

To Boldly Go:

The *Starquest* Adventures

Like Fleas on a Dog's Back

by Cleve Johnson

Captain's Log: Stardate 54006.7

It has been almost a week since the U.S.S. Venture had departed with the Kennedy survivors and their descendants. We have mapped the planet designated as New Earth and completed geologic and meteorological surveys. Lieutenant Wells and Lieutenant J.G. Rockwell were disappointed that they found nothing atypical from dozens of other known planets. On a more positive note, Lieutenants Salak and Morgenstern cataloged several animal species unlike any found in the known galaxy. I planned to leave orbit tomorrow, but the Life Sciences department requested another week of study, and as a scientist myself, I am happy to grant the request.



Captain Rob Stuart entered the bridge and walked toward the command chairs. He smiled at the first officer as he sat down next to her. "Anything to report, Exec?"

"Blake hasn't returned yet," Melanie Leeson said. "He's obsessing over the *Borman's* performance."

"Still?" Stuart shook his head. "That shuttle is just a smidgeon slower than the other Type 9 shuttle, and Blake spends days trying to find the problem. I don't know if I should commend him for his due diligence or order him to see the counselor for obsessive behavior."

"Why not both?" Leeson smirked. "I don't think that the shuttle has anything wrong with it. No two are the same, but he doesn't seem to realize that."

"He is a true 'flyboy,' Mel, and he has high standards when it comes to a ship's level of performance." Stuart turned his head to face the main viewer so he could enjoy the view of the planet. "I think that he just wanted an excuse to take one of the Type 9 shuttles for a spin to see what it could do."

"*That* is probably the truth of it, Captain."

Ensign Eric Kelly currently manned the CONN station. He turned in his chair to face the two senior officers. "Sirs, may I offer an opinion?"

Stuart nodded to the young officer. "You work closely with Lieutenant Commander Adams, so you probably have good insight into his behavior. Please speak freely."

"Well, Captain, I think that he wants to prove that he is useful to you." Kelly saw Stuart and Leeson simultaneously raise their eyebrows, so he realized that he should be more specific. "What I mean is that we have been orbiting this planet for several weeks,

and he probably feels that his purpose as the senior flight officer is not needed, and the only way he knows to compensate for it is to prove his usefulness by performing flight tests on the shuttles.”

“You would make a good ship’s counselor, Mister Kelly,” Stuart said.

The ensign started to blush as he offered a barely noticeable grin. “I just understand him sir since I’m also a ‘flyboy.’”

“Understood, Mister Kelly. I’ve known him for a long time, but there are some things about Commander Adams that you probably understand better than...”

“Captain!” Lieutenant Mary Goodman interrupted Stuart. “We’re receiving a distress signal from the *Borman*.”

Kelly spun around and prepared to take the ship out of orbit if the captain ordered it.

Stuart looked at the OPS manager. “Patch him through. On speakers.”

“Starquest, *this is shuttle four. I’m under attack.*”

“Blake, who is attacking you?” Stuart was concerned for his friend. He knew that Blake could outfly just about any ship he had previously encountered, but this was an area of space that Starfleet was new to. Who knew what alien species Blake might have bumped into?

“*Remember that species we met a few weeks ago?*”

“The Tranak?”

“*Yeah, Skipper. Them.*”

Leeson looked at Stuart. “Their technology is at least a couple of centuries behind ours, Blake. Even the shields on your shuttle would be sufficient to...”

“*That’s true, but there are eight of their ships chasing me and all firing at once. I’ve taken several hits to the shields, and they’re holding...for now.*” There was a short pause before Adams continued. “*The lead ship just launched a missile, and sensors show that it has a nuclear warhead!*”

A burst of static came through the bridge communications system.

“Blake!” Stuart quickly stood up and spun around to look at Lieutenant Commander T’Les at the science station. He did not have to verbalize the order for the science officer to run a sensor scan. He noticed that the Vulcan almost betrayed her heritage as she fought to control her look of concern.

“Sensors detected a twenty-kiloton explosion at coordinates seven four point two, mark twenty-nine, Captain. The shuttle appears to be intact.”

The coms’ static cleared, and Blake Adams’ voice returned. “*If you can hear me, Skipper, I could use a hand if you’re not too busy.*”

“You’re alive! Thank God!” Stuart turned to the CONN. “Mister Kelly, set course for those coordinates and break orbit. Take us to maximum warp as soon as we are out of the gravity well.”

