Goodman. "Everything okay, Mary?"

"Yes, Captain. No problems."

"Good. Have you seen Blake?"

"I think he said that he would be in Holodeck One working on programming backup personnel holograms," Goodman said.

"Ah, yes. The ship came equipped with the EMH Mark I and Mark II, but we have an opportunity to enhance substitutes for the primary bridge stations, main engineering, and security in case of an emergency," Stuart said. "He's probably having the time of his life."

"Knowing how he likes holography, I'm sure he is," Mary Goodman said.

"I might just take a stroll to check in with him."

The bosun's whistle sounded just then. "*Transporter room to bridge.*"

"Stuart here. Go ahead Chief."

“Lieutenant Commander Lexra from Utopia Planitia has just beamed aboard, Captain.”

“Please send him to my ready room. I’m sure he knows the way,” Stuart said.

“Will do, Captain. McKinney out.”

Stuart looked at the OPS manager. “The stroll to the holodeck will have to wait. You know where I’ll be.” He patted the edge of the console and left the bridge.



When the electronic chirp sounded to reveal someone requesting to enter the ready room, Stuart said, “Enter,” as he stood and walked around his desk with an outstretched hand, which he offered to the man who was walking into the captain’s office. He shook the other officer’s hand and pointed to the couch. “Please have a seat. I’m Rob Stuart.” Stuart sat in a comfortable chair facing the man on the couch.

“Thank you, Captain. Lieutenant Commander Jeron Lexra. I was told that you wanted to speak with me about *Starquest*. Is there a problem, sir? There were no anomalies found during the shakedown, and all systems were working at peak efficiency.”

“No problems, Commander. I just wanted to talk with you.” Stuart moved forward to sit on the edge of the chair to size up the Trill in front of him. “Commander, I understand that you commanded the shakedown cruise, and I wanted to tell you in person that I think your report of the ship is very encouraging. I am looking forward to seeing how she handles.”

“Well, sir, you will not be disappointed,” Lexra said, feeling proud that his report was noticed with such high regard. He usually did not hear from a commanding officer unless some issues came about. “I appreciate the compliment.”

“Did you have anything to do with the construction?”

“Not with this particular ship, sir. I was assigned as the chief inspector and then as the temporary CO for the shakedown. My CO at Utopia Planitia told me that he thinks I will make a good senior testing supervisor after a few years’ experience.”

“I’ve taken a look at your record, and I’m sure that he’s right.”

Lexra wondered why Stuart would pull his service record. Did he like his report that much?

“How long have you been at Utopia Planitia?”

“Just over a year, sir. Why do you ask?”

Stuart smiled. “Just curious. How many starships have you commanded during testing?”

“This was my first, but I have served as chief engineer on four others during shakedown cruises.” Lexra’s curiosity was growing each question. “Sir, what is this about?”

“I know that Utopia Planitia is trying to recover and rebuild from the Vendoth attack, so I’m sure that every engineer and technician is needed; however, I’m in need of a good chief engineer. I want to offer you the position. Would you be willing to consider it?”

Lexra did not know what to say. Before Utopia Planitia, he had served as an engineer on two starships and as an assistant chief engineer on a third. Now he was being offered an opportunity to serve as a chief engineer on the vessel that he had recently inspected and completed the shakedown cruise. He was aware of the ship's systems and performance. He could see himself in the role, but he also knew that his presence at Utopia Planitia would be missed with all the cleanup of the shipyards and repairs that dozens of wrecked ships required. "It's a tempting offer, Captain Stuart, but in the aftermath of the invasion..."

"I understand, Commander. I would be conflicted if I faced the same decision, too." Stuart moved back to a more relaxed position in the chair. "I took the liberty of talking to Captain Johnson about this matter because I did not want to make you an offer that your current CO would not be willing to sign off on. He gave his permission and a glowing letter of recommendation, but he said the decision is yours."

