

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

ARRIVAL

By Alex Rosenzweig

SD9408.25:

When I first stepped off the transporter platform on the heavy frigate Avenger, I looked around interestedly. My first sight after rematerializing was that of the ship's Commanding Officer, Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig. The Admiral wasn't that prepossessing a physical specimen, indeed seemed fairly average as Star Fleet officers went, although shorter than many. He was slender, and looked about 165 or 170 centimeters tall. He was bearded, too. His eyes were bright and welcoming, though, as he took in myself and the two other crewmembers who had just appeared.

With him was Commander Carlos Maldonado, the ship's Executive Officer. Carlos was smiling, evincing a cheerful disposition that I immediately thought would make him popular with the crew. He was a few centimeters taller than the Admiral, and a little heavier. He was beardless. He, too, looked happy to have us aboard, and I thought that this could be a really great posting.

Deciding that it really wasn't seemly to just stand and stare, and with a quick glance at the pretty Ensign in the control booth, I took a step forward.

"Permission to come aboard, sirs?"

"Permission granted, Ensign," Rosenzweig said formally. Then he smiled, an expression taking in both myself and my compatriots on the platform. We were all fresh out of the Academy, and were looking forward to deep space postings. I'd heard good things about the Avenger, especially that for over six years she'd been the flagship of the 7th Fleet (although scuttlebutt had it that the flagship posting was about to rotate, and other—less definite—rumors had it that the new flagship would be the Challenger, a heavy cruiser refitted to newer, exploratory specs and currently commanded by Fleet Captain Vosseller, one of a number of 7th Fleet COs who'd served under Vice Admiral Rosenzweig at one point or another in their careers), and that no fewer than **nine** starships' command crews had served aboard the Avenger while in their training cadre phase. Add to that important mission successes like the encounter with the Daltexi last year, the rediscovery of the lost Pern Colony (although the colony is still interdicted), the opening of relations with the Ahrmanyak Transstellar League, and so on, and one couldn't help but be left with the impression that being on the Avenger would at least be interesting.

"Welcome aboard," the Vice Admiral went on. "I hope you'll enjoy your tour with us. I look forward to having a chance to speak with each of you, but I'm sure that first you'll want to settle in. I'm going to place you in the hands of our Executive Officer, Commander Maldonado." He glanced at the exec. "I'll be on the bridge, if you need me."

"Aye, sir," Maldonado responded, although from the look the two men exchanged it seemed like the formalities were just that. These men were very good friends.

The Admiral left the room, and Commander Maldonado returned his attention to us. "Let's see," he began, looking down at the padd he was carrying. He pointed at me. "If my information is correct, you'd be Ensign Charles Donovan." He paused for a moment, an inquiring expression on his face. I nodded.

"Yes, sir."

"Good." Maldonado went on to confirm the identities of each of the two others on the platform. I was assigned to the Sciences Division, filling an opening that had come up in the ship's Linguistics staff. It seems that a senior scientist had transferred off the Avenger and one of the lab techs had been promoted into the scientist's position. That left the need for a new tech, and that gave an opportunity to...*moi*.

With me were Ensign Semek (assigned to Navigation) and Ensign Jaqueline MacLeod (assigned to Environmental Systems). We were fresh out of the Academy, and the Avenger was our very first posting...following a little time off for "good behavior". I can't speak for the other two, but I was certainly ready to get down to the business of working on a starship.

"First order of business," said Maldonado, "are living quarters assignments." He handed out our cabin numbers. "Did you all review your data packs on the layout of the Avenger?" MacLeod and I nodded, while Semek responded, "Of course, sir."

"Good." The exec looked each of us squarely in the eye. "Then your first test will be to locate your cabins. You'll find orientation schedules and duty orders on your terminals. If you have any questions, don't hesitate to contact your department chief, Second Officer Fillmore, or myself."

We all exchanged salutes—a quaint tradition in this day and age, but one still followed on occasion. Then Mr. Maldonado left and I picked up my carry-ons. "Well," I said to my companions, "let's go find our cabins. I'm on Deck 6, Section 4."

It turned out that we were all quartered near each other, though none of us were sharing a cabin. My roommate, it turned out, was a Communications Specialist. He greeted me effusively, and pointed out all the amenities, as well as what we didn't have that the more senior officers all did. He worked a different shift than I did, so it looked like we wouldn't spend that much time together regularly, but he certainly seemed a decent sort, so I wasn't complaining. When he left, I dropped into a chair in front of the computer console and keyed in my identification. The computer recognized me; obviously somebody had programmed in my information. I was scheduled for a briefing with the Chief Science Officer, Lt. Commander Ciufu, at 1400, and a physical exam at 1550. I looked at the desk-top chrono. That left me three hours to look around before going to Mr. Ciufu's office on Deck 7. I decided to make the most of it; it's one thing to understand the ship's layout from diagrams and simulated walk-throughs, and quite another to actually be there in the rooms and corridors.

