

## *Previously...*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Aye, Captain,” Kwan replied.

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

There was lots of mumbling and disagreement among those on the bridge. Granger held up his hand to quiet everyone. “Look, I know we are facing a difficult situation, but let cool heads prevail. We’ll figure it out.” He smiled at his crew to try to promote an optimistic atmosphere. “We will take it one day at a time.”

## ***STARDATE 59059.2***

Lieutenant Commander Richard Baker entered the outer office of the 4<sup>th</sup> Fleet 3<sup>rd</sup> Exploratory Group office suite. He looked at the Vulcan junior grade lieutenant, Commodore Stuart's aide. "Lieutenant Sokal, is the commodore in his office?"

Sokal rose from behind his desk and placed his hands behind his back as he faced the strategic operations officer. "Commodore Stuart is having lunch with Commander Morgenstern and Captain T'Paski. He said that he would be back by 1330 hours, sir."

"It's almost 1330 now, so I'll wait in my office," Baker said. "Will you let him know that I need to speak with him when he comes in?"

Sokal nodded. "Of course, Commander." The Vulcan sat down behind his desk and returned to his work.

Baker started to walk toward the door to his office, but he stopped and turned around when he heard the hiss of the door behind him open. Stuart was entering. "Ah, Commodore, I'm glad you're here."

Stuart smiled as he greeted his former aide. "Richard, how are you?"

"Fine, sir. Do you have a minute?"

"It sounds like this is an official visit," Stuart said.

"Yes, sir. I was in CnC when the message came through."

"Message?"

"From the *Eclipse*," Baker said. "Captain Storan reported that his crew has reactivated the Takarian machine, and apparently, the anomaly is giving off energy readings."

Stuart hoped that this news meant that the U.S.S. *Solar Flare* could be contacted in the other universe where it was trapped. He hoped that Captain Granger and his crew could be rescued. He decided not to reveal how he felt, but he expected that Baker was thinking the same thing. "Richard, please contact Captain Storan, and inform him that the *Republic* should arrive in Takaria orbit within seventy-two hours."

"With pleasure, sir." Baker turned and walked into his office.

Stuart turned to his aide. "Lieutenant, please inform Commander Lexra to prepare the flagship for departure in... forty-five minutes." The commodore turned and exited the office and quickly strode into the corridor before Sokal had a chance to reply.



### **To Boldly Go: Homecoming**

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

By Cleve Johnson



The *Nova*-class vessel orbited Mars. The ship had recently returned from visiting the Federation core systems as well as the Klingon and Romulan Empires. All the familiar stars were there. The planets were also in orbit of those stars; however, the civilizations did not exist. Sentient life did not exist on any of those worlds—Vulcan, Andor, Tellar, Qo’noS, Romulus, Remus. Denobula did have signs of sentient life, but it had not yet developed into a space-faring race. That civilization was operating at the same level as Earth, this universe’s Earth, which currently was in the early Twenty-first Century. The only evidence of life in this universe, other than Earth and Denobula, was the enigmatic intelligence that led to Jupiter’s transformation into a second star within the Sol system. That same intelligence also had left a monolith on Europa, and its purpose was unknown; however, information that Granger had learned from the encounter with the crew of *Discovery II* included a warning transmitted to Earth a few years earlier, when Jupiter was transformed into a second sun, to stay away from Europa. Although *Solar Flare*’s sensors detected the monument, which created much curiosity for his senior officers and those in the science department, Granger decided to heed that warning. He realized that his ship and crew would be vulnerable to any race that had the power to create a star.

Captain Thomas Granger sat behind his desk in his ready room. He studied the latest reports from the science department concerning the ongoing observation of the Sol system and Earth. He wondered how much longer he could delay deciding on the best course for his crew. Eventually, the ship’s resources would run out, and the only chance for the crew’s survival might be to go to Earth. That would be a viable solution for the human and Betazoid members of the crew, but it would be difficult to disguise some of the other races. Surgical alterations and other medical techniques would be required for Vulcans, Trills, Bajorans, and a few others; however, some would be problematic, especially the Andorians and the multi-armed Veloran. It might become necessary to find a place to settle, and it would have to be a world without any sentients so there would be no chance of accidentally interfering with another civilization. But Granger did not think that the time had come to take that step. Not yet.

Granger picked up the mug sitting on the desktop and took a sip of coffee. He made a face as it was no longer hot. One thing he hated was cold coffee. He swiveled around in his chair and stood up, walked around his desk, and made his way to the replicator. He placed the mug in the slot. “Computer, recycle, and give me a hot mug of coffee. Cream and double sweet.” After retrieving the new coffee mug, he returned to his desk and started reading the report where he left off. He set the mug on the desk when he was interrupted by the door chime. He looked up. “Enter.”