Lexra stood up slowly and walked to the transparent aluminum window. He looked out and saw the drydock framework that surrounded the starship. He was able to see the Earth below. He turned to face Stuart who also had stood up. "When do you need an answer?"

"I don't want to rush you into a decision, Mister Lexra, but we were originally scheduled to launch today. We're not going to launch until I have a chief engineer, so I would like a decision soon. But again, I do not want to put you in a position where you feel pressured. A few days' delay will not be critical to our mission."

"Thank you, Captain. Would you mind if I stayed onboard a few hours to talk with members of the crew? I would like to talk with some of the engineering staff to get a sense of what it might be like to work with them."

"I think that would be a splendid idea, Commander. You have the run of the ship to talk to whoever you would like to."

"Thank you, sir." He shook Stuart's hand. "If I may ask a favor?"

"Feel free," Stuart replied.

"Please don't let anyone know that I am considering your offer."

"My first and second officers already know. Lieutenant Commander Adams is the one who suggested I contact you to see if might be interested in the position," Stuart said. "I will let both of them know that you will be *covertly* interviewing the crew and not to say anything."

"Thank you, Captain." Lexra shook Stuart's hand, turned, and exited the ready room.



Janice Edwards smiled at the young crewman as he jumped off the examination table. "You'll be happy to know that you are perfectly healthy," the doctor told her young patient.

"Thank you, Doctor," the crewman replied. "Am I free to go?"

"Certainly," Edwards said as the twenty-year-old turned to hurry toward the door that led out of Sickbay.

Edwards went back to her office to check her schedule. As she sat behind her desk and

activated the computer monitor, she noticed a red rose lying in the replicator dispenser. She got up and retrieved the flower, wondering who it could have been from. “Computer,” Edwards stated. “Who replicated this rose?”

The computer was not forthcoming with the answer that the doctor wanted. “*That information is classified,*” the feminine computer voice stated.

“Hmm,” Edwards wondered. “It seems that I have a secret admirer.”

Just then Commander Melanie Leeson entered Edwards’ office. Noticing the rose in the CMO’s hand, Leeson smiled. “Taking up gardening?” she asked.

Edwards motioned for the first officer to sit down across from the desk as the doctor sat in her chair. “Do you know anything about this?” Edwards asked.

Leeson shook her head. “Who sent it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” Edwards shrugged. “And the computer has been sworn to secrecy,” she added. “So,” the doctor continued, laying down the rose. “What brings you here?”

“I haven’t seen you around for a while,” Leeson said, “and I wanted to make sure that you were okay.”

“I’ve been busy trying to finish the standard physicals,” Edwards said. “I want to get as many done before we launch.”

“How many more do you have, Jan?”

“Just you and the captain,” Edwards said. “And the new chief engineer when we get one.”

Leeson leaned toward Edwards, speaking in a low tone. “Do you think that the flower came from the captain?”

The edges of Edwards’ lips turned slightly upward as she thought about that possibility. “I don’t think that he’s interested, Mel,” the doctor stated.

Leeson thought that she detected disappointment in the doctor’s voice. “Didn’t you have dinner with him last week?” she asked.

“Captain Stuart frequently shares a meal with one of his officers,” Edwards retorted. “I’m just one of the crew like anyone else.”

Leeson just smiled at her friend. “The captain will share breakfast or lunch with a fellow officer,” she said. “But I don’t remember him having dinner with anyone except maybe Blake,” Leeson added.

“You’re making something out of nothing,” the doctor said.

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Leeson smiled. “What if I’m right? What if he is attracted to you?”

“I was married once to a career command officer,” Janice said. “I don’t want to take a chance at making that mistake again.”

“Rob Stuart is not anything like Paul. He puts people ahead of his career.”

“How do you know that, Mel? We’ve known him for what? Almost a year?” Jan didn’t have anything against Stuart, but her judgment was clouded by a marriage that failed because her husband—ex-husband—placed *his* Starfleet career above devotion to his wife. The divorce took place a few years earlier, but Jan occasionally still felt the pain of being abandoned.

