

Cleve Johnson's

To Boldly Go

The Voyage of the Monarch:



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These are the voyages of the starship U.S.S. Monarch. Its mission—to explore, to seek out life, to represent and defend the Federation.

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The Voyage of the *Monarch*: Consequences of Conscience

C l e v e J o h n s o n

Jovani of the planet Welva entered the transporter room. He bowed to Robert and Janice Stuart, who stood next to the transporter chief at the console. “Are you sure that you will not visit my people, Captain?”

Stuart smiled as he shook his head. “Thank you, but no. I have to get back to Earth to deliver Zar-

Bek to Starfleet, and y ship is in much need of repair.”

“Perhaps we will have a chance to visit your world at a later date,” Jan said. “From what you have told us, I’m sure that we wouldn’t pass up the chance to get to know your world and your people.”

Rob Stuart bowed to Jovani. “I appreciate your offer. We both have several weeks of leave time available.”

Jovani’s infectious smile diminished. “Captain Stuart, I think it is important that your children be born on my world. You may call it...superstition, magic, or divine presence. But I feel that your children each have a destiny to fulfill and Welva as their birthplace is essential to who they will become.” The Welvan placed his hands on Rob’s shoulders. “Please heed what I say, my friend.”

Stuart looked at his wife quizzically, not sure what to say. He turned his face back to look at Jovani. “I’m not sure that will be possible to arrange at this time, Jovani. The *Monarch* will be in drydock for at least two, maybe three months. The babies will be born before we could get back to this area of space.”

“I trust that you will find a way, Captain. Follow your heart.” Jovani bowed once again, turned, and walked toward the transporter chamber. As he stepped up toward the raised circular floor, Elsen Rab rushed into the room. Jovani turned to face his former accuser.

“I’m glad I made it before you beamed down.” Rab stretched out his hand toward the Welvan. “I want to apologize for my behavior when I first met you, Jovani. I don’t know if you can...”

Jovani smiled as he shook the Betazoid's hand. "Of course I can forgive you, Mister Rab."

"Elsen, please."

"Certainly Elsen. I hope our paths will cross again one day." Jovani bowed and stepped up on one of the transport pads. "I am ready."

Rob Stuart nodded to the transporter chief. "Energize."

Rob, Jan, and Elsen walked out of the transporter room together. They silently strolled through the curving corridor until they reached the turbolift. Rob Stuart looked at the first contact specialist as they waited for the turbocar to arrive. "So, Mister Rab, what is next for you?"

"Are you trying to get rid of me, Captain?" Rab smiled as he spoke.

"Not at all," Stuart replied. "I just assumed that you would be reassigned since we will be spending a good deal of time in Earth orbit."

The lift doors slid open and the three stepped inside. "Deck five," Rob said.

"I might be reassigned, but I would not mind staying with this ship. I'm sure you will be sent to another unexplored area of the galaxy where my services might be needed."

Stuart smiled. "I would be glad to have you, but I plan to go back to Enkar when repairs to the ship are completed."

Rab, being a strong telepath, already knew what Stuart planned, although he tried to block out stray thoughts of those around him. "Do you think Starfleet, or the Federation council, will let you go back to attempt another rescue?"

Rob stared at the lift doors, not saying anything for several moments. "I don't know why they wouldn't let me. My mission was to discover what happened to LaSalle's crew and retrieve them. That mission hasn't been completed yet."

Jan, who had previously remained silent during the conversation between Rob and Elsen Rab, placed her hand on Rob's arm. "You're forgetting two magic words, Rob. Where possible."

"Rob continued to stare at the turbolift doors, his face blank. "It's possible."

Rab shook his head. "You have captured Zar-Bek. Do you think you can just walk into the Enkara capital and they'll let you walk back out with our people?"

"I'll set up a trade in a neutral location."

"You're assuming that Starfleet Command will allow it," Jan said. "What if they want to hold on to him, or..."

"Or what, Jan?" Stuart looked at wife with fire in his eyes.

Jan let go of her husband's arm and glared back at him with the same intensity. Her gaze softened as she stared into Rob's eyes. "I'm afraid for you, Rob. I've never seen you like this before."

Rob slowly turned his head to stare at the doors once more. "Like what?"

"You're filled with hatred toward the Enkara, Rob. Especially toward Zar-Bek."

"Don't I have a right to feel as I do?"

"Rob, I can't imagine what you went through on Enkar. I think you need to meet with Counselor Underhill."

"I've met with the counselor...more than once."

"Almost two weeks ago," Jan said. She thought about her next words carefully before uttering them. "I want you to meet at least three days each week with the counselor during our journey back to Earth."

"What if I refuse?"

"I could make it a medical order."

"You could, but I don't think you will."

"Your wife is serious, Captain," Rab stated. "I think you should listen to her."

Rob spun around to face the Betazoid civilian, but stopped himself from saying anything to the other man. Rob turned back toward his wife. "Would you really order me to see the counselor? You know me better than anyone, Jan."

"I thought I did." Jan took her husband's hand in hers. "You have been through a traumatic experience that has impaired your judgment, Rob. You're obsessed with making the Enkara pay for what they did to you and the *Columbus*' crew."

"This isn't about revenge, Jan. It's about getting eight Starfleet engineers back to their homes and families."

Jan wanted to believe her husband, but she had to think of what was best for him, the ship, and Starfleet. "Promise me that you will see Caitlan. And I want you to promise me that you will abide with Starfleet's decision about what to do with Zar-Bek and any decision they make about those eight engineers."

Rob caressed his wife's cheek. "I promise to see the Counselor."

"And what about obeying Starfleet's decision?"

Rob thought for a moment. "That depends on if they make the right decision or not."

"Rob, you know I can relieve you from duty if you keep up this abnormal behavior."

The turbolift stopped and Rob stepped out, turned, and held up his hand. "Would you really relieve me, Jan?"

"If it was in the best interest of the ship and crew, I would."

Rob considered his wife's response to his question. He nodded. "You have learned your lessons well, Jan." With a forced grin, he added, "I never should have to let you take the bridge officer's test." He turned and walked down the corridor toward Counselor Caitlan Underhill's office.

* * *

Five Weeks Later (Stardate 55924.4), 1325 Hours

The U.S.S. *Monarch*, even in its need of repair due to the scars of battle, gracefully approached Earth. It passed swiftly by the moon, and approached the gargantuan spacedock that orbited Earth. The vessel slowed as it entered orbit, passed the spacedock, and drew closer to the framework of the repair drydock facility that was designed for the large *Sovereign*-class starships. The ship slowed even more as it entered between the latticed structures, finally stopping within the metallic web. The docking arm began to extend toward the ship's portside airlock.

Robert Stuart, his wife Janice, and Marcus Grey walked together toward the airlock. "Marcus, I'm leaving you in operational command. Coordinate with Henry and the dock master to get the refit started," Rob said.