The door slid open, and the first officer walked in. “Am I bothering you, Captain?”

Granger smiled at the Andorian. “Yes, but I think you enjoy doing it.” He pointed to the chair across the desk from him. “Come in and have a seat, Commander Shaalvren. What can I do for you?”

The first officer did as the captain requested and sat down. He usually tended to be jovial and laid back when he and the captain were by themselves, but his demeanor was unusually glib during this visit. “Captain, I know that we have been limiting replicator use since shortly after we arrived in this universe, but I think we need to place further restrictions. We should consider

cutting back to restricting each person to only two uses per day and, if necessary, start using emergency rations.”

Granger placed his forearms on the desktop as he leaned forward. “That’s quite a step, Shaal. I thought we would have several more months before we had to resort to less replicator usage.”

“That was my thought as well, Thomas, but here is the latest energy consumption report.” Shaalvren handed a PADD to the captain. “Maybe we should not have traveled too far from the Sol system after we discovered that the Federation founding worlds were void of civilization.”

Granger leaned back and slowly ran his fingers through his hair as he considered the problem. “There must be other options. The botany lab has been repurposed for edible fruits and vegetables, which has helped, hasn’t it?”

“It has helped, but the botany lab is not big enough to produce enough food for eighty people in the long term. Earth has several food and other resources that we could exploit, but there is a risk of being detected if we attempt to approach transporter range.” Shaalvren’s antennae started to droop.

“We might need to take that risk, but I want to explore as many alternatives as possible before we do,” Granger said. “I want the department heads to put on their thinking caps.”

The Andorian first officer’s antennae perked up as he tried to understand Granger’s reference. Human jargon sometimes was difficult to understand as far as Shaalvren was concerned. “Main conference room, sir?”

“Yes, in ten minutes. Maybe a room full of smart and experienced Starfleet officers can figure it out.”

The first officer stood and nodded to his captain. “I hope you’re right, Thomas.” Shaalvren turned and left the captain’s office.



The U.S.S. *Eclipse* rested on the planet’s surface. Commander Allisa LaCroix, the first officer, entered the officer’s mess and made her way to the table where she saw the ship’s linguist, Gashi Jabethu, sitting alone at a table and staring out the windows. “Ensign? May I join you?”

“Do I look like I’m falling apart?” It was an old human joke that she had once heard when she was at the Academy. She smiled at the first officer. “I’m sorry, Commander. I didn’t mean any disrespect.”

“None taken,” LaCroix said as she chuckled. She sat in the chair on the other side of the table from the Zanarian. “I wanted to let you know that we are going to lift off and head into orbit within the hour.”

“Does that mean that we’re going to open the anomaly?”

The first officer smiled. "Yes, it does, Gashi. If we're successful, you should be reunited with your brother soon."

"I hope so, Commander. I hope that we can reunite all members of that lost crew with their families," Gashi Jabethu said.

"We'll do our best to make it happen," LaCroix said. "Commodore Stuart and the *Republic* will be here shortly, and then we'll get underway."

"The commodore is leading the rescue?"

"According to his first officer, he feels responsible for what happened."

Gashi had never met Commodore Stuart, but she had heard that he was a good leader who cared for those under his command. A leader who would do anything possible for those who needed help. What Commander LaCroix just said was further evidence that the commodore was a man worthy of respect and loyalty. "I hope that I get a chance to meet him."

"You might get the chance, Ensign," LaCroix said. "It was you who translated the Takarian language, and that was the key that led to figuring out how to understand the machine that controls the anomaly. Who knows? Maybe the commodore will give you a commendation for your work."

Gashi smiled. "Well, as nice as that would be, the best reward will be getting my brother back. After our parents died, I felt responsible for him. I was in my second year at Starfleet Academy when we lost them, and I almost dropped out to go home to care for him. My father's brother and his wife would not hear of it. They let Dek live with them until the following year when he left for the Academy."

"If you don't mind me asking, how old are you, Ensign?"

"I will be twenty-one years old next month."

"You've been on this ship two years, so you must have been fifteen when you went to the Academy. Did you lie about your age?"

Gashi saw the smile on the commander's face and realized that the other woman was teasing, or so she thought, but she wanted to make sure that it was not an accusation that would get her into trouble with Starfleet. "Yes, I was fifteen, but Zanarians are legally adults at age fourteen."

"I had heard that your people 'grew up' sooner than many other species, but I had no idea what the age was," LaCroix said. "And how much younger is your brother?"