Melanie Leeson was no psychologist, but she realized that her friend was displaying some type of subconscious defense mechanism. Jan would rather be safe than happy in pursuing a relationship with the captain. “My background is security, Jan. I’ve learned how to read people,

and my gut says that Rob Stuart would put you before his career. Sure, he would still live up to his duty to his crew and ship as regulations demand, but if I'm reading him right, he is a family man at his core."

The doctor considered her friend's words. "Why are you so interested, Mel?"

"I want to see you happy."

"You think I'm unhappy?" Edwards smiled. "I have a career that I love and friends. Great people to work with."

"Now who is putting career first?"

Jan started to open her mouth. She was about to tell Leeson that she was out of line, but she suddenly realized that there was truth in her friend's words. Jan sighed. "You're a good friend, Mel. If he's the mystery man who left the flower, I'll give him a chance."

"Would you be disappointed if it wasn't him?"

Jan tried to keep her demeanor neutral but was not very successful.

Leeson looked at Edwards and smirked. "That's what I thought." The first officer turned and left the CMO's office.



Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams stood within the holodeck arch entering information into the LCARS interface. He had been working several hours to program the supplemental crew holograms. The doors parted revealing the captain standing in the corridor.

"How's it going, Blake?"

Blake momentarily stopped what he was doing and turned to face his friend. "Hey, Skipper! It's going faster than I thought it would. I've completed the backup bridge holograms for CONN, Tactical, Engineering, and OPS, and now I'm working on the security holograms."

"Can I see what you've come up with?" Stuart walked into the holodeck far enough for the doors to close behind him.

Blake stepped out from under the arch. "Computer, activate CONN hologram.

Out of thin air, a male wearing a gold Starfleet uniform common to the 2260s. Blake smiled as he admired his programming. "Well, what do you think?"

"That's...unexpected," Stuart said. "Did a little hero worship inspire you?"

"Well, maybe just a little."

Stuart shook his head as he let out a little laugh. "Well, now I can say that I met Hikaru Sulu. Why didn't you put him in a contemporary uniform?"

"I wanted to add a sense of nostalgia," Blake said. "I suppose that you want me to change the uniform." Blake feigned a look of disappointment.

Rob, grasping his chin, walked around the hologram. After a pause, Rob nodded and then faced his friend. "I like him as is."

Blake smiled. "Oh good. Then you won't mind that I'm going to put the security holograms in old-fashioned red shirts. I'll name them Red One, Red Two...."

Rob rolled his eyes, held up both hands, and started walking toward the exit. "It's your project," he said as the doors started to slide shut behind him.



Commander Melanie Leeson was walking through the corridor when she saw Captain Stuart exiting one of the holodecks and walking away from her. She picked up the pace and called his name. "Captain Stuart."

Stuart stopped and turned around, pausing until she caught up with him. "How are you doing, Exec?" He turned back in the direction he was going and the two of them slowly walked side by side.

"I'm doing fine, sir."

"What's on your mind?"

"Well, I have a question," she said. "I stopped in to see the doctor earlier, and it appears that she has a secret admirer."

"Well, I think that's good for her," Stuart said. "Why are you telling me?"

Leeson smiled as she thought about how close he played his cards. "And you say you're no good at Poker."

"Poker?"

Leeson smirked as Stuart feigned ignorance. "That was a good choice?"

"What was?"

"The rose." Leeson could see that Stuart was not going to be cooperative. "The rose in the replicator."

"What replicator?"

"The replicator in Jan's office, of course." As the two officers continued walking, Leeson glanced at Stuart. "You're not going to admit it, are you?"

"Admit what, Exec?" Stuart's face did not reveal any clue as to what Leeson was suggesting.

"That you left the rose for Jan," Leeson said.

Stuart stopped and faced his first officer. "You think that I..."

"Yes, sir. That is what I think."

