

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

AFTERMATH

By Alex Rosenzweig, based on a Concept by Bob Vosseller

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9410.27:

The Avenger is en route back to Starbase 29, having completed our general survey of Sector 21775. The last month has been most refreshing. This type of long mission had not been an option for the Avenger and her crew during the years she spent in her erstwhile role as 7th Fleet flagship, a role in which we could not be completely out of touch for an entire month. I am pleased to report that the ship and crew performed well, and that everyone is readjusting to the 'freedom' quite well. I, myself, enjoyed the chance to, as it were, 'stretch my legs', too, and our Communications personnel are quite happy not to have to worry about which of over 25 other starships we didn't hear from this month...and why. It's been good to be back to some straight exploration again."

Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig tapped the switch to turn off the log recorder and leaned back in his chair, exchanging glances with Lt. Commander Klufas in reaction to his comment about Communications. The Communications Chief grinned. It had often been Klufas and his staff that Rosenzweig turned to to unmangle odd transmissions from the far-flung vessels of the 7th Fleet or to try to raise the ones that didn't check in...and didn't have good reason for not checking in.

"Well, Mike, we're almost home."

"Uh-huh," was Klufas' response. Alex turned toward Navigation. "ETA to the Starbase?" he queried.

Lieutenant Graevyn looked up from her station. "About three hours at our present speed, Admiral," Sasha reported.

"Thank you, Lieutenant." The ship's Commanding Officer swiveled back toward Communications. "Mike, please hail the starbase. Advise Commodore Johnson that we're inbound and about three hours away."

"Yes, sir." Klufas turned his attention to his console. A few moments later, he swung around to face the center of the bridge. "Admiral, I can't raise them."

"What?" Rosenzweig came to his feet and strode over to the railing between Communications and the lower, central portion of the bridge. "Try again."

Klufas nodded and swung back to the controls. A minute passed, then another, then a third. Alex clamped his mouth shut, not wanting to unduly pressure the Communications Chief. He was, however, growing concerned. Federation starbases, especially the large ones that served as headquarters for the various subfleets around the Federation, were not supposed to go silent. Indeed, they were the ones that were supposed to be ready to scramble if the starships screamed for help.

"Still no response, Admiral," Klufas reported, masking his concern in a more military formality than was typical of him. "I'm not even getting a sense that their equipment is on-line. There're no recognition response codes, no carrier bouncebacks, no—"

"I get the picture, Commander."

The turbo-lift doors slid open, and Commander Carlos Maldonado Jr., the ship's Executive Officer, stepped onto the bridge. It

took only a glance at the concerned expressions on both Alex's and Mike's faces for him to realize something was up. The exec stepped down next to Rosenzweig's command chair and softly asked, "What's wrong?"

"We're getting no response from Starbase 29," Alex told him.

"That's not good," Carlos replied. "In fact, that's very bad."

"Correct," the Admiral responded.

"Is there any reason that the base might be operating silent?" Maldonado asked.

"If there is," commented Klufas, "there weren't any updates we received."

"They wouldn't have known where we were until now," Rosenzweig pointed out.

"Then anything that might have come up would have done so in the last four weeks," concluded Maldonado.

"We're just speculating in the dark," said Alex, "until we can get more information. The base is still out of sensor range. Let's just get there as quickly as possible. Mike, keep trying to raise them." He returned to his chair and settled back into it, facing forward. "Mr. Toland," he said to the Helm Officer, "increase our speed to warp factor six." He turned to face the Sciences station. "Mr. Ciufu, keep the sensors ready. As soon as you get some information, let me know."

"Aye, sir," the Chief Science Officer responded.

As Toland responded to his orders, the crew heard the rising hum as the increased energy running to the main engines translated through the ship. Toland reported the increase in speed, and the Avenger flashed through space toward the starbase.

Reaching the star system in which Starbase 29 was located, the Avenger dropped out of warp and angled toward the fourth planet. Starbase 29 was constructed, in the manner of most of the earlier bases, primarily on the planet's surface. It did, however, have an extensive orbital support network, including a dockyard complex and three stations, including both an administrative and a science facility. As the ship approached the planet, however, a stunned silence took hold on the bridge. Although there were a number of ships in orbit, the starbase's facilities were...a mess. Two of the three space stations were hulled in multiple places. One of the drydocks was bent at an odd angle, girders warped and twisted. As the ship made orbit and scanned the base itself, they observed a scene of devastation. Demolished buildings, crippled power systems, obliterated communications towers... It was more than clear why the base had not responded earlier to their hails.

"Oh, my gods," Rosenzweig said. He exchanged glances with Maldonado, whose expression bore mute testament to his horror.

"What happened here?" the exec muttered.