"Almost two years." Gashi found it easy to talk with the first officer. She sensed that Commander LaCroix was showing a general interest in Gashi, her brother, and Zanarian culture. "Dek was fourteen when he went to the Academy. He had been promised to a woman the same age as him, and they planned to marry after his graduation even though they would be eighteen by that time."

"Seems too young to get married."

“Maybe for humans, but most Zanarians marry by age sixteen.”

“I’m getting quite an education here, Gashi. Thank you,” LaCroix said. “Is it true that your people speak at least a dozen languages?”

“Yes, it is, but most of us speak more...and that is just the different languages on Zanaria,” Gashi replied. “Those of us who travel off-world learn many more so we can interact naturally with other species in their own languages rather than depend on the universal translator.”

“And how many off-world languages do you know?”

“At present, I have learned twenty-three Earth languages, Vulcan, Romulan, Andorian, Denobulan, Bajoran, Trill, and Klingon,” Gashi said. “Although I have not mastered all of the Klingon dialects yet.”

Allissa LaCroix shook her head in amazement. “I’m impressed, Ensign. I’m doing good just to keep up with Federation Standard and French. Maybe you can help...” LaCroix did not have a chance to finish her sentence when the bosun’s whistle interrupted her.

“*Commander LaCroix, please report to the bridge,*” Captain Storan’s voice echoed through the public address system.

“On my way, Captain,” the first officer replied. She placed a hand on Gashi’s shoulder and smiled before turning and walking toward the exit.



The U.S.S. *Republic* entered orbit around Takaria, the planet that had been under investigation by the crew of the starship *Eclipse* for more than fifteen months. The planetary study had originally been scheduled to last five to six months, but the discovery of the alien machine that controlled the temporal anomaly a couple of light years distant, along with the loss of the U.S.S. *Solar Flare* through the anomaly into another universe, extended the investigation. The *Eclipse* had been on the planet most of that time, but a few hours before *Republic*’s arrival, Captain Storan had ordered his ship to leave the surface and maintain a standard orbit to rendezvous with the flagship when it arrived. An engineer, a few technicians, and some members of the science department stayed in the underground alien facility to oversee the monitoring and maintenance of the machine.

On the *Republic*’s bridge, Commodore Stuart sat in the center seat and leaned slightly to his right as he spoke to his first officer, Commander Jeron Lexra. “Once we make sure that anomaly is open and stable, we will take up a position about one hundred thousand kilometers from the event horizon and start broadcasting a subspace message to try to contact Captain Granger.”

“I hope that he is listening,” Lexra said.

“I would be surprised if he isn’t.”

“It took days to find the correct quantum and temporal signatures of that universe before. I hope it doesn’t take as long this time.”

“We now know what the signatures are, so it should not take long at all.” Stuart turned to

face the OPS station when Lieutenant Tharon Ch'Toriith interrupted the commanding and executive officers' conversation.

"The *Eclipse* is coming alongside, Commodore. We are being hailed."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Stuart said. "Open the channel."

The main viewer transformed from the planet to the bridge of the other Starfleet vessel. Stuart nodded to his counterpart sitting on the other starship's bridge. "Captain Storan, it is good to see you again."

"And you, Commodore. I trust that your journey was without incident."

"The journey was fine, but it seemed slow getting here."

"On the contrary, Commodore, you arrived one hour forty-three minutes ahead of your previously announced estimated time of arrival." Storan was a typical Vulcan in his literal viewpoint and communication style, but at least he did not mention how many seconds were involved. "The machine is active and working at sixty-four point seven two percent energy level. We have a probe located three hundred twenty-seven thousand four hundred fourteen point two kilometers from the anomaly's event horizon monitoring its expansion, which is gradually increasing to a distance that will allow a *Nova*-class starship to pass through."

"I would like some leeway in case the anomaly starts to collapse while the *Solar Flare* is passing through, Captain."

"Agreed, Commodore. Logic would support the precaution of a large margin of error. I will inform my team on the surface to increase power to the machine and increase the opening of the anomaly's aperture."

"Thank you, Captain." Stuart felt a little anxious about the success of this mission. Retrieving the *Solar Flare*, its officers, and its crew was more important to him than any mission he had commanded. "Shall we get underway?"

"I am prepared to do so upon your order, Commodore Stuart." The Vulcan remained neutral in his tone and demeanor, but he also desired the successful recovery of Captain Thomas Granger and his crew, lost more than a year prior.

Both starships left orbit and sped away under full impulse power until they were far enough from the planet's gravity well, and then they engaged their warp drives.



The senior officers had spent almost two hours discussing possible options, debating the pros and cons of each option, postulating theories, rejecting some ideas, and getting frustrated at not making much headway.