Stuart shook his head. "Melanie, I..." He realized that his first officer's investigative abilities would eventually lead to the truth, so he decided to be forthright. "I don't know how you figured it out, but I'm asking that you not say anything to her."

"I'm sorry, Captain, but I already suggested to her that you might have been the one who left the flower for her." Leeson lowered her head. "I'm sorry, sir."

Stuart was silent for a short time as he started walking again. Leeson walked beside him but did not say anything else as she wondered if he was angry with her. She knew that Rob Stuart did not easily show his emotions.

Finally, Stuart stopped, turned toward Melanie Leeson, and spoke. "What was her response?"

Leeson hesitated to say anything. She realized that she already made a mistake in pushing the captain to admit to his secret interest in the doctor. "I'm not sure that I should tell you, Captain."

Stuart smiled as they slowly started walking again. He faced forward as they slowly traversed the corridor. "You're right. You shouldn't. And thank you for that."

Leeson appreciated Stuart letting her off the hook. "I'll keep this conversation to myself."

"What conversation, Exec?"

Leeson let out a short laugh. "I...will see you later, Captain."

"Before you go, could you come to my ready room at 1600? We need to discuss the upcoming mission."

"Of course, sir," Leeson said. "I'll be there." She turned around and started back toward the holodeck.



Later in the day, Commander Leeson exited the turbolift on deck one and made her way to the captain's ready room. She pressed the call button on the LCARS keypad on the wall next to the door. The door opened, and she walked in. She saw that Stuart was not alone.

"Come in, Exec." Stuart and the other man both stood up. "Have you met Lieutenant Commander Lexra?"

Leeson walked toward the Trill officer and shook his hand. "Good to meet you, Commander."

"And you," Lexra replied. "I understand that you are the first officer. And that your background is in security."

"Right on both accounts," Leeson said. "Before command school, I was the security chief at Starbase Eighty-two."

"I knew someone that served at Starbase Eighty-two a couple of years ago. Lieutenant Terri Haskins of the engineering department."

"I don't remember meeting her, but it's a big place." Leeson looked at Stuart. "Are we still meeting to talk about the mission, Captain?"

"Yes, but it shouldn't take too long." Stuart turned his attention to Lexra and shook his hand. "Thank you, Mister Lexra, and welcome aboard."

“It’s my pleasure, Captain. I will take a shuttle back to Utopia Planitia to retrieve my personal belongings and be back by morning.”

“Senior officer briefing will be 0800 in the main conference room,” Stuart said.

“I’ll be there, sir.” Jeron Lexra turned and exited the captain’s office.

As he left, Leeson watched him go and turned back around to sit in one of the chairs opposite the desk where Stuart stood. “I take it that Mister Lexra is our new chief engineer?”

“Yes, he is. He has all the qualifications, and he knows this ship very well since he commanded the shakedown cruise.” Stuart sat down before continuing. “He spent some time talking with various crewmembers and officers, especially those in the engineering department. I think that he is going to fit right in.”

“That’s good. We’re fortunate to get someone quickly so we can get back into deep space.”

“And that is what I wanted to talk about,” Stuart said. “Since we now have a complete crew, we should be able to leave tomorrow afternoon at the latest. I’m just waiting to hear back from Starfleet Command for authorization and departure time.”

“I’m assuming that you would like me to light some fires and get the crew back on prepping for the launch.”

Stuart smiled and slid one of the PADDs that was on his desk toward the first officer. “Yes, please do. Here is a copy of our orders for you to read before tomorrow’s staff meeting.”

“Anything unusual?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary, but you know how that can change in a moment’s notice,” he said with a hint of sarcasm. “We’re going back to the Beta Tongarii Sector to pick up where we left off before the Vendoth showed up. Have you had a chance to meet the few new crew members that were assigned?”

“Most of them. I think there are two or maybe three that I haven’t had the opportunity to meet yet, but I will make sure I do before we launch.”

“Have you met Ensign Kelly, the Beta shift CONN officer?”