"Romulan attack?" suggested Klufas.

"It'd have to have been one major attack," commented Toland.

"Admiral," said Ciufu, "we're tracking three perimeter action ships coming 'round the planet. On visual." The main viewer shifted

to show a trio of Akyazi-class starships coming in over the limb of the planet.

Also coming into view were a number of other ships: cruisers, transports, and other craft involved in what was clearly a cleanup operation. Although many were craft not normally assigned to the 7th Fleet, Rosenzweig recognized the Wolf—distinctive as one of a comparatively few Lagrange-class heavy transports—as well as the destroyer Justice and the frigate Endurance. While shuttles flitted back and forth to the Wolf and the Endurance, the Justice held a higher orbit, facing out into space, rather than down toward the planet. Ciufu reported detecting active sensor sweeps being run by the destroyer.

Alex swiveled toward Communications. “Mike, hail the Justice.”

“Aye, sir,” Klufas responded, and leaned in to speak softly into his console pickup. A moment later, he glanced back toward the center seat. “Sir, I have Captain Tunis.”

“Good. Put him on viewer.”

The main viewer shifted from a view of the on-orbit activity to a shot of the Justice's bridge, with Captain Tunis sitting alertly in his command chair. He smiled as Rosenzweig's image came up on his viewer.

“Admiral, it's good to see you again, sir.”

“Hi, Ed. Good to see you, too.” Rosenzweig cut short the small talk, and leaned forward. “Ed, what the hell happened here?”

“The base was attacked,” Tunis replied. Rosenzweig stiffened in his chair. “It wasn't a military strike by anyone we know,” Ed went on hurriedly. “Bob said it was some kind of energy creature.” “What?!”

“Remember the story that circulated about five years ago about the Enterprise-A going into the Great Barrier?”

“Yes.”

“They supposedly found this planet on a direct line toward the Galactic Center?”

“Yes,” Alex went on, “and found an energy being trapped there. They destroyed it, with the help of a Klingon Bird of Prey called the...Okrona, I think.”

“Captain Klaa's ship,” Tunis agreed. He paused. “Well... They didn't quite destroy the creature.”

Rosenzweig noticed that Tunis now had both Maldonado's and Ciufu's attention, in addition to his own. “Ed, what are you talking about?”

“You know about the New Horizons, right?”

“The new explorer that's undergoing trials? Assigned to the 7th Fleet instead of the Orion.”

“Yep,” said Tunis. “Well, it seems the ship was operating in the vicinity of the pseudo-Sha Ka Ree, and made an...interesting little discovery.”

“The creature.”

“Uh-huh. It promptly took over the ship, and directed the crew to bring it back to a Federation base.”

“And they did.”

“Right again. Now I don't have all the details—we weren't on hand for this situation, either—but if I understood Bob right, the creature promptly tried to take over the base.”

“Well, if I know Barry Johnson, he wasn't about to let *that* happen.” Commodore Johnson was, or at least had been, the CO of Starbase 29.

“He didn't. He led, from what I understand, one helluva resistance. In the end, the creature couldn't get what it wanted. Then it

had a temper tantrum. That's when most of the damage was done. It was forced to flee when a task force showed up with Bob at the head of it. They caught and destroyed the creature.”

“How—?” started Alex, but Ed shook his head.

“Bob didn't give me the details. He ordered us to stay on patrol in this sector, in case some ne'er-do-wells decide to...take advantage of the situation.”

“Wise move. Where is Commodore Johnson?”

“He was hurt pretty badly in the battle with the creature. They moved him to Starbase 27 to recuperate.”

“Damn. Has his family been notified?”

Tunis nodded. “Yes. Most of them are either at Starbase 27 now or are on their way. Only his son can't get to him right now.”

“Hathaway's otherwise tied up?”

“Right.”

“Okay. Where's Bob right now?”

“Starbase 7.”

“Starbase 7. Not 27?”

“No, sir.” Somehow, Tunis seemed just a little more formal. “Starbase 7...zero-seven.”

“But that's over 200 parsecs from here. Why in the worlds would he be there?”

“He said something about Star Fleet deciding to re-homeport the 7th Fleet.” Rosenzweig shook his head frustratedly. What the hell was Star Fleet up to? With tensions high with the Rihannsu, and a watchful eye needed to ensure that Klingons opposed to the détente with the Federation didn't try anything unfortunate, moving the 7th Fleet to the other side of the Federation made no sense...unless there was something *else* going on that Alex hadn't heard about during their deep space run.

“Did he say why?” Alex asked.

Tunis shook his head. “No. I don't get it, either, but you know how Star Fleet Command can be sometimes.”

“Yes, I do. Okay. Thanks for the information, Ed. I have a certain Fleet Captain to contact. Avenger out.”