Granger rubbed his eyes as the frustration got to him as well. He looked at those in the conference room with him and held up his hand. No one appeared to notice as his visual cue did not deter multiple conversations from ending. He wanted to slam his fist on the table, but he maintained control. Instead of his fist, he started tapping his index finger on the table, and the others finally stopped talking. "Listen, ladies and gentlemen, we are not getting anywhere, so let's all breathe deeply and take a break. We all know the situation we're in, but the situation is not hopeless." Granger took a deep breath before continuing. "I believe that there may be multiple *potential* solutions, so all we need to do is find them and discover which ones are the best to explore. We want to find options as soon as possible, but we have time. There's no need



to panic.” *At least not yet*, he told himself. “Take an hour to refresh and come back ready to put our heads together.”

The officers all agreed as they saw their captain’s wisdom. Each one stood and walked toward the exit. Granger remained seated until the last of the senior staff was out of the room and the door was shut. He lowered his head into the palms of his hands. He tried to clear his mind and rest, but it was not as easy as he hoped it would be.

*“Bridge to Captain Granger.”*

Granger slower raised his head. He was grateful that no one could see his facial expression as he rolled his eyes. “Granger. What can I do for you?”

*“This is Midshipman Jabeth, Captain. I have detected energy readings coming from Titan’s orbit.”*

Granger’s lethargy left immediately at the news. He straightened his posture. “I’ll be right there.” He stood and quickly walked toward the door. It parted for him, and he made his way around the short corridor to the portside entrance to the bridge. After the door slid open, Granger went straight to the main science station where the Zanarian, Dek Jabeth, monitored the sensors. “Cadet, let’s hear your report.”

“It appears that the anomaly has reappeared,” Jabeth said. “I cannot determine the diameter from this distance, but there is an event horizon forming, and it appears to be growing larger as the energy readings rise.”

“Thank you, Mister Jabeth.” Granger turned to face the CONN station where the flight control officer on duty had turned his chair around to look expectantly at the captain. “Ensign Bradley, set course for Titan. Full impulse power.”

The young officer smiled and turned around to the console as he replied. “Aye, sir.” He entered the course and worked the controls to leave Mars orbit.

Granger went to the command area in the center of the bridge and sat down. He turned his head to the left as he heard the bridge door slide open with a whoosh. He smiled at the first officer approaching. “Commander Shaalvren, we might have just caught a break!”



The starships *Republic* and *Eclipse* returned to normal space as they approached the anomaly. Just as on the day that the Solar Flare was dragged into the vortex, a visible even horizon swirled around the center. The diameter of the vortex continued to expand.

Stuart’s gaze was fixed on the main viewer. “Have you ever seen anything as beautiful, Number One?”

“Only one other during five lifetimes,” the Trill first officer replied. “And it was more dangerous.”

“I’d like to hear about that sometime.” Stuart had met his first officer almost a year and a half before, but he had not spent as much time with him, on a personal level, to get to know him



as much as he would like to. Stuart knew that Jeron was the fifth host of the Lexra symbiont, but he did not know anything about the previous hosts. Did any serve in Starfleet? Were any scientists, engineers, politicians? Stuart decided right then that he would make it a priority to get to know his first officer better once the current situation was resolved.

“The anomaly’s diameter is approaching three hundred meters, sir,” Lieutenant Commander Grezka, the senior science officer stated.

Stuart nodded his head vigorously. “Good. Good. Mister Ch’Toriith, please hail the *Eclipse* and ask Captain Storan to relay a message to Takaria that the anomaly’s aperture is large enough.”

“Yes, sir.” The Andorian OPS manager quickly obeyed the order to contact the *Nova*-class vessel.

“After you get a reply, I want you to direct a message through the anomaly on all Starfleet frequencies,” Stuart said.

“Captain Storan has replied and will relay your message. I’m opening hailing frequencies to the *Solar Flare* now, sir.”

“We had difficulty with communication through the anomaly after they went through, Commodore,” Lexra said. We might not be able to contact them.”

“We have to try and let them know that the gate is open.” Stuart rubbed his chin as he searched for ideas to contact Thomas Granger.

“No reply as yet, Commodore,” Ch’Toriith said.

The turbolift doors opened, and Counselor T’Faaz Laris entered the bridge. Making her way to the chair at the commodore’s left, she sat down, activated the console to her side, and quickly reviewed the status of what had been happening the last few minutes. She turned her head toward Stuart. “I hope you don’t mind my presence, Commodore. I sensed some excitement going on and thought that you might want me on the bridge.”

“I’m glad you’re here, Counselor. How strong are your empathic abilities? Could you sense the *Solar Flair* crew members through the anomaly?”

The Betazoid-Vulcan nodded her head to one side. “Perhaps. It depends on how close they are on the other side.”

“What about sending a telepathic message?”