"Yes sir." Marcus slowed as the trio neared the hatch. "With your permission, Captain, I would like to grant extended shore leave to all non-essential personnel."

"By all means, Exec. Feel free to rotate the others with seventy-two hour passes as well. They all deserve time off for what they accomplished."

"Yes sir."

"Don't forget to include yourself in that schedule, Commander." Rob gave his first officer a mischievous grin.

"Of course, Captain." Marcus turned and went back toward the turbolift.

Janice took her husband's arm as they stopped a few feet away from the airlock, which was guarded by a marine private. "Caitlan tells me that you have done well dealing with your anger toward the Enkara." She smiled. "I was worried about you for awhile."

Rob patted his wife's hand as he turned to face her. "No need to worry, Jan. The counselor tells

me that what I felt is normal for anyone who goes through that sort of experience." He smiled slightly. "I still think I did the right thing by bringing Zar-Bek back with us. It gives us a bargaining chip."

"Are you sure the Enkara will be open to a trade?"

"Mister Rab thinks so, and so do I. From what I observed, the Enkara almost worship their Supreme Commander. I'm not sure what kind of hold he has over them, or if his leadership is so entwined into their culture that they would not consider doing anything for him."

"Any word from Starfleet Command about capturing Zar-Bek?" Jan's face showed her concern for her husband.

"Not officially, but Uncle Bob sent me a message last week. He said that several of the admirals support my decision, but there are a few who...disagree."

Jan frowned, something that she rarely did. "Are you worried about your career?"

Rob looked away for a moment, and then turned back toward Jan. "Not really. I did what I thought was right...and my conscience is clean. That is more important than my career, if Starfleet wants to make an issue of it. Besides, taking him prisoner was the best possible action to get those eight people safely returned."

"Did Uncle Bob say which admirals you need to worry about?"

"No, but he seemed more concerned about certain members of the Federation Council."

Jan worried even more than a few moments before. "The Council? Who is he concerned about?"

Rob shrugged his shoulders and tilted his head. He wanted to downplay his wife's concern. "He didn't give me specific names, but he did say that he suspected the Vulcans and Betazoids were not happy about it."

"That doesn't sound good. The representatives of both worlds carry persuasive voices in the

Council." Jan stepped away from her husband, still holding his hands in front of her. "And what is your uncle's opinion about all this?"

Rob smiled at his wife and drew her close, leaned forward, and kissed her hands. "He has always trusted my judgment, Jan. You know that."

Jan returned her husband's smile. "Of course I know that, Rob. I want you to know that I'm sorry for what I said to you a few weeks ago."

"Don't fret over that, my love. You said what you had to, and I'm glad you did."

"Glad?"

"You helped me put things in perspective, Jan." Rob paused as he let go of his wife's hands and turned away toward the airlock. He stopped and turned back to face Janice again. "By standing up to me with the truth, you not only showed your strength as an excellent officer, but also your love and dedication as my wife."

"It's a good thing you married me." Jan's smile

broadened, and then her face became serious. "Although she retired several years ago, my mother still has some pull with some of the Council members. Perhaps I could..."

Rob shook his head. "No, Jan. I don't want family involved with this."

"What about Uncle Bob?"

Rob smiled. "He's already involved."

Jan nodded, not surprised by Rob's answer. "Well, I'm sure she would be glad to help if you change your mind." She kissed her husband, aware that the marine private standing nearby tried to look in any direction but theirs. "I need to get back to sickbay, but I will see you when you get back from your meetings with all those admirals."

As Jan walked away, the airlock hatch slid open and the marine standing next to it snapped to attention. A Starfleet lieutenant entered and faced the marine. "I'm Lieutenant Powers. I'm here to see

Captain Stuart. Permission to come aboard.”

“Permission granted sir.”

The lieutenant turned and approached Rob Stuart. He immediately noticed the number of pips on Stuart’s collar. “Captain Stuart, I’m William Powers. Admiral Hathaway asked me to welcome you back to Earth and take you to his office.”

Rob raised his eyebrow at the sight of the insignia on the lieutenant’s uniform. “Why did the admiral send a JAG officer to ferry me to the surface?”

“He thinks you may need my services, sir. I’m a qualified pilot, so I volunteered to fly you to HQ, and I figured it would give us time to talk about what happened.” Lieutenant Powers motioned toward the airlock. “The shuttle is ready if you are, Captain.”

* * *

Starfleet Command, San Francisco, Admiral Hathaway’s Office, 1530 Hours

“Enter.”

The door slid open and Captain Rob Stuart, followed by Lieutenant William Powers, walked into the admiral’s office. Lieutenant Powers was the first to speak. “I brought him just as you asked, Admiral.”

Hathaway quickly approached his nephew and thrust out his hand, which Stuart enthusiastically took into his own, and shook it vigorously. “I’m glad to see you home safe, my boy.”

“Thank you, Uncle Bob.” Rob, not wanting to make a scene in front of Lieutenant Powers, released his uncle’s hand and stepped back. “Lieutenant Powers says you think I need his services.”

Hathaway turned and walked to the window behind his desk, staring out across the city skyline and the bay beyond. He focused his eyes on the historic Golden Gate

Bridge. “Most of the admirals here at Starfleet Command understand, and agree, with your actions. Unfortunately, there are some who do not.” The admiral turned to face his nephew and the lieutenant. “I’m not worried about them. It’s some of those on the Federation Council—Lucius Farnsworth, Tarec Haaltru, and T’Brel—who are the main concern.”

“Why don’t they want to retrieve the rest of those that are still being held prisoner?” Stuart showed his frustration without reservation. He walked over and sat in one of the chairs in front of the admiral’s desk.

Hathaway forced a slight grin. “My boy, they don’t want to risk another war. The Dominion, the Borg, and the Vendoth are still recent events, and our hope for a post-war permanent alliance with the Romulans has faded in the last few months. Starfleet is not back to full strength because of the past decade’s conflicts, and they are just tired of fighting.”

“Uncle, you know that I am a man of peace. I hate war and military conflict, but...” Rob stood up and rested his hands on the desk as he peered into his uncle’s eyes. “...You must understand that I did not take Zar-Bek prisoner to start a war. I took him to secure the release of valuable Starfleet personnel.”

Hathaway sat down in his chair and motioned for Stuart to return to his seat as well. “I do understand, but those who don’t agree with your actions are claiming that what you did is nothing more than a kidnapping. They call it a crime, especially since your prisoner is a planetary leader.” Hathaway leaned back and tapped his index finger on his desk. “Robby, Farnsworth intends to make an example of you.”

“You mean crucify me.” Rob shook his head. “What is Admiral James’ position on this?”

“In his position as CnC, Admiral James needs to stay neutral; but off the record, he’s in

your camp. He has instructed the JAG office to conduct a thorough and fair investigation.”

“That’s where our friend Lieutenant Powers comes in, eh?” Rob gave a head gesture to his rear, where the lieutenant still stood next to the door.