“Don't ream him out too badly, Admiral,” Tunis said, just a hint of a smile crossing his countenance. “I don't think this whole thing was *completely* his idea.”

“Noted,” Rosenzweig said. “Take care.”

“Justice out,” Tunis responded. The viewer blanked, then returned to an image of the space near the Avenger.

“Somebody's not makin' any sense,” Rosenzweig said emphatically. “Re-homeporting the 7th Fleet is not a good idea.” He swung to face Communications. “Mr. Klufas, contact Fleet Captain Vosseller, either at Starbase 7 or aboard the Challenger.”

Klufas nodded. “Aye, sir.” It took a bit of time before Vosseller could be tracked down, but eventually Klufas accomplished it. The image that lit showed Fleet Captain Robert Vosseller, seated in what looked the Base Commander's office on Starbase 7. With him was the starbase's CO, an Andorian officer whom Rosenzweig didn't know, wearing Commodore's insignia on his jacket. Vosseller leaned forward, his eyes going to what was obviously the location of the office viewer.

“We're receiving you, Avenger. Welcome back. I only wish the circumstances could be better.”

“Thanks, Bob, and agreed.” Alex exchanged a glance with Carlos, then fixed his gaze on the main viewer. “Captain, just what the *hell* happened?”

Vosseller paused. “Have you spoken to anyone at Starbase 29?”

"You mean any of the ships in the clean-up crew?" Bob nodded. "I spoke to Ed. He gave me what he knew, but indicated that there was more."

"Actually, there is."

"Well...?" Alex paused, reminding himself that even though he outranked Vosseller by several grades, Bob was the man in charge of the 7th Fleet now. He had to be allowed the freedom to handle that responsibility as he saw fit.

Bob, actually, was trying to decide whether to be straightforward over an open channel, or keep some things secret for a while longer from an agitated Vice Admiral. Secrecy won out. "Admiral," he said formally, "I can't tell you everything right now."

"And why not?" Alex was not amused.

"Transmissions from your location aren't secure. We're concerned that one or more hostile powers may be monitoring transmissions in the vicinity of Starbase 29, trying to determine what advantage they can take of this emergency. That's one reason we have so many ships at Starbase 29 right now, to ensure that no one will *try* to take such advantage."

Rosenzweig nodded tersely. "I understand."

"Can you report to Starbase 7 post-haste? Once you get here, I can brief you in full."

"Of course. We should be there by tomorrow."

"Good. In the meantime, I'm overflowing with things to do here, so I'd better cut this short. We'll talk when you get here. Starbase 7 out."

"Avenger out," Rosenzweig responded.

Early the following day, the Avenger slipped into orbit around Starbase 7. Near one of that base's orbiting stations, the bridge personnel saw the Challenger, Thagard, and Lexington orbiting, the science vessel nestled between the two Enterprise-class ships. Maldonado, in the center seat, tapped the chair-arm intercom control. "Bridge to Vice Admiral Rosenzweig."

"Rosenzweig here," Alex responded. He was in his ready room, organizing the mission reports for transmission to Vosseller. Bob would subsequently combine them into a master performance report for the 7th Fleet and send that to Fleet HQ and the fleet homeport.

"We've arrived in orbit around Starbase 7, Admiral," the Executive Officer reported.

"Good. Thanks, Carlos. I'll be out in a moment." Alex tapped off his intercom switch and looked up at Wonder. The bronze fire-lizard gazed intently at him, and Alex smiled, sensing the question in Wonder's gaze. "I'm sorry, Wonder. I'm going onto the bridge, so you can't come right now. Sometime soon, I'll call another exception-day, and you and the other fire-lizards can come to work with us. Meanwhile, why don't you go play for a while? Just don't—" and he wagged his finger at the fire-lizard "—get into mischief." Wonder chirped brightly, then leaped up from the desk and vanished. Alex smiled, then got up from his desk and walked out of the ready room.

A moment later, he'd stepped off the turbo-lift and onto the bridge itself. "Admiral on the bridge," announced Lt. Commander Csuti, but Rosenzweig waved them all off.

"As you were," he said. Stepping down into the center of the bridge, he nodded to Lieutenant J.G. Toland and Lieutenant Graevyn, who were at the Helm and Navigation stations this watch. Maldonado slipped out of the command chair, surrendering it to the CO. Alex settled into the chair and glanced around the bridge.