T’Faaz suddenly had a thought. “Do you know if there are any Betazoids or other telepathic races among the crew?”

Stuart tried to recall his limited knowledge of Granger’s crew and thought at least one Betazoid might be part of his crew. He decided not to rely on his memory. “Computer, access Starfleet records. Query: Are there any Betazoid or other telepathic or empathic members of the U.S.S. *Solar Flare* crew?”

*“Affirmative. Two Betazoids and one Napean currently serve on U.S.S. Solar Flare, NCC-72512.”*

“I suspect that one of them would pick up on any telepathic message I send...*if* close enough,” the counselor said.

“It’s worth a try, Counselor.” Stuart nodded to her. “Go ahead.”

The Vulcan-Betazoid closed her eyes to concentrate. She mentally focused on the anomaly, projecting a single thought. *Come home*. As her mind traveled through the anomaly, she repeated the simple message multiple times.



On the bridge of the U.S.S. *Solar Flare*, Lieutenant Fendara Gimlis, the Napean astrophysicist, sat at Science II to assist in monitoring the energy readings. She suddenly felt strange. It almost seemed that there was a voice in her head as she suddenly had images of her home. She had images of her parents calling her to come into the house—it was a memory of when she was a child playing. And the image changed. Instead of her parents, Gimlis saw the image of a Vulcan woman calling to her.

The port doors slid open and Lieutenant Faraan Kesh, the ship’s botanist, entered the bridge. At the same time, the turbolift on the starboard side opened, and one of the enlisted shuttle pilots, Chief Petty Officer Lasara Welbred, entered. Both were Betazoids.

“Captain Granger, I have something to report,” Kesh said.

“I do too, sir,” Welbred added.

“Captain,” the Napean said. “I believe that I might have something to add that is pertinent, too.”

Granger knew each of the three was either telepathic, empathic, or both, so he suspected that whatever each had to say must be related. “One at a time. Mister Kesh, you were first. Let’s hear it.”

“Sir, I believe that the vortex we came through is re-opening.”

“How do you know?”

“I heard someone calling me home...in my head.”

Chief Welbred started shaking her head vigorously. “Yes, sir, that is the same thing I experienced.”

Granger turned to look at Lieutenant Gimlis and gave an inquisitive look. “Lieutenant?”

“It was different for me, Captain. I had a memory of when I was a girl. I was playing outside, and my mother and father called me to come into our house, but the memory morphed into a vision of a Vulcan woman calling me to come home, but...”

Granger cocked his head slightly to one side. “But what, Mister Gimlis?”

“It was very odd, sir. The woman I saw was Vulcan, but she was...smiling.”

“Lieutenant Commander T’Faaz Laris,” Lieutenant Faraan Kesh mumbled to himself.

“What was that, Lieutenant?” Granger asked.

“Sorry, sir. I’m acquainted with someone—a smiling Vulcan woman—who could be who Lieutenant Gimlis saw in her mind.” Kesh had met Laris a few years ago and again on *Gateway Alpha* not long before *Solar Flare* was assigned to Gem World. “T’Faaz Laris is the counselor on

the *Republic*, Captain. She's half Vulcan and half...Betazoid. The voice in my head did sound like her voice."

Granger smiled. He was aware that *Republic*'s counselor was a Vulcan-Betazoid hybrid. "Fleet Captain Stuart has found us." He turned to face the viewscreen. "How soon will we reach the source of the energy readings?"

"Twenty-four minutes, Captain," Ensign Bradley said.

"Sensors show an event horizon is becoming visible and increasing in diameter, sir," Midshipman Dek Jabeth said from his post."

Commander Shaalvren rose from his chair to stand beside his CO. "Thomas, if this is the break that you mentioned earlier, I would agree."

"Open hailing frequencies," Granger said. "Let's see if we can talk with our friends."



"Sir, we are receiving a faint transmission coming through the anomaly," Lieutenant Tharon Ch'Toriith said as he worked the OPS console to try to boost the signal. "It is coming from the *Solar Flare*, Commodore." The Andorian smiled triumphantly at the success of establishing communication with the other ship.

"Well done, Lieutenant." Stuart was on his feet and moving toward the viewscreen. He walked down the steps to the lowest level of the bridge, stood behind the CONN station, and placed his hand on the back of the flight controller's chair. He turned his head toward the science stations. "Is the anomaly steady, Mister Grezka?"

"It appears stable, Commodore," the Xindi Arboreal stated.

"Ch'Toriith, hail the *Eclipse* and tell Captain Storan to hold position. Mister Axred," Stuart said to the Bajoran CONN officer, "move us closer. I want a direct path to direct our tractor beam into the center of the vortex if we need to use it."