“Aye, Skipper.”

Stuart glanced toward the tactical station. “Yoshi, sound red alert.”

“Aye, Captain. Shields activated. Phasers and photon torpedoes are ready on standby.” Lieutenant Nakamara dutifully stood ready. He knew that Adams and the Tranak ships were not far outside of the star system, and it would only be minutes at maximum warp before they arrived.

“Blake, we’re on the way. How did you survive that blast?” Commander Melanie Leeson asked as she felt relieved that he was still breathing.

“I was able to fire phasers at the missile before it was too late. But it was close enough to take out my shields and collapse my warp field. The Tranak ships are targeting my impulse engines and warp nacelles. Normally, I would say that the Tranak are like fleas on a dog...and I’m the dog, but without shields, they’re starting to do some serious damage...when they manage to hit their target.”

“Keep doing your famous evasive maneuvers, Blake,” Leeson said. “Let’s see if you can fly as well as you keep saying you can.”

Stuart walked up to place his hand on Ensign Kelly’s shoulder. “Prepare to drop to sublight, Ensign.”

“Will do, sir. Just give the word.”

“Bridge to Transporter Room One,” Stuart said. “Mac, prepare to lock onto Mister Adams as soon as we drop out of warp, and prepare to beam him aboard on my signal.”

“Yes, Captain. I’m standing by.”

Stuart returned to the command chair and sat down. He gripped the ends of the armrests as he focused on the streaking stars on the main viewer. “Mister Kelly, take us out of warp.”

The ship slowed to impulse speed and approached the shuttle Borman. On the bridge, Stuart’s jaw tightened. “Mary, patch me through to the shuttle.”

“Channel open, Captain,” Lieutenant Mary Goodman said.

“Blake, the calvary has arrived.”

“Just in time, Skipper. I have a problem. The warp core is about to blow.”

“Hold on.” Stuart turned his head toward the tactical officer. “Drop shields.” As soon as he gave the order, he immediately gave another. “Transporter Room One, do you have a lock?”

“Locking on now, Skipper.”

“The shuttle’s warp core is critical, Mac. Beam him aboard.”

It only took a few seconds before Chief John McKinney replied. *“I have him, Skipper.”*

Stuart felt relieved and grinned slightly. “Shields up, Yoshi. Ensign Kelly, give us

some distance.”

Both officers said, “Aye, Captain” in unison. It almost sounded like they had practiced it.

“We’re almost out of blast range, Capt...” Yoshi’s statement was interrupted by the shuddering of the deck. “Shields are holding at ninety-four percent. We received minor hull damage on decks three and four by multiple laser hits when the shields were down. They barely scratched the paint.”

Blake Adams had just entered the bridge via the turbolift on the starboard side. “Like fleas on a dog, Skipper.” He made his way to face Stuart and Leeson at the center of the control room.

Stuart stood up and placed his hands on Blake’s shoulders. “The next time you take a shuttle for a spin, make sure there are no hostiles within five parsecs.”

Adams frowned. “I just got the bugs worked out of that shuttle. Those Tranak owe me a new one.”

Stuart patted both of Blake’s shoulders. “Do you *really* want them to provide a shuttle with their level of technology?”

Blake shook his head and forced himself to smile. “No, I don’t think so. They barely have warp drive for their main ships.”

“Captain, Tranak ships are still firing,” Yoshi said. “Shall I return fire?”

“Phasers at forty percent power. Target the laser weapon ports and turrets on the closest ships. Fire when ready.”

“Firing.”



On the lead Tranak ship, the aliens found it difficult to remain standing as the vessel shook. The commander stood at his command console and grabbed the edges of it to keep from falling. Other members of the crew did the same, but some of them were thrown to the deck. After the structural integrity field compensated, they quickly recovered and returned to their stations.

The commander glared at his crew, bearing his sharp teeth as his fin-shaped ears vibrated back and forth. It was an autonomic function indicating his agitation. “Crolek, what happened?”

The first officer checked the monitors at his station. “Yurek, the aliens have destroyed our energy weapons. We still have missiles. Three of our other ships are in the same condition.”

Yurek realized that the alien spacecraft was more powerful than his entire task force, but the fact that the enemy had only damaged his and the other ships’ weapons did not go unnoticed. “Signal our ships to withdraw to Tranak.”