Lt. Commander Csuti was seated at Mission Ops 2, while Lt. Commander Wilson was at Mission Ops 1. Commander Fillmore stood by the Master Situation station, the Second Officer having decided after the previous day's briefing that he wanted to be there to hear first-hand what Fleet Captain Vosseller had to say. Commander Padovan was at the Engineering station. In fact, the only two division chiefs not on the bridge were Dr. Fillmore and Lt. Commander Klufas. Lieutenant J.G. Rhea was at the Communications station, while Klufas was in the Communications Center two decks below the bridge. Rosenzweig's roving glance finally settled on Rhea. "Lieutenant, please hail the Challenger."

"Yes, sir." The Bajoran Communications Officer ran practiced fingers in an arpeggio across her console, glancing up at a pair of status displays at eye-level above the panel. A moment later, she said, "Admiral, the Challenger is responding. I have their Communications Chief."

"On viewer, please," Rosenzweig requested.

"Yes, sir." Rhea hit another control, and the main viewer image changed to that of the Challenger's main bridge, viewed from a pickup at the Communications station. There was a blonde woman centered in the image, smiling into the pickup.

"Lt. Commander Francen," Alex greeted her. "How are you?"

"Not bad," Francen replied. "Looking for Fleet Captain Vosseller?"

"Actually, yes," the Vice Admiral responded dryly.

The Challenger's Chief of Communications nodded. "He's down on the base, in conference with the Commodore, Captain Hanford, and Captain German. If you folks can hold tight for a few minutes, we'll give a call down there and see if we can't find him for you."

"Thank you; we'd appreciate it," Alex told her. "Just have him signal the Avenger."

"Aye, sir," Francen replied. The transmission was cut.

The Avenger officers looked at one another. "It's obviously something pretty big they're contemplating," Fillmore opined, "if Bob's gone into conference with the base commander *and* two ship COs."

"You got that right," Maldonado replied.

"Admiral, I have a hail from the base," interjected Rhea. It turned out that it was the starbase's commander, Commodore Threll A'von. Francen had indeed transmitted the message to the starbase, and the Commodore, rather than disrupt the meeting by dragging Vosseller out, instead excused himself and returned the call. He invited Rosenzweig to come to the base and join them. The Vice Admiral quickly accepted. As Threll signed off, Alex swiveled to face Carlos and Bob.

"Gentlemen, I will brief you as soon as I know what's going on myself." He stood. "Carlos, the con is yours."

Rosenzweig materialized on the transporter platform in the Base Commander's outer office. Threll's aide directed him to the briefing lounge, where Alex joined the four senior officers.

"Welcome, Vice Admiral," said the Andorian Commodore smoothly. The others nodded.

"Thank you," Alex said as he settled into a chair. "I hope I'm not disrupting things too much."

"We were mostly waiting for you," said Vosseller, just a hint of a smile crossing his face. Alex went to look at his wrist chrono.

"Oh, no," said German. "He's teasing you; you were on-time." She shot a look Vosseller's way. On several occasions, he and the Challenger had not been, although Vosseller proclaimed that it

wasn't as bad as the scuttlebutt made it out to be. Vosseller bristled just slightly, but he saw Sashi's expression and realized that he, too, was being teased.

Vosseller sighed. Then he turned his attention back to Rosenzweig. "Alex, are you familiar with the U.S.S. New Horizons?"

"I know she's an exploratory cruiser, just recently built. I know she's been on trial runs. And I know from Ed that she got too close to pseudo-Sha Ka Ree and the energy creature, which wasn't quite as destroyed as we thought, took it over."

"Pretty much accurate. Captain Stratus didn't have any reason to believe the creature was still there, and decided to test her ship's shields by making a run through the Great Barrier surrounding that sector." Vosseller shook his head. "Well, they got through just fine; some of the information garnered by the Enterprise went straight into new shield technology. So they come into orbit around the planet and decide to just have a little look-see."

"And all hell broke loose," interjected Hanford.

"Funny you should put it that way," said Vosseller. "But essentially right."

"So what happened?"

Vosseller looked directly at Rosenzweig. "Did you read the log-releases from the Enterprise?" Alex nodded, and Bob continued.

"As far as we can tell, Captain Stratus brought the New Horizons close enough that the creature was able to join with it, making the mistake that Kirk avoided when they were there. The creature had apparently been rendered only temporarily inactive by the Enterprise's torpedoes and Okrona's disruptors. And with the opportunity to escape dangled in front of it, then taken away..."

"It was *real* pissed off," commented German.

"Uh-huh," Vosseller affirmed. "It wasted no time at all in joining with the New Horizons, apparently blending itself with the actual physical structure of the ship."

"Wait...you mean like that creature the Enterprise found at Questar M17 back in '69?" asked Hanford.

"Yes," said Vosseller.

"Now there's something I hadn't thought of. Could those two creatures have been of the same...race?" wondered Rosenzweig.

"Interesting thought," said Threll.