Leeson leaned back comfortably in the chair. “Blake introduced me yesterday. According to him, Mister Kelly shows a lot of promise.”

“If I’m any judge of people, I agree.” Stuart smiled. “I met him on the bridge this morning. He was getting familiar with his station even though he was off duty.”

“That’s admirable. Is this his first starship assignment?”

“I looked up his record,” Stuart said. “Academy class of ’74. He was assigned to the Lakota as a general officer for six months and then as a relief CONN officer ever since. He had put in a transfer request to serve on *Providence* when he heard that Blake was the senior flight

officer. But the Vendoth came, and...well, he changed his request once he discovered that Blake would be assigned to *Starquest*.”

“So, where does Mister Kelly know Blake from?”

“Until he came on board, he had only known Blake by reputation. It seems that the ensign wants to learn to improve his piloting skills, and he believes that our Mister Adams is the best person to learn from.”

“I just hope that Blake doesn’t teach him how to be a ‘hot shot.’” Leeson said it tongue-in-cheek, but there was truth behind it. “Does Blake know that he has a camp follower?”

“I haven’t had a chance to tell him yet,” Stuart said. “I’m not sure that I want to. It might inflate his ego more than it already is.” Stuart grinned. “Please don’t tell him I said that.”

Leeson laughed. “No worries, Captain.”

Stuart stood up, indicating that the meeting was ending. Leeson also stood as she took the hint. “I know that you have a lot of reading, Exec, so I won’t keep you any longer. “Will you call an impromptu meeting with all members of the engineering department to inform them that Lieutenant Commander Lexra will be taking over as the chief engineer effective tomorrow?”

“I’ll do it within the hour, sir.”

“Thank you. See you in the morning.” Stuart picked up the other PADD from his desk as Leeson nodded, turned, and walked toward the exit. Stuart walked to the windows and looked out into space. He saw the edge of the Earth and the moon beyond. He looked forward to getting back to exploring the unknown, and the next day he, and his crew, would be on their way to do just that. He enjoyed the view, but he had more to do, so he turned and walked to the exit.

Stuart walked through the corridor and entered the entrance to the bridge. His suspicion that Ensign Kelly would still be working proved true, so he walked to the CONN station. “Mister Kelly?”

Ensign Kelly turned and stood up. He quickly came to a position of attention. “Sir, how can I help you, sir?”

“At ease, Ensign.” Stuart smiled at the young officer. “I see that you are still diligently familiarizing yourself with your workstation.”

“Yes, sir. I don’t want to leave anything to chance when we depart.”

“Lieutenant Commander Adams is busy working on the holographic system, so I would like to ask a favor of you.”

“Certainly, Captain. How can I help?” Eric Kelly was eager to do whatever he could.

Stuart handed Kelly the PADD that he had brought with him. “I’ve listed the names that I want to be assigned to the shuttles. Would you take charge of the shuttle maintenance techs to have these names painted on the hulls?”

“I would be glad to, sir,” Eric said as he activated the PADD and started reading the names—Borman, Gagarin, Lovell, Mattingly, and Mayweather. Kelly was familiar with the three 20th Century NASA astronauts and one cosmonaut. He was very familiar with Mayweather, who was the first helm officer on the NX-01 *Enterprise*. He noticed that the name for the Waverider shuttle was a woman’s first name. “Captain, I think you chose appropriate names, but I’m curious about the name *Elizabeth*.”

Stuart felt both sadness and pride simultaneously at the sound of her name. He forced himself to display a look consistent with the happy memories that he had rather than the sad ones. “Elizabeth was my mother’s name, Ensign.”

Kelly, noticing that the captain used the past tense, realized that his mother was deceased. He lowered his eyes. “Oh. I’m sorry if...”

“No need for apologies, Ensign.”

“Yes, sir. With your permission, I’ll get on this immediately.”

Stuart nodded. “Thank you, Mister Kelly. Carry on.” Stuart turned and started for the starboard exit, where the turbolift was located.