“Yes sir,” Lieutenant Powers said as he began to approach Stuart and Hathaway. He stepped up to Stuart’s side. “A hearing to determine if you should be brought up before a general court martial will be scheduled for next week. I will handle your defense, unless you have any objections, Captain.”

Rob shook his head. “No objections, Lieutenant. Can I assume that you are a decent litigator?”

Powers nodded. “I’ve won about eighty percent of my overall cases. I’ve won half of the ones where I was opposite chair of Lieutenant Commander Harmon, who just happens to be the assigned trial counsel in your case.”

“I liked the eighty percent better.”

Hathaway spoke in defense of the young JAG officer. “Robby, Lieutenant Powers is the only JAG officer that has ever achieved that percentage of wins against Commander Harmon. He’s the best lawyer in the service.”

“I’m hoping to change that perception, Admiral,” Lieutenant Powers said with wry grin. He became more serious. “I want you to know, Captain, that I’m your best chance against Harmon.”

Stuart could not believe that he might actually be in trouble for doing something that he absolutely knew to be right. What had happened to the convictions that the Federation once loudly proclaimed? He strongly believed that there were still absolute rights and absolute wrongs in the universe. And what he did, the decision that he made, was absolutely correct. Why couldn’t the politicians see it? “You say it’s just a hearing, but you’re making me

think that this is already a court martial, Lieutenant.”

“If we don’t beat Harmon during the hearing, it could lead to a court martial, Captain.”

Stuart pondered what the young JAG officer said. “You seem confident in your abilities, Mister Powers. Can you beat Lieutenant Commander Harmon in the courtroom?”

Powers nodded once. “Oh yes sir. He mentored me, taught me everything he knows. For more than three years, I’ve worked with him, both as his second chair and against him. I know how he thinks, Captain.”

“Consequently, he also knows how you think.”

“I said he taught me all he knows, but I also know more than what he has taught me. I’ve had a couple other mentors as well, plus I have learned a few things on my own.”

“Has your entire Starfleet career been in JAG, Lieutenant?”

“Why do you ask, sir?”

“You seem to have a quality, or should I say a cockiness, that I have seen in fighter pilots.”

Powers smiled broadly, trying not to burst into all-out laughter. “As a matter of fact, Captain, I started out flying *Peregrines* during the war.”

“I think I’m in good hands, Lieutenant.” Stuart rose from his chair, stood before the JAG officer, and shook his hand. “One last question.”

“Certainly.”

“Why were you assigned to my case?”

Powers seemed reluctant to answer Stuart’s question at first, but decided to reveal it. “I volunteered, sir. I would rather keep my reasons to myself at this time.”

Stuart nodded. “Very well, Lieutenant.” After a brief pause, Stuart returned to the matter at hand. “Where do we go from here?”

“I need to conduct interviews of the witnesses, especially those who participated in your rescue and

in Zar-Bek’s capture. I plan to talk with Zar-Bek as well.”

“You may want to start with Commander Adams. I understand that the *Providence* is scheduled to head back to the Trilarnex Sector.”

Admiral Hathaway interrupted his nephew. “The *Providence* left orbit this morning, but Commander Adams recorded a statement in case we need it.”

Lieutenant Powers piped in. “I already have sworn depositions from Captain Leeson and Commander LaSalle. I will be interviewing your fellow cellmates from the *Columbus* to establish the conditions that all of you endured during your captivity. If I can convince the judge of how the Enkara planned to use Starfleet personnel for slave labor and for our technological knowledge, then I can show why you felt the need to take Zar-Bek prisoner.”

“As long as you don’t try the temporary insanity plea, I’ll trust you to get me a favorable verdict.”

Stuart shook the lieutenant's hand again.

Powers faced the admiral and snapped to attention. "With your permission, Admiral, I would like to get started with the investigation."

Hathaway nodded. "By all means, Lieutenant."

After the JAG officer exited Hathaway's office, the admiral sat back down behind his desk and let out a heavy sigh. "I'm afraid that I have to temporarily relieve you of command until this business is over."

"Understood. I already placed Commander Grey in operational command of the ship before I came here." Stuart frowned slightly. "Jan will remain onboard and I don't want to be away from her any more than necessary, especially with her pregnancy. Can I still stay on the ship?"

Hathaway thought about his nephew's request. "Well, the ship will be in drydock for two or three

months. As long as your XO is in command, I don't see why not."

"I will finally have a chance to catch up on some reading, and I might even have a chance to enjoy some R&R in the holodeck for a change." Rob tried to hold on to some old fashioned optimism in spite of the circumstances that he found himself.

* * *

"I can't believe that Starfleet is serious about making these charges." Janice Stuart paced erratically back and forth through the living area of her and Rob's quarters. "What kind of nonsense is that?"

Rob held up his hands in a gesture of surrender...or more like a lack of understanding. He tried to calm his wife to no avail. "It's just a hearing, Jan. Starfleet has certain regulations and procedures that have to be followed."

"I know that, Rob, but this...this is idiotic." Jan raised her

hands in frustration. "Your uncle can't do anything?"

"He did. He got me a great defense attorney."

"You shouldn't need a defense attorney, Rob."

The door chime sounded, interrupting Jan's tirade. Rob turned and took a step toward the door. "Come in."

The door swished open and Commander Marcus Grey stepped poked his head into the doorway. "Am I interrupting, Captain?"

"Come in, Marcus."

The first officer entered, allowing the door to slide shut behind him. "I understand that I am to retain command for the duration of this JAG investigation, Captain. I want you to know that the entire crew is backing your position."

Rob smiled at Grey. "Does that include you, Exec?"

"Of course it does, sir. I only hope that this...*travesty*...is put to rest in short order."

"I hope so, too, Commander, but look at the bright side. If the

judge doesn't rule in my favor, you have a good chance of commanding the *Monarch* permanently."

"Don't even joke about that, Rob," Jan chided her husband.

"I agree, Captain." Marcus placed his hand on Rob Stuart's upper arm. "I have no desire to have your command. I would much rather continue as your first officer."

Rob kept his jovial attitude. "Come now, Marcus. Don't you want to command a starship?"

"Yes sir, but I don't want to gain command because of this particular circumstance."

There was silence for several seconds. Rob nodded at his first officer. "Agreed. So, how are the repairs coming?"

Marcus, taking notice of his CO's question, respected Stuart's right to change the subject and transitioned back to ship's business. "The dock master has scheduled repairs to begin at 0800 tomorrow, but Commander Li has

the engineering staff working on several systems already."

"Good. Now, if our CMO would take care of her department," Rob teased as he looked toward his wife. "But that's not for me to say since I'm not currently in command."

Jan glared at her husband momentarily, and then she relaxed and addressed the acting captain. "All ambulatory patients have been transported to Starfleet Medical. Doctor M'Tan has released Lieutenant Commander Thomas back to active duty, but she is scheduled for one hour of daily physical therapy for the next two weeks. I will use the next few weeks to conduct evaluations on my staff and restock medical supplies."