"They seem at least similar," German added thoughtfully, "but the creature at Questar didn't seem telepathic..."

"Well," Vosseller went on, before the discussion could drift completely onto a tangent, "once the creature had joined with the ship, it demanded to be taken away from the planet. Apparently it was unable to penetrate the Barrier on its own."

"What does god need with a starship?" Rosenzweig said softly, recalling the logs' recounting of the question a suspicious Jim Kirk had asked the creature.

"Just so," said German.

"At first Captain Stratus refused," Vosseller explained, "but she finally relented when the creature threatened to kill the ship's crew one by one until his demand was met. They went back through the Barrier, and the creature ordered them to bring the ship to a command base. So, they went to Starbase 29. Stratus was obviously hoping that a fully-equipped starbase would be too powerful to be overwhelmed. Once they got there, the creature promptly tried to take control of the base."

"That'd be a bit more difficult than taking over a ship," commented Rosenzweig.

"Master of understatement..." muttered Hanford. Alex shot him a sardonic grin.

"Realizing that it couldn't manage a takeover so easily, it started making threats." Vosseller sighed softly. "Having the powerful weapons of a starship at hand, as well as a crew to hold hostage, made threats easier. However, the base's crew just wasn't acceding to the creature's demands."

"I'd've been surprised if Commodore Johnson had," Rosenzweig supplied. "He's the type who takes no guff."

Vosseller nodded. "And he didn't. The creature got frustrated and started lashing out, both directly and using the weapons on the New Horizons. The base's crew fought back hard, but ultimately a lot of the base was destroyed." He shrugged. "The Corps of Engineers says it'll take a few years before it's rebuilt enough to put back on-line."

"It was one helluva mess," Alex said frustratedly.

Bob nodded. "Uh-huh. Anyway, the base sent out a distress call, naturally, and we scrambled a task force in response. I took Challenger in, along with the Wolf, Endurance, Raptor, Sovereign, Lexington, and Triton. Unfortunately, the nearest ship—the Endurance—was nearly an hour away. By the time we all rendezvoused, all we could do was pick up the pieces. To make things worse, the creature had taken the New Horizons and her crew, and was still on the loose. So we went after them.

"Meanwhile, Stratus had finally managed to get into the ship's systems while the creature was distracted, and figured out how to grab it with a transporter beam. Unfortunately, it didn't stay distracted long enough for her to carry out the plan. That is," and Vosseller grinned briefly, "until the task force showed up. With seven starships corralling the New Horizons, the creature didn't have much hope of getting any farther."

"It was not happy," Hanford put in. "Trying to get close enough to the New Horizons without getting shot at was rather interesting, I will say."

"It was at that point that Stratus and the Transporter Chief finally got the drop on the creature." The Challenger's CO was not about to let control of this story get away from him. "They beamed it out into space, then backed away at high impulse speed to make sure it couldn't get right back aboard. Then the Challenger, Wolf, Sovereign, and Raptor swept in around the creature and used our tractor beams to create an energy snare of sorts to trap it."

"Once you had it trapped, what did you do with it?" asked German. She hadn't heard the details of this part.

"We had a couple of choices," explained Vosseller.

"You had three," Hanford opined.

Bob nodded. "Three, then. We could let it go. We could destroy it. Or we could drag it back to 'Sha Ka Ree'. We ended up destroying it, because the first option was unacceptable and the third was infeasible." He looked at Alex and Sashi. "And I don't want to hear a *thing* about unwarranted destruction of alien life..."

Alex put up his hands. "Not from me. The record's perfectly clear, as far as I'm concerned. This thing wasn't misunderstood. It was nasty." German nodded in agreement.

"Thank you," said Vosseller.

"So how did you destroy it?" asked Rosenzweig.

"The creature was composed of coherent energy," explained Vosseller. "Once we had it caged, we set up a harmonic resonance in our tractor beams which disrupted the creature's structure. In effect, we tore it apart."

"Shame the Enterprise didn't try that," said Hanford. "It would've saved us a lot of trouble."

"You'd need at least three ships to do it," Rosenzweig replied, "if I understand Bob's explanation correctly. The Enterprise and Okrona wouldn't have been enough."

"Exactly," said Vosseller.

"So that covers what happened to Starbase 29 and the New Horizons. But why is the 7th Fleet being re-homeported over here?" He nodded to the starbase's CO. "No offense, Commodore Threll, but Starbase 7 *is* more than halfway across the Federation."