"Yes, sir. How close do you want to get?" Lieutenant Commander Axred Nulan asked.

"Ten thousand kilometers but be ready to reverse course quickly if the vortex increases in size or becomes unstable." Stuart gently patted the Bajoran on the back. He turned around to face the Andorian at OPS. "Put the transmission through."

Ch'Toriith nodded and activated the bridge speakers.

"...is U.S.S. So...Flare to any Fed...ation starship. Please acknowledge."

Stuart recognized Granger's voice. He nodded to the OPS manager to indicate that he wanted to reply. "*Solar Flare*, this is Commodore Stuart on the U.S.S. *Republic*. It's good to hear from you, Thomas. Lock in our transmission. We'll guide you home."

"*You don't know how happy I am to hear from you, Rob. Did I hear...say that you're a commodore now?*"

Stuart tried not to roll his eyes as he forced himself to smile. "Reluctantly, I agreed to a promotion, Tom."

*“Which means that Admiral Montoya didn’t gi...a choice.”*

“That’s about right, Tom.” Stuart became more serious. “Listen, we can talk about that later. We are standing by with a tractor beam if you need it.”

*“We should be fine getting through without it, Rob. We are closing in on the vortex now.”*

Stuart turned back to focus on the main viewer. He watches the image of the vortex intently with the expectation of seeing the other starship at any moment. “How long, Tom?”

*“About four minutes.”*

After a few seconds, Commander Lexra said, “That was the fastest four minutes I have seen.”

Stuart, along with everyone on the bridge, saw the *Nova*-class starship emerging from the vortex. He crossed his arms as he wondered if he misheard Granger or if the *Solar Flare* was closer to the vortex on the other side than Granger had thought. “Mister Ch’Toriith, is it possible to establish visual communication?”

“Coming on screen now, Commodore.”

The viewer image transitioned from the vortex and the open space around it to the bridge of the other vessel. Captain Thomas Granger stood in front of his chair, smiling.

Stuart started smiling at the other man. “Welcome home,” he said. “May I beam over to greet you in person?”

*“I look forward to it,”* Granger said. *“I will see you in a few minutes.”*

Stuart turned toward his first officer. “Number One, please have Doctor Achebe meet me in Transporter Room Two. You have the bridge.” He started toward the turbolift and glanced at T’Faaz Laris. “Counselor, why don’t you join me?”

“It would be a pleasure, sir.”



Captain Thomas Granger entered Transporter Room One. He nodded toward the young Jamaican man behind the console. “Good day to you Petty Officer. Any plans now that we’re back in our home universe?” Granger was just engaging in ‘small talk,’ but he prioritized doing whatever he could to make his crew feel comfortable.

“Hello, Captain. I want to take some leave time back on Earth as soon as possible,” Petty Officer Martin St. Marten said as he smiled at his commanding officer.

“I plan to request an extended leave for the entire crew before the day is done Mister St. Marten,” Granger replied. “Has *Republic* signaled?”

“Right before you walked in, sir. I was preparing to respond.”

“Please do so.” Granger turned toward the raised transport dais and stood straight as the columns of coalescing energy appeared and faded. Where there was nothing a few seconds before, now stood three Starfleet officers.

Stuart stepped down first with an outstretched hand. “Permission to come aboard?”

Granger stepped to shorten the distance, grasped Stuart’s hand, and shook it vigorously. “Permission granted, sir! It’s good to see you again after almost four years.”

Stuart’s expression suddenly changed. “Four years? It’s only been fourteen months.”

“The universe we were in must not be synced with the flow of time in this universe.”

Stuart placed his hand on Granger’s shoulder. “I’m sorry it took so long to open that doorway, Tom.”

“Don’t be, Rob,” Granger said. “I just found out that our time away from our loved ones was less for them. Hopefully, that means that not too much has changed to come back to.”

Stuart’s positive demeanor returned. He smiled at Granger. “Well, the time difference in the other universe explains the touch of gray in your hair.” He turned and motioned the other two officers to join him. “I brought along my chief medical officer and counselor to see if you could use their services—Doctor Kofi Achebe and Counselor T’Faaz Laris.”

Granger shook each officer’s hand, but he looked into the Vulcan’s eyes. “I understand that you were our guiding light, Counselor. If you were not a Vulcan, I would kiss you.”

T’Faaz smiled, which surprised Granger. “I’m half Betazoid, Captain, so feel free to kiss me if you want to. I would not be offended.”

Granger started to blush, but he received permission. Why waste the opportunity? He kissed her on the lips but not passionately. He wanted to keep it platonic, a gesture of his gratitude for mentally reaching out to his crew.

Stuart just smiled at the interchange.