U.S.S. *Starquest*, NCC-76382, Stardate 53694.8

Captain Rob Stuart, followed by Commander Melanie Leeson and Lieutenant Commander Jeron Lexra, entered the conference room. The other senior officers were seated and started to stand, but a wave of the captain’s hand showed them that they should stay seated. The three newcomers also sat down. “Good morning, everyone, and thank you for being on time. Today is the day. Once again, it’s time to boldly go where none have gone before.” Stuart looked around at the officers seated around the table. All but one had served for about a year on the U.S.S. *Providence*, but that ship would be undergoing a refit for some time before it was space-worthy again. Fortunately, Starfleet had assigned them a new ship, a smaller ship. Most of the crew had served on *Providence*, but *Starquest* was a science vessel that only had room for about half of Stuart’s former command. Those who were reassigned to other starships and other assignments would be missed along with the few who were lost during battle, but at least most of the crew, with a few exceptions, knew each other and worked well together.

Stuart smiled at those around the table. “The first order of business is to introduce our new chief engineer, Lieutenant Commander Jeron Lexra. I’m sure that you all will want to get to know him, and he is looking forward to getting to know all of you.”

Lexra gave a nod of his head to the others. “Thank you, Captain. I’m looking forward to serving with all of you. And to answer your unasked questions, yes, I am joined with a symbiont. Jeron is my symbiont’s fifth host.” He noticed the others, except for the Vulcan science officer, smiling.

Stuart looked at his friend, Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams. “I want to thank our second officer for his hard work creating supplemental holographic crew members that we might

need in an emergency. Like the EMH, these holograms will be able to assist us by providing emergency personnel on the bridge, in engineering, and anywhere within the ship. We also were able to salvage the holocloak from our previous ship to install in this one. Mister Lexra, do you know the status of the installation?"

"I have a team working on it as we speak. I expect the job to be finished within two to three hours, and we can begin diagnostics and testing immediately after that."

"We might have to test it while en route, Mister Lexra," Stuart said. "We are due to launch at 1330 hours. Does anyone see any reason for further delay?" Silence and a few shaking heads told Stuart that the ship should be able to launch as scheduled. "Good. Mary, please contact Dock Control to confirm our 1330 departure time after we're done here," he said to the Senior OPS Manager. He turned toward the doctor and focused on her. When his eyes met hers, he almost forgot what he wanted to ask, but it quickly came back to his mind. "Uh, Doctor Edwards, have you completed all medical evals?"

She smiled as she looked directly at the captain. "All but two, Captain. Our new chief engineer has not had time, but if he could indulge me before we leave orbit?"

The Trill nodded as he hinted at smiling. "I would be glad to, Doctor. What time would you like to see me?"

"Can you be in the main sickbay at 1100?"

"I'll be there, Doctor."

"And who is the other person that you need to see?"

"We still need to do your exam, Captain." The chief medical officer tried not to smile...much.

Stuart blushed as he nodded. "Please let me know when it would be convenient, Doctor." He quickly looked around the table to observe the other senior officers. He faced Lieutenant James Goodman. "Counselor, anything to add?"

"My services have been in a higher demand since the battle, Captain," Goodman said. "Some of the crewmembers are dealing with PTSD, but they are coping and capable of performing their duties. I don't see any concerns as long as they continue with their sessions. I'm convinced that they all will be fine."

"That's good to hear, Counselor." Stuart looked at each of the other senior officers. "Does anyone else have any business?" Again, silence answered that the meeting had come to an end. "Then let the countdown begin. Dismissed." As he watched everyone stand and start toward the exit, he noticed that Doctor Edwards remained seated. Stuart took a deep breath. He wondered if leaving that rose was a wise decision. "Doctor? Something else?"

Edwards also took a deep breath as she contemplated what she wanted to say. "I...I wanted to talk with you about..." She didn't know how to approach the conversation.

"Flowers?" Stuart interjected.