"None taken, Admiral," said the Base Commander in the typically-soft Andorian accent. He and Vosseller proceeded to explain that Star Fleet Command was in the midst of a general strategic review of Fleet deployment. While the Klingon and Rihannsu borders still bore watching, Star Fleet HQ was increasingly concerned about the activities of the Cardassians. Federation/Cardassian relations were still rather tenuous, although Cardassians were increasingly being seen in the Federation borderspaces nearest their territory. A few had, over the past decade or so, even made it as far as the UFP heartworlds, including one Cardassian poet who had taken up residence on Vulcan after being exiled from Cardassia. What little was known indicated that the Cardassians had a strong martial society, with a decided leaning toward totalitarianism. Since, in recent months, their activities had picked up near Federation territory, Star Fleet Command was watchful. Command also believed that, if relations became hostile, the Cardassians could be a potent threat. HQ was therefore redirecting additional resources toward that side of the Federation. Even so, Starbase 7 was hardly on the frontier, and from its location deeper in Federation space, most ships of the 7th Fleet would, at needs, be able to get to any UFP border in a reasonable time.

"Anyway," Vosseller pointed out, "most of the time, the fleets are spread out all over the place to begin with." Rosenzweig agreed.

"Meanwhile," Threll stated, "Starbase 29 will be rebuilt. It's location is still a strategically important one. We're going to need a base there. Star Fleet has moved quickly to request funding for the reconstruction, and there's every reason to believe the Federation Council and Supreme Assembly will go along."

The briefing concluded soon afterward. As the group began to break up, Vosseller motioned to Rosenzweig. "Alex, can I speak to you for a few minutes?"

"Sure, Bob." Rosenzweig followed Vosseller out into the corridor and down to a small lounge situated in a side gallery. They sat down in a pair of comfortable chairs. Vosseller touched a control that Rosenzweig hadn't even noticed, and a soft click indicated that the door had locked. Evidently Bob had used this room before.

With a sigh, Bob looked at Alex and shrugged. "Been...interesting while you were away."

"Interesting. Yeah, you could say that." Alex gave the Fleet Captain a lopsided grin. "Y'know, Bob," he teased. "After more than six and a half years, I leave command of the 7th Fleet to you, go away for a month, and...you lose the whole homeport." He gave a deep, melodramatic, exaggerated sigh.

Vosseller, proving he could give as good as he got, teased back. "You knew something was gonna happen! You *knew!* So *you* left, and you left *me* holding the bag!"

Then both men grew serious. They knew this had nothing to do with either of them, and there was really nothing either could have done to prevent it. Bob shrugged.

"Alex, I will honestly say that it was a *big* surprise to see the New Horizons come back about a week early from what was supposed to be a proving run under alien control. When Starbase 29 first picked them up on the long-range sensors, everybody thought they'd had some sort of systems failure and needed some more dock-time to get everything properly in tune. And that creature had figured out how to mask itself within the ship's normal operating fields, so it wasn't until it started making demands that anyone even realized it was there. It didn't help that no one imagined they should be looking for it." He looked at Alex. "Did you always find yourself having to worry about this sort of thing?"

"Well," said the Vice Admiral, "I generally didn't have to get used to the idea of strange energy aliens with nasty dispositions taking over our ships...and I suspect you won't have to, either. It's not something that happens very often. But, yes, you do spend a lot of time worrying about a lot more than a single ship and crew. I had our Communications people constantly sorting through transmissions from all sorts of 7th Fleet ships, everything from special conferences to regular telemetry dumps. It does take a lot of energy and focus. And if that's not enough, you quickly get used to watching all the political maneuvering in upper echelons, let alone the politics between Federation member worlds or even our..." he paused, looking for the right word, "...antagonists."

"Antagonists," said Bob. "Diplomatic way of putting it. There's trouble out there. The Cardassians are worrying me."

"How so?" asked Alex.

"I've been watching them," Bob said frankly. "They're an aggressive people, and their recent activities have *looked* aggressive. For the moment, they seem to be trying to stay out of the Federation's way, and vice versa. But that's not going to last. The Federation is expanding in that direction, where there's less to block growth. Let's face it, with both the Klingons and Romulans on the other side, we'll naturally tend to follow the path of least resistance."

"Of course," Alex replied.

"And we're going to run into the Cardassians," Bob went on. "From watching their...style, and studying what Intel has on them—which isn't much, I'm rather worried that all is not likely to be sweetness and light when we do."