Marcus nodded appreciatively. "I believe you have sickbay well in hand, Doctor. Would you also be willing to stand a couple of shifts per week on the bridge?"

"Of course, Commander, but I would like to be with my husband at his hearing." Jan shot an evil grin

at Rob. "Even if he is a butthead," she said in a lowered, muffled tone.

Marcus struggled to stay straight-faced as Rob tried, unsuccessfully, to mimic a "what did I do" look. "I will make sure that you are free to attend, Doctor." Marcus started for the door, but stopped and turned back to face his CO. "Captain, would you be willing to give me some advice?"

"Absolutely, Marcus. What would you like advice about?"

"Well, in light of current events, I will need an acting first officer until this situation is over." Marcus felt funny about bringing the topic up in front of Stuart, fearing that he would appear weak before his currently former captain. "Although Commander Li is the second officer, and should be the acting first officer while this situation is going on, I am concerned that his duties as chief engineer during the refit will prevent him from functioning effectively in a command role."

“And you are worried that you might offend him if you put an officer with less rank in his place as first officer.” Rob reflectively looked at the floor and back to Marcus. “I suspect that Henry will not have any problems with that since he prefers his engineering duties over command. But even if he does, Marcus, it is your decision to make. You’re the captain.”

Marcus nodded and smiled slightly. “Yes sir. I understand.”

“Why don’t you talk to him?”

“I’ll do that right now, Captain.” Marcus turned and walked out into the corridor. He stopped and turned. “Thank you, sir.”

Rob smiled. “Any time, Marcus. By the way, who do you plan to name as acting first officer?”

“Lieutenant Mills is my first choice, Captain. She can utilize her staff to make repairs and upgrades to the weapons and shields while she focuses on assisting me as my exec.”

Rob nodded. “Good choice, Commander. I’d pick her, too, if I were in your shoes.”

Marcus nodded and turned to walk toward the turbolift as the door to the Stuarts’ quarters closed behind him.

Rob turned to his wife. “He will make a fine captain one day.”

Jan agreed, but her concern was for her husband. “Rob, I don’t understand how you can be so calm about this. Your career might be on the line.”

“I don’t think it’s that bad, Jan. Yes, I *might* lose my command and be assigned a desk job for awhile, but I don’t think they will kick me out of Starfleet.”

“What if you’re demoted?”

Rob’s eyes almost sparkled as he took a few steps toward his wife. “Then you won’t have to call me ‘sir.’”

Jan shook her head as she tried to lash out at Rob’s apparent lack of concern, but she found herself laughing. She knew that Rob was right. Worrying would not

do either of them any good. She hugged him, knowing that she would support him through this crisis no matter what the outcome.

* * *

Lieutenant William Powers had just finished his interview with Corporal Tyree when he decided that he needed a break. Powers entered the ship’s Eleven-forward lounge and made his way toward the bar. He ordered an ale and looked around at the other patrons while he waited for the bartender. The young JAG officer noticed a woman sitting near the large observation windows sipping on a glass filled with dark colored liquid, and realized that he knew her. As soon as the bartender returned with the ale, Powers took it and walked straight toward the young woman. He reached his destination unnoticed and hovered over her. “Is this seat taken?”

Lieutenant Commander Kimberly Thomas, a.k.a. CAG to

her shipmates, looked up. Her mouthed dropped slightly as she recognized the JAG officer. "Will? What are you doing here?"

"Not happy to see me?" William Powers had not seen Thomas for almost three years, not since he had left the fighting 63rd. He had left on good terms, but he was afraid that his presence might bring back painful memories for the woman who now sat in front of him because of their prior relationship.

"No, not at all. I mean...of course I'm happy to see you." Thomas immediately stood and hugged her old friend and former wingman. "Where have you been all this time? Are you still flying *Peregrines*?"

Powers and Thomas both sat down. Powers placed his ale on the table. "I haven't been in a cockpit since right after the war. I'm a JAG lawyer now."

"JAG?" Thomas leaned back in her chair. "I would have never guessed that for you. So why are you here?"

"I'm conducting interviews with some of the crew concerning your captain's abduction of the Enkara leader." Powers saw an immediate change come over his old friend's face. It was as if she looked at him as if he was her enemy, so he decided to clear up her perception. "I'm his defense counsel."

Thomas relaxed. "I was afraid you were the prosecution. So, are you as good in the courtroom as you were in the pilot's seat?"

"Better. In fact, I'm just as good as any other lawyer stationed at Earth...except for one."

"And I bet that one is prosecuting the captain, isn't he?"

Powers' silence confirmed what Thomas suspected.

"It doesn't look good for Stuart, does it?"

Powers smiled at Thomas. "It's only a hearing, Kim. I don't think Captain Stuart will go before a full-blown court martial."

Thomas took Powers' hand in hers and lightly squeezed. "Do whatever you can for him, Will. Captain Stuart is a good man, and he's one of the best starship commanders that I've ever known. I'd hate to see him lose his command over this."

"I'll do my best, Kim." Lieutenant Powers slowly pulled his hand away from Thomas and picked up his glass. He raised it to his mouth and took a quick gulp. After letting the synthehol swish around in his mouth, he swallowed it and set his glass down. "So, I see you've been promoted since I saw you last. Are you still flying fighters?"

Kim nodded. "I'm still with the 63rd. I'm in command, believe it or not."

"I thought the *Raptors* were to be decommissioned after the war."

"With our losses, Starfleet downgraded us to a fighter wing, but kept us together. We flew several escort missions to

safeguard cargo and medical ships providing relief to Cardassian space after the war. We were later assigned to Starbase G-6 until a few months ago. That's when we were attached to the *Monarch*."

"Sounds like you have been busy." Will took another sip of ale. "I thought that I'd miss flying, but I've done well at JAG HQ. I keep up my shuttle flight qualification every six months just in case I ever want to get back into space duty."

Kim looked out toward the stars. She focused on what lay beyond the transparent aluminum windows as if she could see another place, another time. "Do you ever think about...us?" She turned to face Will Powers.

"I have good memories, Kim." Will wanted to reach out to the young woman, but thought better of it. As good as his memories of what he once had with Kim Thomas, he did not think that it was appropriate to rekindle their relationship. They had parted as friends, and he wanted to keep it

that way. "Listen, Kim, I have a few more interviews today, but I'd like to talk with you some more. Can you get some time planet-side for dinner?"

"Sure, Will. The squadron has been granted extended shore leave starting tomorrow. Where do you want to meet?"

"Do you remember that Chinese restaurant near the Academy?"

"The Dragon's Lair. When?"

"Once your captain's hearing is over, I'll contact you. My treat." Will rose to his feet and smiled.

"I'll look forward to it, Will." The CAG returned the JAG officer's smile as she watched him turn to leave the ship's social center.