Granger backed away from T’Faaz. “Thank you, Counselor.” He turned to face Stuart. “First of all, Commodore, congratulations on your promotion. Secondly, I suppose that you want a full report of our adventures on the other side of the anomaly.”

“Thank you, Tom. As far as your report is concerned, just give me the short version, and you can download the logs and reports later. I’m sure it will take some time for me to read four years of information.”

“Well, the short version is we did not have any casualties. Everyone who *was* lost is now found,” Granger said.

“That is the most important thing,” Stuart said in agreement. “The ship seems not to have too much wear and tear. I take it that hostile encounters were few.”

“There were none, Rob, which I’m grateful for. To tell you the truth, that universe seemed emptier than ours where sentient lifeforms are concerned.”

“Oh?” Stuart’s curiosity rose a couple of notches, but he could wait. “I look forward to reading about it. Right now, I would like to tour your ship and welcome each member of your crew home.”

“I’m sure they’ll appreciate that, Commodore.” Granger raised his arm toward the exit. “This way.”



On the U.S.S. *Eclipse*, Captain Storan glanced at the chronometer above the main viewer. It was nearly time for the shift change. He rose from the center seat and walked toward the science station where Ensign Gashi Jabethu dutifully monitored the anomaly. He stopped and stood next to the young Zanarian officer. “I believe that I have neglected to congratulate you on your work in translating the Takarian language. Your exemplary linguistic skills were a key component to the success of our mission to rescue the U.S.S. *Solar Flare*.”

Jabethu started to smile, but she did not want to offend her Vulcan captain, so she maintained a sober expression. “Thank you, Captain. I was extremely motivated.”

“Yes, I understand that your brother serves on Captain Granger’s ship,” Storan said. The corners of his lips turned upward. Not a smile or a grin, but for a Vulcan, even the almost imperceptible facial expression was unusual. “You have not asked for any special dispensation to visit your brother, which has not gone unnoticed. Your devotion to your duties is noted; however, I believe that your family obligations should be observed. I would be agreeable to grant permission for you to transport to the *Solar Flare* after your shift is completed, which will be in three minutes, fourteen point seven seconds.”

The young ensign nodded slightly as she fought to control her emotions. She thanked her commanding officer in the Vulcan language. “Nash-veh nemaiyo, Khart-lan.”

“Du nam-tor na'shaya, Wuh-lan.” Storan returned to his chair and sat down.



Ensign Jabethu materialized on the platform and saw the transporter technician along with another enlisted crewmember next to her. “Permission to come aboard.”

The transporter technician saw the newcomer’s six-digit hands and the bony ridge above her eyes, clearly indicating that she was from Zanaria. “Permission granted. You must be Cadet Jabeth’s sister. He doesn’t know that you were beaming over just as you requested, Ensign,” Petty Officer Winifred Smythe said, smiling.

“Thank you, Petty Officer. Do you know where I can find him?”

“Computer, where is Midshipman Jabeth?”

“*Midshipman Dek Jabeth is in the officer’s mess.*”

The other crewman, a member of the security department, stepped forward. He looked into Gashi Jabethi’s round blue eyes. He considered them attractive, but he was enlisted, and she was an officer, so he quickly dismissed any idea of trying to get together with her. As much as he

liked to think he was popular with women, he knew the truth of it—he wasn't. "I will be glad to escort you, Ensign."

"Thank you, Crewman...?"

"Harris. William Harris," the crewman replied. "This way, sir."

Jabethu smiled as she followed the crewman out into the corridor.



Dek Jabeth was sitting at a table with two male ensigns, one human and the other Bajoran. Jabeth had been listening to the human, Darren Bradley, talk about his plans to go home to visit his family as soon as leave was authorized. Jabeth thought about his family. His parents had died in a shuttle accident about a year before he entered the Academy, so the only family he had was his sister, an uncle, and an aunt. He wondered if his sister still served aboard the *Eclipse*. He had heard that *Eclipse* was one of the two ships that had been sent to welcome *Solar Flare* back from the other side of the vortex. He set his drink down on the table as he listened to his friends, and then he spotted a member of security and an ensign enter the mess hall. He stood up slowly when he realized that it was his sister. "Gashi?" He ran up to her and placed his hands on her shoulders. "Gashi? Am I dreaming?"

She wrapped her arms around him and started crying. "It's not a dream, Dek. It's me."

Commodore Stuart and Captain Granger walked into the room just then. They stopped and looked around until they saw the Zanarian siblings hugging each other and walked toward them. Stuart was pleased that he could witness the emotional exchange. "I hate to interrupt your reunion."

Gashi and Dek immediately faced Stuart and snapped to attention when they realized who was speaking to them. "Oh, Commodore Stuart!"