"You may be right," Alex said. "Bob, I can tell you at this point, I've seen most of what Intelligence does have. Stephen Buonocore is keeping me in the loop, and in my new role as a Field Operative for Fleet Ops, I expect to see quite a bit more as we get it. I'll be honest, though. Based on what I've seen and read so far, I'm still a lot more concerned about the devils we do know." At Bob's questioning look, Alex continued. "There's still a lot of uncertainty in the Klingon Empire. Whole families are outright opposed to the détente with the Federation, and are busy fomenting insurrection. With the reduction of resource expenditure on the military, the Empire is losing some control over its weapons stores, and a vigorous black market has sprung up through Klingon space. And then there are the Rihannsu." Bob shot a look at Alex. The Vice Admiral was comparatively unusual in his insistence on using the Romulans' proper race name for themselves. Even the Rihannsu had a tendency to use the Federation terms for themselves and their worlds when around Federation people. But Alex insisted on using the true terms, for two reasons, as he'd explained to Bob on a few occasions. First, it was a mark of respect, in essence the antithesis of the Klingons' use of the Federation terms as a way of insulting the Rihannsu. Secondly, it was a strategic stance. To the

Rihannsu, names had power. If one knew your name, that person had a certain measure of power over you that did not exist for one who did not know your name. Alex was, in a subtle way, asserting a sense of power. "The Rihannsu," Alex continued, "are still not happy. They don't like the détente, they don't like the treaties, and they don't at all like the idea that they could find themselves opposing an alliance of the Federation and Klingon Empire. They've already tried a couple of times to disrupt the détente, and I expect they will continue to do so. We have to watch them."

"So it could be a...two-front war," Bob said, not liking at all where that thought led.

"Star Fleet has to be careful not to 'redirect' resources too precipitously." Alex paused again, as if weighing what he was allowed to say. "I knew, of course, about the strategic review. It's being done at the behest of the Military Staff Committee, because Star Fleet hasn't done this kind of general review in about five years and the galaxy is changing."

"That's no lie," Bob responded. "I wonder what will come of all this?"

"I wish I knew," Alex answered earnestly. "All I can recommend to you is to stay flexible in your command of the 7th Fleet. Depending on what Star Fleet Command decides to do, it may change in ways that neither you nor I could even imagine right now. Or it might not. We simply don't know. Let's face it; I wouldn't have predicted that one of the first things that would happen after I left the post you're in now would've been that the fleet would be re-homeported at Starbase 7." The Admiral shrugged.

Bob nodded. "I wouldn't have guessed it, either. I'll keep that in mind." He looked at his wrist chrono. "Time flies." He looked up at Alex, shaking his head just slightly. "I have to get back to the Challenger. I'm sure there'll be some new crisis to deal with." Alex nodded sagely, and stood up. Bob released the door-lock, and both men left the lounge.

Vosseller hurried off toward the transporter complex. Rosenzweig watched him go for a moment, then turned and headed for the base's main Operations Center. He knew that Ops would have a broad overview of what was happening around the Fleet, and he assumed further that the Avenger's next orders would await him there, as well. Oh, he could've picked them up from the ship, as Bob planned to do on Challenger, but the Admiral wanted to see Starbase 7's Ops. It had been a long time since he'd been there.

As he walked down the wide starbase corridors toward the Operations Center, Rosenzweig heard his name being called. As he turned to locate the source of the call, Captain German came striding up alongside him.

"Hello, Admiral," she said cheerfully. German was one of the most cheerful human beings Alex knew.

"Hi, Sashi," he replied, returning her smile. "How's everything aboard the Thagard?"

"Well, if you don't count having your entire schedule thrown off 'cause something's blown up your primary starbase, pretty good. We've been doing a series of system surveys in the Narvel Cluster."

Rosenzweig nodded. "Find anything interesting?"

"Could be. We need to do a follow-up survey at UFC-7413. The third planet has some very interesting interrelationships between certain geological structures and the life-forms that inhabit the areas around those structures. They're not unheard-of, but they are unusual and haven't been well-cataloged."

"Hmm... Intriguing."

"The crew's keeping busy. The science teams couldn't be happier. Even the astronomy and astrophysics gang are studying some interesting planetary dynamics issues in a couple of the systems we've been to. And when you add in the fact that the average distance between stars is only about a parsec in the cluster, there're are a few really unique aspects to be studied." She leaned closer to Alex and lowered her voice. "We think we may even have found an example of Hoyle's Life-Migration Theory." Alex raised an eyebrow at her. Instances that adhered to Hoyle's Theory—which suggested that life spread through the carrying of spores, DNA-bearing microorganisms, or similar forms on asteroids or comets, which eventually impacted on potentially-suitable planets—were quite uncommon. However, they were occasionally observed in clusters like Narvel, where stars were closer together than in the galaxy at large.

"Let me know what you find out," Alex told her. "It sounds fascinating."

"I'll send you copies of the reports," Sashi promised.

Alex asked after Lt. Commander Green, who had transferred from the Avenger to the Thagard about two and a half months earlier. Sashi looked at him curiously. "You didn't hear?" she asked.

"Hear what?" Alex looked back with equal curiosity.