The doctor smiled. “Yes, sir. Flowers.” She looked down at her hands, one resting on top of the other on the conference table, and then she looked up again. “So, it *was* you who left the rose.”

“Yes, I’m the guilty party,” Stuart said, not knowing if he should smile or keep a neutral expression. He decided that he should make the most of the opportunity since the secret was out. “Did you like it? I hope that you’re not allergic to...”

“Oh, I loved it...and the thought behind it.” Edwards looked at Stuart a little sheepishly. “And, no, I’m not allergic to roses. Or any other types of flowers,” she added with a not-so-subtle hint.

“I’m glad.” Stuart found his voice faltering and cleared his throat. “I hope you don’t think it was too forward of me to give you a red rose, but I didn’t know how else to...”

“Let me know that you are interested?” Jan finally admitted to herself that she was also interested in Stuart, but her past made her reluctant. “Captain...Rob, I need to tell you that I was married once.”

“I know. It’s in your Starfleet record.”

“Of course, it would be. And my divorce is in the record, too,” the doctor said.

“That doesn’t matter to me, Janice,” Stuart said.

“I think you’re a fine man, Rob, and I admit that I’m attracted to you.” Edwards paused as she tried to find words that would not discourage or drive Stuart away but at the same time not to encourage him too much. “After my divorce, I have found that it is...difficult to want another romantic relationship.”

“I think I understand,” Stuart replied. “I was once engaged to be married, but...”

“You had a falling out? Decided that she wasn’t the right person?” And Edwards’s mind went to the real reason that led to her divorce—her ex-husband was a polygamist. He was married to his career and to Jan, but it was clear which ‘wife’ he favored more. She would not let that happen again. “Your career was more important?”

“Nothing like any of that,” Stuart said. “She...she died.”

Edwards immediately regretted her last words. She had inferred that Stuart would do the same thing that Paul had done, but she could not assume that it would be the same. “I’m sorry.”

“Thank you, Janice.” He appreciated her sympathy, but he did not want sympathy. He wanted to move forward with his life and wanted to explore the possibilities of moving forward with Janice Edwards. “Would you be interested in having dinner with me again? Maybe we can talk about something other than work this time?”

Edwards wanted to get past Paul and the reasons that her marriage to him failed. She never considered that she would not engage in another relationship or possibly marry again, but she had not considered that the next man in her life would be another career Starfleet officer.

Maybe it was time to take a risk and open herself up to care for a man again. For Rob Stuart. “I think I would like that, Rob, but let’s take it slow, okay?”

“Of course,” Stuart said. “I agree one hundred percent. I was initially reluctant to leave that rose because I wasn’t sure that pursuing a fellow officer within the same command would be a good idea, but I have done some soul searching and realized that, with proper caution, it’s possible.”

“You’re different than Paul,” Edwards said as she slightly turned her head to one side, studying the captain’s face. “Melanie tried to tell me that this morning, and I wasn’t open to the idea, but now? Now I see that you are different, which is good for both of us.”

“I don’t know your ex-husband, and I don’t know what it was that he did wrong, but as we get to know each other more, I will try to make sure I don’t make the same mistake that he did.”

“He only did one thing wrong, and I want to be upfront with you about it.” Edwards stared into Stuart’s eyes. Her look was serious and her face neutral. “Paul Edwards put his career before me. I’m not a jealous or needy person, Rob, and I know the importance of duty; however, I want to feel that if there was ever a choice to be made between your career and me, we could openly discuss it and come to a decision together that would be beneficial for both of us.”

Stuart smiled gently. “I have always believed that my career was important, but people are more important. I will do my best to not let my career come ahead of you.” Stuart suddenly felt like he was moving too fast after agreeing to move slowly. “I apologize if I’m coming across as if we are already in...”

“...a relationship.” Edwards finished Stuart’s sentence as if that was a normal part of their communication. “No worries,” she said as she stood up, smiled, and walked up to him. She was surprised that she desired to kiss Stuart right then, but she held back. She did, however, place her hand up to rub his cheek softly. “When and where?”