* * *

Lucius Farnsworth, one of Earth's representatives to the Federation Council, approached the guard stationed outside the door that led to the main cellblock

at the Starfleet Security building located on the outskirts of San Francisco. Farnsworth was accompanied by two men, each dressed in a dark blue suit and wore a small electronic listening device in the right ear. Farnsworth stopped in front of the armed guard and presented an isolinear chip. "I have clearance from the Federation Council to see the Enkara *hostage*." He emphasized the last word, refusing to call Zar-Bek a prisoner. "I wish to speak with him right away."

The guard detached the tricorder from his belt and inserted the chip into it. He quickly scanned the information. "Sir, I will have the prisoner brought to interrogation room A if you will wait there, please. The room is around the corner on the left."

Farnsworth and his aids turned and walked in the direction the guard indicated. Within moments, the trio entered the room and the councilman sat on one side of table that was positioned in the

middle of the room. His aids remained standing, one at his side, the other near the door that they had entered. Farnsworth looked around the small room. He estimated that the dimensions were roughly twenty-five square meters. Two sliding doors were present, the one he entered from the corridor and another on the opposite wall where prisoners used to enter from the cellblock. The room was barren of pictures and any decoration on the walls. The wall color was a bland shade of tan. A mirror, certainly with an observation room behind it, covered most of one of the walls. The carpet was a dark brown and the ceiling echoed the color of the walls.

Farnsworth waited about five minutes before the being he came to see was ushered into the room by two Starfleet security guards. Farnsworth was appalled that Zar-Bek's wrists and legs were shackled. "Remove those," he said to the guards.

"Sorry Councilman, but prisoners must wear shackles when out of the cellblocks."

"I'm giving you a direct order from the Federation Council, crewman." Farnsworth's voice was firm, his anger barely restrained.

The first security guard remained steady, but the second was less experienced and his body visibly began to quake. "With all due respect, sir, I cannot release the prisoner's restraints without orders from the Chief of Starfleet Security's office," the first stated.

Farnsworth's face darkened, but he realized that the young man in front of him was doing his duty. No, the councilman would not take out his anger on the guard. He would have to go straight to the top to get what he wanted. "Very well, crewman. You have your orders, but I do want to speak with Zar-Bek in private."

"Yes sir. I will be on the other side of this door and crewman Hanson will be outside the other one." Hanson, the second guard,

moved toward the other door and exited. "Please use the com panel if you need anything or when you have completed your interrogation."

Farnsworth nodded and the first guard exited the room. Once the door slid shut, the councilman leaned his arms on the table and linked his fingers together as he faced the Enkara, who seated himself. "Zar-Bek, I am Lucius Farnsworth from the United Federation of Planets Council. I apologize for your incarceration, which I plan to remedy as soon as possible."

Zar-Bek remained silent as he stared arrogantly at Farnsworth.

"I want to assure you that your abduction was not sanctioned by the Federation. I hope that you will not hold Captain Stuart's, or Starfleet's, actions against our government or general population."

"What has been done to Captain Stuart? Has he been punished for his actions?" Zar-Bek asked. "What about those who

participated in my abduction? Have they been punished?"

"Captain Stuart has been relieved of his command pending the findings of a legal inquiry, Zar-Bek." Lucius Farnsworth only had one thing in his mind: avoiding another interstellar war. "He alone is responsible for ordering your capture. The others were obligated to follow his orders, so they bear no responsibility." Farnsworth had little use for the military side of Starfleet, and he had even less understanding of Starfleet's regulations or how the service truly operated. "Captain Stuart believed that it was appropriate to kidnap you since you held several of our people captive."

"Your people invaded our space. We had a right to defend ourselves."

Farnsworth held up his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I don't deny you your rights, Zar-Bek, but you misunderstood the purpose of why our people were in your space. They were exploring an

unknown area of the galaxy, not spying. We were not even aware of your people or the boundaries of your claimed space."

"I might have been willing to accept that if it were not for my illegal imprisonment on this alien world."

"I and my associates are diligently working to have you released as soon as we can. Unfortunately, some of my colleagues on the Council do not agree that Captain Stuart performed an act of terrorism against you. My government is not exactly swift in making decisions."

"If this were my world, decision would be made much more swiftly since I am the *only* government there." Zar-Bek bore his teeth. "It is a more efficient way of ruling than yours."

"I did not come to debate our differences, sir. I only want to make it clear that your kidnapping and subsequent incarceration was a mistake that I, and others like me, am trying to correct." Farnsworth

knew that he did not have authority to speak for the entire Federation Council, but he had to be as diplomatic as he could to avoid another war. "I must work within my government's legal system to secure your release and return to your world, Zar-Bek. It would be a gesture of good faith on your part to authorize the release of the remaining Starfleet personnel that are on your world."

"You sound like your Captain Stuart, Councilman Farnsworth." The Enkara leader stood and leaned across the table, glaring into the man's eyes. "His purpose for capturing me was to trade me for the invaders still being held. Is that your goal as well?"

Farnsworth shook his head. "Absolutely not, Zar-Bek. I intend to have you released regardless of whether or not you have our people released. I am just looking for the quickest way to resolve this situation, and securing our people from your world would help me do that."

“The quickest way to resolve this is to let me go back to my world now...with Captain Stuart and all those who helped him kidnap me.”

Farnsworth sighed. “I will do what I can, but it must be in accordance with our laws.”

Zar-Bek walked to the door that separated the room from the cellblock. He pressed the com button and turned back to the council member. “Then nothing else needs to be said until I am released. I hope, for your sake, that your planetary defenses are in good working order.” The door slid open and the Starfleet security guard escorted the alien out of the room.

Farnsworth began to sweat as he rose from his seat and moved toward the exit.

In another room, on the other side of the mirror, two admirals considered what they had just witnessed.

“Zar-Bek is bluffing. According to all reports and logs of both the *Monarch* and the

Trailblazer, Enkara ships are incapable of reaching Earth.”

“But what about the outer worlds and outposts? Those reports also say that Enkara weapons and defensive technology is more than a match for ours.”

“I assigned the bulk of the Fourth Fleet to that area of space two months ago. They are maintaining a constant state of readiness. So is Starbase G-6.” Admiral Hathaway stared at the now empty interrogation room through the one-way mirror. “I’m afraid that Lucius Farnsworth is more dangerous than the Enkara.”

“He seems to want your nephew’s head on a platter, or at least he’s willing to use him as a scapegoat,” the Chief of Starfleet Security said. “What did Robert ever do to deserve Farnsworth’s ire?”

“Nothing. Farnsworth and his cohorts just want an excuse to downsize Starfleet’s military role. People like that are so afraid of getting into another conflict that

they throw reason out the window. They think that weakening our defenses will discourage potential hostile aliens, but that sort of stupidity will only invite would-be conquerors.”

“Like the Enkara.”

“Exactly.”

* * *

One week later...