"I guess you didn't. Rhonda transferred again after only about six weeks on the Thagard. She wound up on the Medallion. It was apparently a better offer than being the Thagard's only full-time linguist."

Alex shook his head and smiled. "Well, wherever she winds up, I hope she's happy. What did you do about filling the slot?"

"Turns out there was an officer looking for just this kind of research opportunity, and she jumped at the chance to serve with us. Her name's T'Valet."

"Vulcan?"

"Uh-huh. Easier to get along with than some, and a really fine officer. Actually, the irony is that she's got a temperament not too unlike Rhonda's."

"Interesting," Alex replied. "Well, hopefully T'Valet will work out for you."

"She seems to be very happy with us, as Vulcans go, so I'm pretty optimistic," said Sashi.

The two COs continued their discussion as they walked through the corridors. Soon, though, they reached Starbase Operations. Entering the large room, they observed Commodore Threll in discussion with several officers on one side. Directly ahead of them was a very large wall viewer with an elaborate display of starship deployments and facility locations on it.

"Hmm..." said Rosenzweig. "Where's the detailer's station?"

German shrugged, but a young security officer stepped up to them. "Pardon me, Admiral, Captain, but I couldn't help but overhear. The detailer's console is just over there." He pointed to a console on a raised platform to one side of the room, facing the wall screen. An officer wearing Lt. Commander's pins on her uniform sat at the console.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," German said to the security man.

Rosenzweig nodded, as well. Then they made their way up a ramp to the detailer's console to pick up their new mission orders. Collecting the data carts, they hurried back to the Operations Center's entryway.

"Take care of yourself, Sashi," Alex told the younger officer.

"You, too," Sashi said in reply. They hugged briefly, then parted company.

Rosenzweig returned to the Avenger soon afterward. Stepping off the transporter platform, he glanced at the transporter specialist. "Ensign, please have the senior staff meet me in Briefing Room 1 in fifteen minutes." As the specialist nodded, Alex smiled at him and left the room.

Meeting the senior staff in the briefing room on Deck 2, the Vice Admiral quickly gave them a general rundown on what he'd learned from both Commodore Threll and Fleet Captain Vosseller. When he finished, he leaned back in his chair. "Comments, ladies and gentlemen?"

"I didn't know the Cardassians were posing that much of a threat," commented Lt. Commander Wilson, the Chief of Operations.

"They may not be," Alex responded. "But Star Fleet Command is concerned, anyway."

"What effect will the homeport change have on the 7th Fleet?" asked Maldonado.

"Well," said Fillmore, "if we have a war, we'll be meeting at a spot 200 parsecs away from where we would have met before this creature showed up, I'd say."

"That's just about it," Alex agreed. "The only other changes will probably come as we see what new ships are assigned to this fleet and which ones are rotated out of it."

"Do you think there'll be any major changes?" asked Klufas.

"I doubt it," Rosenzweig answered, "but we'll just have to see what the future holds." He leaned forward. "Are there any other questions?"

Dr. Fillmore asked, "How many casualties were there at Starbase 29?"

"Less than there might've been," Rosenzweig told her. "About 400 persons, mostly on the orbital facilities. It could've been a lot worse."

They eventually left that topic and reviewed the new mission orders that Rosenzweig had brought back from Starbase 7. They were assigned to conduct a patrol and survey run in Sector 19117. System L117GA was of particular interest to the sciences folk at Headquarters, and the Avenger was to do an investigation of the system. Maldonado, Wilson, and Chief Science Officer Ciufu began discussing resource allocation for the mission.

Seeing that there were no further questions, Rosenzweig closed the meeting. The senior officers dispersed, Rosenzweig and Fillmore returning to the bridge. As they stepped off the turbo-lift, Alex glanced quickly around the bridge, noting who was on duty at each station. He crossed the bridge and moved down to the command chair.

"I'll take over now, Mr. rRham," he said to the tall Tzen seated there. rRham unfolded his reptiloid body from the chair and moved up to the Master Situation station. Rosenzweig settled into the center seat and looked forward at the image of the Lexington and Thagard in orbit ahead of them. As he watched, the Thagard's aft thrusters flared and the ship moved off. "Ms. Graevyn," Rosenzweig said to the navigator, "plot a course for Sector 19117." He glanced toward the Helm Officer. "Mr. Toland, as soon as you have the departure coordinates and are cleared by Starbase Traffic Control, please take us out of orbit." Rosenzweig swung to face Communications, where Lt. Commander Klufas had relieved Captain Goldberg. "Mike, if you would contact Traffic Control...?"

Klufas did so, and soon the Avenger had received its clearance. Alex nodded to Graevyn and Toland, and the ship surged forward, leaving the starbase behind it and heading onward to its next mission.

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