Stuart felt heat in the place where Edwards was still touching. “Excuse me? When and where?”

“Dinner,” Edwards said, taking her hand away.

“Would tonight be too soon? I know a nice seafood restaurant in San Fransico. I already checked the holodeck to make sure we have the program on file.”

“I like seafood. I’ll meet you about 1800?”

Stuart smiled. “Then I’ll see you at 1800. Computer, reserve Holodeck Two for 1800 hours today. Duration—two hours.”

“*Holodeck Two has been reserved for Captain Robert P. Stuart at the specified time and duration,*” the computer’s female voice replied.

Edward smiled. “Can we make it three hours?”

Stuart smiled back. “Computer, update the duration to three hours.”

“Acknowledged update for holodeck reservation.”

“Would you be available for your medical exam now?” the doctor asked.

Stuart nodded. “I said whenever it was convenient, but to be honest, I’m suddenly a little self-conscious about having you give me the exam.”

“To be honest with you, I am, too, so maybe it would be better if Doctor Matal did your exam.” She smiled and exited the main conference room with the captain following.



A few hours later, the bridge crew completed preparations and waited for the captain to begin. He did not make them wait long. “Commander Leeson, it’s almost 1330 hours. Please go through the pre-launch checklist.”

“With pleasure, Captain.” Leeson flipped open the display console between her chair and the captain’s. She entered a code into the LCARS interface to pull up the list and started reading off the departments. “Tactical.”

“Tactical standing by. The board is green,” Lieutenant Yoshi Nakamura said.

“OPS.”

“OPS standing by. All ship systems are ready,” Lieutenant Mary Goodman stated.

“Engineering.”

Lieutenant Commander Jeron Lexra preferred to be on deck seven in the engine room, so the engineer’s mate, Petty Officer Dorian White, manned the bridge engineering station. “Impulse and warp drives are standing by. RCS thrusters are active and available upon command. Main and auxiliary deflector dishes are active.”

“Science.”

“Standing by. Short- and long-range sensors have been activated,” Lieutenant Commander T’Les said unemotionally.

“CONN.”

Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams, with boyish excitement and a good-natured tone, said, “CONN is ready to go. All umbilicals have been disconnected. Thrusters at station keeping. Just give the word, Skipper.”

Leeson shook her head as she tried not to smile...too much. “Captain, all departments have reported in. All officers and enlisted personnel are accounted for. We are ready, sir.”

“Thank you, Exec.” Stuart looked toward the OPS station. “Mary, please inform Dock Control that we are ready to depart.”

Lieutenant Mary Goodman did as she was asked and turned her head toward the captain. “Dock Control signals that we are clear to launch.”

Stuart smiled as he focused on the main viewer. “Blake, thrusters ahead. Take us out.”

The *Nova*-class U.S.S. *Starquest* slid out of the latticed framework and left Earth's orbit. It gracefully flew past the plethora of work bees that daily, hour after hour, worked to clean up the debris from the damaged and destroyed starships. Even after several weeks, the aftermath of the battle was still evident. Stuart did not know when he would return to Earth, but he hoped that it would look as it had before the Vendoth came. For now, it was time to look ahead.

The captain tapped one of the LCARS touchpads on the console between him and Leeson. "Bridge to all hands, we're on our way." He closed the transmission and looked at his first officer beside him, and then to the CONN station between him and the main viewer. "Blake, full impulse until we leave the solar system, and then engage warp six."

"Heading, Skipper?"

"Beta Tongarii sector. We didn't have a chance to finish our analysis of that nebula." Stuart thought about what might be out there and what new adventures awaited him and his crew.



"Maybe there is another timeline where I made a different decision and..."

"And things turned out differently." Blake finished Rob's sentence. "Maybe some things are different, and some are the same."

"Or similar," Stuart added. "Some things I hope would not change."

Blake smiled. "We'll probably never know what might have been."

The End...or is it a new beginning?