Lieutenant William Powers walked beside his client Rob Stuart and his wife Janice. They each wore dress white uniforms. They approached the JAG headquarters building where several members of the Monarch crew mingled near the entrance, along with a group of admirals, including Robert Hathaway and Bartholomew James. Three members of the Federation Council also hovered nearby. Of the three, Lucius Farnsworth was the most well known for his strong stance to have Zar-Bek sent back to Enkar

without using him as a bargaining chip to have the Starfleet personnel released.

Farnsworth, followed by Tarec Haaltru of Betazed and T'Brel of Vulcan, approached the Stuarts and Lieutenant Powers. The three officers stopped in the middle of the walkway as Farnsworth and the other two blocked them from proceeding further. Farnsworth stepped forward as the designated spokesperson. "Captain Stuart, I am Lucius Farnsworth of the Federation Council. With me are..."

"I'm aware of who you and your colleagues are, Mister Farnsworth," Stuart said politely. "I assume that you are here to try to convince me to work out a deal."

Farnsworth was surprised by Stuart's candor. "I want you to tell the judge that you were wrong, and that you support the release of Zar-Bek."

Rob raised an eyebrow as he felt Jan's hand begin to squeeze

tightly on his. "Is there anything else, Mister Farnsworth?"

"I also want you to apologize to Zar-Bek and record a statement to be sent to his world that your actions were not authorized by the Federation or by Starfleet."

Lieutenant Powers stepped forward. "Mister Farnsworth, you are trying to coerce my client to go against his conscience. Council member or not, you are out of line and I can charge you with interfering with a JAG investigation."

"Do you know who you are talking to, *Lieutenant*?"

"Do you know that the lieutenant is right and you are out of line, *Lucius*?" Another civilian, along with Admiral Gareth Venkish, the Judge Advocate General, approached. "I will bring you before the Council Ethics Committee if you don't leave Captain Stuart alone," the civilian stated matter-of-fact.

"Just because you are the Secretary of Starfleet, Mohinder, does not mean that you have the right to threaten me." Farnsworth

thought he could bully anyone who got in his way. He was quite mistaken.

"And just because you are on the Federation Council does not mean that you are above the law." The Secretary, who was slightly taller than Lucius Farnsworth, stared down directly into the other man's eyes. "I assure you, Lucius, that the President will be informed of your actions. I strongly suggest that you leave."

"I am due to testify at the captain's hearing."

"Then get you bureaucratic butt in the courtroom. And you better not use this case for your own political gains, Lucius, or you will answer to the Ethics Committee for sure."

Farnsworth and his supporters quickly turned and headed for the entrance to the building.

Mohinder Ramesh Nair faced Rob Stuart. "I apologize for Mister Farnsworth, Captain. He tends to be overzealous about his

pet issues.” Nair turned to face Lieutenant Powers. “Do your best in there, Lieutenant.”

“Aye aye sir.”

The Secretary of Starfleet turned and walked toward the entrance. Lieutenant Powers looked at Stuart, who just smiled. The lieutenant saw that the captain had enjoyed watching Farnsworth make a spectacle of himself, and then get shot down by the Secretary.

“Are you ready, Captain?”

Powers asked.

“Absolutely, Lieutenant. Let’s get this over with.”

Lieutenant Powers led Rob and Jan Stuart toward the JAG headquarters building...and toward Rob’s fate.

* * *

Lieutenant Powers sat calmly next to Captain Stuart as Lieutenant Commander Harmon gave his opening remarks.

“It is the intention of the government to show that Captain

Robert Patrick Stuart knowingly and willingly violated Starfleet General Order Two, which states, ‘No Starfleet personnel shall unnecessarily use force, either collectively or individually, against members of the United Federation of Planets, their duly authorized representatives, spokespersons, or designated leaders, or *members of any sentient non-member race, for any reason whatsoever.*’ It is also the government’s position that Captain Stuart has endangered the United Federation of Planets because of his actions, and he should be brought before a general court martial.”

Lieutenant Powers stood as Commander Harmon returned to his desk and sat down. Powers approached the judge, stopping about halfway between the bench and the defense counsel’s desk. “Your honor, the entire crew of the U.S.S. *Columbus* had been captives of a hostile government to be used as slave labor. Starfleet Command sent Captain Stuart and his crew on a mission to rescue those hostages. In the attempt, Captain Stuart was captured and held hostage himself, but his crew, along with another rescue team, did in fact rescue him and the other Federation hostages. However, eight Starfleet officers and enlisted

personnel are still captives. Captain Stuart determined that the only way to get those other hostages returned was to take Zar-Bek, the leader of Enkar, as a prisoner to later trade for the aforementioned hostages. Captain Stuart did not act out of malice or revenge, and his actions did not endanger the Federation. Captain Stuart did exactly what needed to be done in order to complete his mission, and he has done nothing that warrants court martial.” Powers turned and returned to his chair next to Stuart.

The judge, Commodore Thomas Reinhold, scanned the room, noting that three members of

the Federation Council, the Secretary of Starfleet, and Admiral James, the Starfleet Chief in Command, were present. He also noticed that the Judge Advocate General himself stood at the back of the courtroom. Reinhold knew that the JAG would not try to influence his decision or the proceedings; however, his presence, along with the Secretary and the others’, indicated that this was an important hearing. “Now that opening arguments have been heard, let’s hear the evidence. Mister Harmon, call your first witness.”

Harmon stood and looked to the back of the room. “The

government calls the Honorable Lucius Farnsworth.”

Farnsworth rose and made his way to the witness stand. He raised his hand as Lieutenant Commander Harmon approached him.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth?”

“I do.”

“Please be seated, Mister Farnsworth.” Harmon stepped back a few steps before beginning his questioning. “Sir, what interest do you have in Captain Stuart’s case?”

“I have no personal interest in Captain Stuart’s case; however,

his actions have endangered the Federation by taking the leader of another space faring society. Zar-Bek's imprisonment has brought us to the brink of another war."

"Objection. Mister Farnsworth is offering speculation, not fact."

"Sustained." The judge looked at the council member. "Please stick to the facts, sir."

Harmon resumed his questioning. "Mister Farnsworth, why do you think that Captain Stuart's actions have *hypothetically* brought us to the brink of war?"

"History shows that any attack on a nation's leader will invariably lead to hostilities.

Clearly, Captain Stuart's abduction of Zar-Bek has put the Federation in a position to fight another war that we cannot afford to fight. Starfleet strength is still not back to where it should be after our losses during the Dominion War, two incursions by the Borg, and the Vendoth invasion. We must release Zar-Bek immediately and return him to his planet. Captain Stuart must make a public apology to Zar-Bek and to all the people of Enkar."

Lieutenant Powers stood up. "Objection. Your honor, Councilman Farnsworth is using this hearing to make personal political statements. Zar-Bek's

status as a prisoner, the possibility of his release, and any potential war concerns are not the issue here."

Judge Reinhold nodded as he turned to face Farnsworth. "Sustained. I quite agree. This is hearing to determine if Captain Stuart's actions warrant a court martial, not a campaign meeting."