“The aliens will have the advantage, Yurek! They will destroy us!”

“They already have the advantage, Crolek. If the alien commander wanted to

destroy us, it would have already come to be.” Yurek turned to face his monitor. He wondered what sort of people they were. He had accused them of being like the Rihansa during the first encounter, but they did not seem arrogant, and they did not destroy as the Rihansa had done many years before. “Crolek, we must be cautious, but it is possible that we have misjudged these aliens.”

“They have invaded our territory, Yurek.” The first officer kept his voice low and steady. He wanted to advise his commander but not challenge his authority. “What word do you give?”

“Let us wait to see if they wish to talk as before. This time, I will listen to their words closely to determine if they speak truthfully or falsely.”



“Captain, seven of the Tranak ships are turning away from the lead ship,” T’Les said. “Their warp cores are powering up.”

“Should I target their nacelles, sir?” Yoshi Nakamara asked.

“I don’t want to be the aggressor,” Stuart replied. “Let them go, Lieutenant but stay alert in case the lead ship launches missiles.”

“Aye, Captain.”

“The other ships have gone to warp, sir.” Lieutenant Commander T’Les made her report as she continued to monitor the ship’s sensors.

“What’s the next move, Skipper?” Lieutenant Commander Blake Adams walked around to stand behind the CO and XO at the auxiliary console attached to the railing.

Stuart turned so he could visually follow his friend’s movements. He expected Blake to relieve Ensign Kelly at the CONN and was surprised when he didn’t do that.

Blake must have guessed why the captain was looking at him or maybe he knew Stuart well enough to understand what he was probably thinking. He whispered his response to Stuart’s unasked question. “It’s still his shift, Skipper. The kid can handle it.”

Leeson, hearing what Blake had said, turned her head toward him. “As good as you?”

Blake smiled. “No quite.”

Stuart enjoyed the camaraderie, but now was the time to deal with the situation at hand. He looked at the ceiling, wondering why he usually did that when he was about to contact a person or department elsewhere on the ship through the communication system. He decided that it was just one of those little quirks and continued. “Counselor Goodman, please report to the bridge.”

“What do you have in mind, Captain?” Melanie Leeson looked up to the still-standing Stuart.

“I want to see if we can make better headway with the Tranak than we did the last time. I want James to be here to see if he can with our friends out there.”

“Assuming that they are willing to talk to us and with a visual transmission,”

Leeson replied.

The turbolift doors slid open, and Counselor James Goodman entered the bridge. He glanced at his wife at the OPS station and winked at her. He approached the center of the bridge and faced Stuart. "Captain, you wanted to see me?"

"Yes, James. I'm going to try to get the Tranak to talk to us face to face, and I want you to observe and let me know if you sense any red flags."

"I'll do what I can, but like I told you before, I have to be very close to sense people's emotions."

"I didn't forget. I want you to observe body language and listen to vocal inflections. You're good at that."

"Of course, Captain," the counselor said. "I just hope that the Tranak psyche is similar to ours or to other species that I'm familiar with." Counselor Goodman walked to Stuart's left and sat down in the designated VIP padded seat.

Stuart sat down and faced the main viewer. He looked toward Lieutenant Mary Goodman at the OPS station and nodded.

Mary entered information into the LCARS interface and looked back toward the center of the bridge. "Hailing frequencies open, sir."

Stuart straightened his posture and leaned slightly forward. "Tranak vessel, this is Captain Robert Stuart aboard the U.S.S. *Starquest* representing the United Federation of Planets. We would like to resolve any hostilities between us and come to a peaceful solution." He waited in hopes that the alien ship's commander would respond. After a few seconds, Stuart tried again. "Tranak vessel, we are transmitting visually. We respectfully ask that you respond in kind."

The image of the alien ship hanging in space on the main viewer was replaced by the alien in charge. His head and upper body dominated the viewscreen, so little of the Tranak's bridge could be seen in the background. "*I am Yurek, commander of the Tranak star cruiser Tirok One. Your ship is more powerful than mine. Why have you not destroyed us?*"

Stuart was grateful that the communications technicians had upgraded the universal translator since the previous encounter with the Tranak. It seemed to be interpreting the alien language with no glitches. "Commander Yurek, we are on a peaceful mission of exploration. It is not our intention to destroy you. The only reason that we destroyed your weapon ports was in response to your attack against our shuttle and this vessel." Stuart paused to take a deep breath. "We do not wish to harm you."