"As you were." Stuart smiled. "I wanted to meet the person who made it possible to bring the *Solar Flare* and her crew home."

"On behalf of myself and my crew, I want to thank you as well," Granger added. "I'm in your debt, Ensign Jabethu."

"It was a team effort, sirs, but...you're welcome."

"Well, I won't keep you," Stuart said, "but when we get back to *Gateway Alpha*, I plan to honor you and your shipmates on a job well done."

Gashi grinned as she felt pride in herself and the entire *Eclipse* crew. "Thank you, sir."

The two senior officers both nodded to Gashi Jabethu and walked toward one of the replicators.

Gashi turned back to face Dek. "I'm relieved that my younger brother is back. Maybe we can take leave and go home to Zanaria. I've stayed in regular communication with Alira, and she still holds hope that you will return to her."

“She does? She hasn’t married?” Dek was surprised that Alira would wait so long for him. He had intended to marry her after he graduated from Starfleet Academy, which would have happened shortly after his midshipman cruise was completed; however, fate had changed his plans, and he assumed that his intended mate would mourn his loss and find another to spend her life with. After all, she was already nineteen years old, and most Zanarians married by age sixteen unless they chose to devote their lives to total service, which was a rarity among their people. Only the most dedicated, approximately eight percent of the population, had chosen that path. Gashi was one of the eight percent, but Dek felt that it was his responsibility to carry on the family line.

And then Dek had another thought. “Gashi, I don’t know if you can call me your younger brother any longer.”

“Oh? Why not?”

“We were in the other universe longer than we were gone from this one.”

“What do you mean?”

Dek Jabeth did not know how his sister would take the information that he was about to tell her, but he knew that she would find out eventually. It would be better to hear it from him. “Time moves at different speeds in the two universes, so for me, four years passed.” He paused as he faced Gashi and held her hands. “I’m almost two years older than you are now.”

Gashi’s mouth opened, but she did not know what to say at first, however, the initial shock quickly subsided, and she started to smile. “I always wanted an older sibling.”

Dek and Gashi both started laughing.



Granger and Stuart entered the transporter room. Doctor Achebe and Counselor Laris had previously returned to the *Republic* after offering their assistance to *Solar Flare*’s medical staff. “Thank your doctor and counselor for your assistance, will you?”

“Certainly, Tom,” Stuart replied. “I’m just glad that your crew came through this event as fit and well-adjusted as they did. I expected that the counselor’s services would have been needed.”

“Well, Counselor Ev-Dragir had her hands full at times, but she was able to keep the crew morale up with few exceptions.” Granger quickly cocked his head to one side and back again as he smirked. “Although, *she* might need some counseling herself. I’m not aware of her reaching out to anyone to work on her mental health.”

“I’m sure T’Faaz would be willing to spend time with Counselor Ev-Dragir if she is open to it.”

“I’ll let her know, Rob,” Granger said. “Thank you.”

Stuart offered his hand to Granger, who reciprocated by shaking it. “Well, Tom, it should just be a few days trip to *Gateway Alpha*, and you and your crew can take an extended leave after



a *very* short debrief. I'm going to authorize six months' leave for you and every member of your crew. I think you all need it, and you certainly deserve it."

Granger smiled as he was relieved and grateful for the extra time. He expected maybe three months and would have been content with two. Six months was beyond what he had thought. "On behalf of the crew as well as for me, thank you again, Rob."

"Well, it will take most of that time to do a minor refit and resupply of your ship," Stuart said. "Any specific plans?"

"I'll go home to Riverside and see my family." Granger had the privilege of growing up in the same hometown as the famous James T. Kirk, which was the major influence in his life that led him to seek a Starfleet career. "And then I might take a trip to some of the places I always said I wanted to visit and never found the time."

"Or *made* the time," Stuart said, smiling.

"The funny thing is most of those places are on Earth. When I was a kid, the only thing I wanted to do was join Starfleet, so I stayed home most of the time preparing myself by studying. It wasn't until I spent some years traveling from one star to another that I realized that I had missed a lot of interesting places right on Earth all because I was too busy wanting to get into space." Granger shook his head. "Well, now I have some time to do something about it."

"Good for you, Tom. You need that time away from the big chair, but it will be waiting for you." Stuart patted Granger's shoulder, turned, and stepped up on the transporter platform. As he stepped on the pad and turned to face Granger, he smiled. "Welcome home."

"Thank you, Rob." Granger nodded to the commodore and turned to the transporter tech. "Energize."

As Stuart dematerialized, Thomas Granger nodded to the transporter tech and exited the room. He walked through the corridor contemplating Stuart's last words—"Welcome home."

**The End**