Reinhold turned to face Lieutenant Commander Harmon. "Commander, do you have any questions for this witness that might result in any *relevance* to this case?"

"Not at this time, your Honor, but I may want to recall this witness at a later time."

“Do you wish to cross examine, Lieutenant Powers?”

“No questions, your honor.”

The judge turned his attention back to Lieutenant Commander Harmon. “Call your next witness, Commander.”

“I would like to call Admiral Bartholomew James to the stand.”

Admiral James approached the stand, turned, and raised his hand. Commander Harmon administered the oath as he had done before with Lucius Farnsworth. The admiral sat down and placed one hand over the other as he awaited Harmon’s questioning to begin.

“Admiral James, please state your current position in Starfleet.”

“I am the CnC of Starfleet.”

“This means that you are well versed in Starfleet general orders.”

“Yes, I suppose it does.”

“In your expert opinion, Admiral, did Captain Stuart violate General Order Two?”

“It could be interpreted that way, but...”

“Thank you, Admiral.” Harmon was not about to let the CnC add information that might go against the point that he, as the prosecution, wanted to make. “Did Starfleet Command send Captain Stuart to Enkar for the purpose of

kidnapping the leader of that world?”

James felt like he was being maneuvered into a wall, and there was nothing that he hated more than being manipulated. What he did not understand was why Lieutenant Powers did not object to the question.

“Admiral?” Harmon tried to push the admiral to answer without much time to think about how to answer.

“Captain Stuart and his crew were sent on a rescue mission, and everyone knows that starship captains are given a wide berth when it comes to making decisions

that result in completing their missions.”

“So he was not ordered to kidnap Zar-Bek?”

The admiral crossed his arms across his chest. “No, he was not.”

Harmon turned and walked toward his seat, allowing himself a grin intended to be seen by Lieutenant Powers. “Thank you, Admiral James. No more questions.”

Lieutenant Powers rose and approached the witness box. “Admiral James, you said that Captain Stuart was not ordered to kidnap the Enkara leader. In fact, neither you nor anyone in Starfleet

even knew of Enkar’s existence. Is that correct?”

“Absolutely.”

“Isn’t it true that starship captains have been trained physically, mentally, and emotionally to undergo intensely stressful situations and still make correct and proper decisions even under those conditions?”

“That is true. Captain Stuart would not have command of a starship without the ability to make the right decisions for the situations that he is faced with.”

“You said that what Captain Stuart did *could be* interpreted as a violation of General Order Two.

Are there other possible interpretations?”

“Of course there are.”

“Do you believe that Captain Stuart acted appropriately?”

“Objection.” Harmon sat stiffly in his chair.

“What would you have done if you had been in the captain’s place?”

“Objection. Calls for speculation.”

“I withdraw the question.”

Admiral James sat up and peered at the judge. “I would like to answer that, your Honor.”

The judge mulled over James’ response. “I’ll allow it.”

"If I was in his situation, I would have done exactly what Captain Stuart did. I would have attempted to capture Zar-Bek to use for a prisoner exchange if I saw no other viable means to recover those eight hostages."

James noticed that Lucius Farnsworth and the other two council members were on their feet. The Vulcan and Betazoid representatives quietly moved toward the exit, but Farnsworth glared at Admiral James, who didn't seem phased by the bureaucrats' responses.

"Admiral, do Starfleet regulations contradict each other?"

"Of course not, Lieutenant. They must work in concert with each other."

"Is it possible that some regulations might *apparently* contradict others?"

"It's possible, I suppose."

"And if there are apparent contradictions in the regulations, which regulation takes precedence?"

"I would need to know what specific regulations were at issue, but it would be typical to consider the most recent regulation as being the most authoritative."

"Thank you, Admiral." Lieutenant Powers faced the judge. "Your Honor, I submit that Captain

Stuart was operating under General Order Twenty-four, which says, 'If a commanding officer deems that an individual or group of individuals pose a threat to Starfleet personnel or Federation civilians, he may take any action deemed necessary (including force) to secure the safety of those threatened.' Admiral James has testified that a more recent regulation has more authority over a previous one if they apparently contradict one another; therefore, Captain Stuart could not have violated General Order Two."

"Objection, your Honor." Lieutenant Commander Harmon was on his feet.

“On what grounds, Commander?” Judge Reinhold stared at the government’s counsel.

Harmon stared back for what seemed like infinitely more than the few seconds that it really was.

“I...withdraw my objection, your Honor.”

“Good. Now do you have any other witnesses for the government, Commander?”

“No, your Honor.”

“Lieutenant, do you have any other witnesses that you wish to call?”

“I have a couple on standby, but I don’t think I will need them to prove that Captain Stuart should not go before a general court martial;

however, I would like to call Captain Stuart to the stand just to show that he did not intentionally put the Federation in any danger of going to war with another power.”

Stuart rose and went to the box. He took the oath and sat down.

“Captain, please tell the court why you took Zar-Bek prisoner.”

Stuart relaxed in the witness box as he began. “My crew rescued me and the *Columbus*’ crew, except for eight engineers.

They had been separated from the rest of the crew prior to my abduction from the *Monarch*. When the rescue team came for us,

we did not know where the engineers were being held, so I decided that the best way to get them back was to take a prisoner of our own to be used later for an exchange. Based on what I learned about the Enkara during my captivity, I realized that the only prisoner that the Enkara would be willing to negotiate for would be their supreme leader.”

“Did you think that your actions might precipitate a war between the Federation and Enkar?”

“Not at all.”

“Do you still maintain that position?”

“Yes I do.”

“Please tell the court why.”

“The Enkara are on the same level, or slightly superior, to the Federation in regard to weapons and defense technology; however, they are at least one hundred fifty years behind us in propulsion. Their ships are incapable of reaching the Federation core worlds without refueling.”

“Would you consider yourself a warmonger?”

“I prefer peace above war any day. I’m an explorer, but I know that there are times that conflicts and misunderstandings can escalate into violence. I don’t like

it, but armed conflict is unavoidable at times.”

“Thank you, Captain Stuart. I have no more questions.”

“Commander Harmon, do you wish to ask the captain anything?”

Harmon approached. “Yes sir. Captain Stuart, if you thought that there might be a possibility that your abduction of Zar-Bek could lead to hostilities between the Federation and Enkar, would you still have taken him prisoner?”

“I did take that into consideration, Commander. I have been trained to keep a cool head and to look at many variables before making decisions. I assure

you that if I thought that Federation planets and citizens would be in danger of retaliation because of Zar-Bek’s imprisonment, I would have sacrificed those engineers. I took the only course possible to give those engineers a chance at coming home one day.”

“No more questions.” Harmon approached the bench as Stuart stood and started back to sit by his counsel. “Your Honor, based on the testimony presented, the government withdraws its recommendation to bring Captain Stuart before a court martial; however, due to the seriousness of his decision to abduct the head of another planet’s government, I

recommend that he be referred to an admiral's mast."