"Captain Robert Stuart, you appear to be a thoughtful being. We attacked the small space vessel and your vessel because you have invaded our territory. This star system is ours as is the star system that you entered nineteen garsuta past. We wish you to leave."

The counselor leaned close to Stuart. "I don't know what a *garsuta* is, but he seems adamant in his request."

Stuart nodded slightly to James before turning his attention back to Yurek on the

viewscreen. “I apologize for our intrusion. We are not aware of your territorial boundaries. We came here in search of survivors from another one of our starships that was stranded in this sector long ago. We found them on an inhabited planet in this system and rescued them. Another one of our starships came and took them to their home planets, and we have stayed to explore the planet and other planets in this star system.” Stuart’s confidence was building as the Tranak commander seemed willing to converse, but he did not want to push his luck. “If you want us to leave your territory, we will abide by your wishes; however, one of our purposes for exploration is to contact other species. We want to open a dialogue with you and your people.”

“For what purpose? To spy on us? To take our resources?”

Stuart shook his head. “No, that is not our intention. We want to learn from you and allow you to learn from us.”

“What could you learn from my people? It is obvious that you are more advanced.”

“Maybe we are more advanced in our technology, but perhaps you are more advanced than we are in other areas.”

Yurek blinked his eyes as his ears slowly moved forward. *“I am tasked with the defense of my planet and the territory claimed by my leaders. I have a duty and an obligation to deny your request. I must ask you to leave immediately.”*

Stuart was disappointed that Yurek was not willing to talk more, but he held out hope that the future might present a positive opportunity to open a dialogue. “We will do as you ask, but we have a survey team on the planet, so we need to retrieve them first. We also do not know the boundaries of your territory. How do we know what is off-limits to us?”

“I will transmit the coordinates of our borders to you.” Stuart watched as Yurek turned to an unseen member of his crew off to one side and ordered the transmission to be sent.

Mary Goodman looked at the captain. “Sir, we are receiving Yurek’s transmission.”

Stuart nodded to the OPS manager and turned back to face the viewscreen. “Thank you, Commander Yurek. I hope we can one day meet again in peace to learn from each other.”

“I will report your offer to the leaders of my people. If they wish to open a dialogue, we will send a message of invitation.”

“Before we leave, do you need assistance repairing your weapons ports?” Stuart wanted to show the Tranak that the Federation was willing to be hospitable.

“That is...a thoughtful gesture, Captain Robert Stuart, but we will make the repairs without your assistance.” The viewscreen image went dark and the image of the Tranak ship returned.

“Well, that could have gone better,” Stuart said. “Mister Kelly, let’s go pick up our people. Set course for New Earth.”

“Aye, Skipper...uh, I mean Captain.”

Stuart looked behind him at Blake Adams. “You’re a bad influence on him, you know.”

Blake smiled. “It’s all part of training him to be a good flight officer, Skipper.”

“I wonder if he could have outflown those fleas,” Stuart said as he smirked at his friend.

“He would have bought the farm before you had time to rescue him.” Blake’s smile faded as he remembered what had happened. “One thing bothers me, Skipper.”

“What’s that?”

“They owe me a new shuttle, and you let them off the hook.”

“I’ll make sure you get a new shuttle as long as you promise that you won’t go joyriding again in hostile alien territory.”

“I’ll do my best to keep that promise, Skipper.”

“It’s not as bad as it seems, Captain,” the counselor said. “I think that Yurek meant what he said. He will report to his leaders, and I have a hunch that he will recommend that they send an invitation.”

“What makes you think that, James?”

“You told me to observe his body language and listen for verbal clues. He wasn’t too difficult to read. I got the impression that he is curious about us just as we are about his people.”

“Let’s hope that you’re right,” Stuart said as he contemplated the possibilities of another encounter with the Tranak.



Captain’s Log: Supplemental

We picked up our survey team from New Earth and set course outside of Tranak space. The first...and second contact with the Tranak did not go as well as I wanted it to; however, even if the door is not open to us at present, at least it is not locked. Maybe we will have an opportunity to prove that the Federation is only interested in peaceful relations. Now we continue to map the sector and make new discoveries. Maybe the next species we encounter will be less suspicious of our motives.

The End