Judge Reinhold stroked his chin. "I tend to agree with the captain's actions in his situation, but I do agree that some form of punishment might be in order for the reason that Lieutenant Commander Harmon has presented."

Lieutenant Powers and Captain Stuart stood at attention, facing the judge.

"Captain Stuart, I am sending you to your commanding officer to dispense any non-judicial punishment that seems appropriate to him."

"Your Honor?"

"Yes Commander Harmon?"

"Should the captain stand admiral's mast before the Chief of Operations?"

"I see what you're getting at, Commander. I know of Admiral Hathaway's family relationship to Captain Stuart, but I am sending the captain to his commanding officer, not the Chief of Operations."

"My mistake, Admiral. I assumed that since Admiral Hathaway issued the orders for Captain Stuart's mission..."

"Please don't assume in my courtroom, Commander. Commander Stuart's direct CO is the CnC of the Fourth Fleet, not Admiral Hathaway."

"Yes sir."

The judge's gavel hit the desk with a loud thud. "This hearing is closed."

Commander Janice Stuart practically jumped out of her seat and hurried to her husband's side. She hugged him as tightly as she could in spite of her swollen abdomen. "I'm relieved, but I don't like the fact that you still may be punished in some way. You might still lose your command."

Robert smiled at his wife. "I'll take whatever Admiral Montoya hands me."

Admiral James and Secretary Nair walked up to Stuart and offered their congratulatory

remarks. James patted Stuart on the back. "Montoya is a fair man, so I don't think you need to worry."

"Thank you, Admiral James."

Stuart turned to face Lieutenant Powers as Admiral James and the secretary walked toward the door at the back of the courtroom. "Lieutenant, thank you. If I ever need a lawyer again, I will definitely look you up."

"My pleasure, Captain."

"One question. Why did you volunteer to take my case?"

Powers remained silent for a few moments before answering. "A little over three years ago, during the Dominion War, you saved your ship from an attack by three

Jem'Hadar. You saved my sister who was a member of the *Republic's* crew."

"Your sister? Allison Powers is your sister?"

"Yes sir. She'll be pleased to know that you still remember her. She had just transferred to your ship a couple weeks before the attack."

Stuart nodded. "Of course I remember her. Fine engineer. She showed promise."

"I'll tell her that, Captain. She's now chief engineer on the *Shran*."

Stuart reached out and shook the young JAG lawyer's

hand. "I'm not surprised. Take care of yourself, Lieutenant."

"You, too, Captain."

Rob and Janice looked around the room, and then at each other. They turned, walking hand in hand, toward the exit.

* * *

The next day, (Stardate 55949.1), 0800 hours

Captain Robert Stuart waited for several seconds before he pressed the com panel. His stomach started to churn. He had not felt like this since receiving his first command.

The door slid open. "Come in, Captain."

Stuart entered Rear Admiral Luis Montoya's office and stood at attention in front of the admiral's

desk. "Captain Robert P. Stuart reporting as ordered, sir."

"Stand easy, Captain." The admiral stood and walked around his desk. He looked over the captain as if inspecting a first year cadet. "So, Judge Reinhold sent you to me for an admiral's mast. You have an excellent record, Captain. I know you, Robert. You did what was right according to your conscience. Unfortunately, there are consequences to following your conscience."

"Understood, Admiral. I am fully prepared to accept any punishment that you hand down."

"You have promise, Robert. I want you to know that I agree with what you did." Montoya walked to the other side of his desk and sat down. "Please, Captain, sit down."

Stuart slowly took the chair opposite the admiral's.

"Robert, you have earned the respect of several people here at Starfleet Command. It has even been suggested that you should be considered to join the admiralty one

day. The first step was for you to command one of the front line starships. The second will be to command a group of starships...or a fleet." Montoya let that last statement sink in. "Captain Stuart, I have received seven letters of recommendation for you. One of them is from Admiral James."

Stuart's eyes lit up. "Admiral James wrote a letter of recommendation for me? I'm honored."

"He suggested that I submit a request for your promotion to the rank of fleet captain, which I have right here." Montoya held up a padd. "Now, I believe you deserve this promotion. Admiral James believes you deserve it. Several others here at HQ, even some members of the Federation Council believe you deserve it; however, there are some who..." He looked down at his steepled hands. "There are some who are like Lucius Farnsworth. Enough said."

That brought a chuckle from Stuart. "Excuse me, Admiral, but

this is not how I imagined an admiral's mast to go."

"Yes, it is unusual. Your punishment is that your promotion will be delayed three months. I believe that is about how long it will take to repair your ship. I think that this incident should blow over by then."

"And what of Zar-Bek?" Stuart did not care what happened to the Enkara leader as long as the last eight hostages would be released.

"Fortunately, most of the Federation Council members do not agree with Farnsworth's position, so Zar-Bek will be used for a prisoner exchange. We sent a subspace message to his world with our terms for his release, and his adjutant agreed. The *Royale*, along with the *Rapier* and the *Victory* as escorts, will leave tomorrow to transport him back to Enkara space."

"I'm glad to hear that, sir."

"I thought you would be. Now back to your promotion and your

next assignment.” Montoya handed Stuart a padd. “Here are the details, which you can read later. In a nutshell, the *Monarch* will be the flagship for the 3rd Exploratory Group, which also consists of two *Ericsson*-class scouts, an *Excelsior*-class, a *Miranda*-class, and your former first officer’s ship.”

“I look forward to that, but I don’t suppose that I could have the *Providence* reassigned to the 3rd as well, can I.”

“Sorry Robert. You can’t keep all your friends close.”

“I understand, Admiral.” Rob understood, but he still longed to have his former crew close by, especially Blake Adams and James Goodman of the *Providence*.

Admiral Montoya stood to indicate the meeting was nearly finished. “In the meantime, Robert, you will spend the next couple of months lecturing at the Academy and working on mission plans for the area of space that you have recently opened up. After that,

Captain Leeson will transport you and Doctor Stuart to Welva as special envoys.”

“Welva?”

“Yes. As you know, the Welvans have petitioned for Federation membership and they specifically asked for you and your wife to be their guests as official Federation representatives.”

“Jovani must have more pull with his government than I thought,” Stuart mused.

“What are you talking about?”

“Jovani, our Welvan guide, told us that it was important that my children be born on his world. I don’t know why, but it’s important to him and his people. I guess he wants to make sure it happens.”

“Well, I leave it up to you to accept their invitation since you have personal misgivings regarding your family.”

“I don’t have any misgivings, sir. I trust Jovani completely.”

“Good. Given Welva’s strategic location in reference to

Enkara space, we need to accommodate our new friends as much as possible.” The admiral offered his hand to Stuart, who stood and shook it vigorously. “Good luck, Captain.”

“Thank you sir.” Stuart nodded and turned to move toward the door as he contemplated his next assignment, knowing that his wife would be relieved that the consequences of his conscience turned out fine in the end.

T h e E n d



To Boldly Go