In thinking about where to go first, I realized that I was hungry. Silly me, I'd skipped breakfast to make sure I got to the Transporter Complex on time. (Being late to one's first assignment just wouldn't do...) So lunch seemed like something reasonable. I headed out to locate the Crew's Mess, which was on Deck 6. It didn't take long to find, being a pretty big room filled with people as the lunchtime crowd started to build. Not seeing anyone I knew, I went to the synthesizer and ordered lunch. Then, finding an empty table on one side of the cheerfully-colored facility, I sat down to eat and

do a little serious people-watching. My first little game was picking out how many different races were represented in the crowd I was studying. The *Avenger's* crew was mostly Human, but Vice Admiral Rosenzweig did try to get the best talent he could, regardless of race. In this group, I recognized a Kyonan and a Mohnan sitting together (interesting...there aren't that many Kyonans in Star Fleet, or Mohnans, for that matter, and there's something...different about this Mohnan, although I couldn't put my finger on what that difference might be), another woman with them who looked Vulcanoid but not Vulcan...not precisely, anyway (Rihansu? The question floated into my mind, but it didn't seem likely...), an Andorian, a Caitian, an Edoan, and a couple of actual Vulcans, too. I wondered what other races had members in this crew.

Well, after I people-watched for a little while, I turned my attention to my food. Despite lots of jokes, synthed food really is pretty good, and it's not actually that easy to tell the difference from stuff prepared by hand, although a gourmet probably wouldn't have much trouble. But who cares? It was good, and it told me I wasn't going to spend the next year or more eating the Star Fleet equivalent of gruel.

"You're new here, aren't you?" I looked up to find myself no longer alone. Standing next to the table was an attractive female Ensign.

"I just came aboard," I told her. "I'm Charles Donovan, new in the Sciences Division."

"Maria Brescia, Engineering, Power Systems," she said. "May I join you?"

"Sure." Maria sat down and placed the mug of hot chocolate that she'd been holding on the tabletop.

"Just graduate?" she queried.

"About two months ago, but I took a bit of leave before being assigned," I answered.

"Well," she said, "you've gotten a **good** assignment. The *Avenger* can be a pretty quirky place, but you get used to it okay. I've been aboard for about two years, came over from the *Anubis*."

Maria and I talked for a little while, 'til she had to go back to duty. We made a date for dinner this evening. After Maria left, I quickly finished my lunch and decided to look around some more.

Thinking things through, I realized that there were a lot of places I probably couldn't go. I wasn't cleared yet for bridge access, although that would come after meeting Lt. Commander Ciufu. I could go find the social sciences lab, where I'd spend most of my time working. I probably wasn't cleared for Engineering yet, either.

While I was thinking, I was startled by something flying right past my face. A small, green, vaguely—but not quite—reptilian creature zipped past me and alighted on a table where a couple of other crewmembers sat. Oh, yeah, it was winged, too, and looked like a miniature dragon. I stared, fascinated, at it. Then I realized that I was being stared back at, both by the creature and its apparent owner.

"Hi!" said the officer who seemed to be in charge of the creature. "Well, you've just met Emerald Aldora."

"Who?" I said.

"Emerald Aldora. My fire-lizard. Say hello to the Ensign, Aldora," the Commander went on. The little creature hummed and gave every appearance of courteously greeting me.

"Uhh...hi," I said to it. "I'm Ensign Charles Donovan." I directed my introduction to both the creature and the Commander, who introduced himself to me as Commander Tom Colgan, the ship's Strategy Officer. "Where did you get...?" Words failed me, but Commander Colgan only grinned.

"She's a Pernese fire-lizard," he told me. "She was hatched on the ship. We have a breeding queen aboard, and a new clutch of fire-lizards is hatched every few months."

"The fire-lizards came from Pern?" I was excited. "I read about the *Avenger's* mission there."

"Oh, did you? Only the declassified parts, I'm sure."

"I guess."

Commander Colgan explained a little about what had happened during that mission. It was significant that the five members of that landing party who returned with the fire-lizards were allowed to keep them, but on several occasions since, the semi-sentient—but very bright for their intelligence level—creatures had been very helpful in getting the ship out of one form of trouble or another. Every crewmember who was lucky enough to Impress a fire-lizard loved his or her little friend dearly. I hoped I could be that lucky at some point, although Commander Colgan did say that the queen was laying fewer eggs as the ship's population of fire-lizards increased. Somehow, they had a keen sense of how much was enough. No one—including me—quite understood that, but it was evidently reality.

After finishing with Commander Colgan, I again started for the messroom door, half-wondering if I'd actually make it out. This time, I did. By now, I had only an hour-and-a-half left before my scheduled briefing with Lt. Commander Ciufu. Shrugging, I decided I'd save the "on-duty"-type stuff 'til I talked to him, and went in search of the Rec Deck.

As on most ships, the Rec Deck was one of the two or three centers of communal life on the *Avenger*. It wasn't the largest Rec Deck I'd ever seen, but then again, the *Avenger* wasn't **that** large a ship, either. Still, the Rec Complex seemed to "fit" the ship.

Entering the compartment, I saw about 15 crewmembers in Main Rec itself. To my left was a doorway leading to the gymnasium, where I could hear the sounds of a spirited contest underway. Looking up, I saw that Main Rec was ringed by a balcony overlooking the lower level. I also saw more fire-lizards flitting about. Commander Colgan had told me that under most circumstances the small creatures weren't allowed in operational areas—like the bridge—but otherwise they had free run of the ship. Even that rule was occasionally waived by Admiral Rosenzweig, although it wasn't particularly common.

I went over to the small lift and rode up to the second level, on Deck 4. Upstairs were some observation areas, reading nooks, the HSA (that's Fleet-speak for Holographic Simulation Area, a three-dimensional imaging chamber used for training and recreational pursuits; some people have started calling it a "holo-deck"), and the Chief of Recreation's office. I decided to go say hello, and touched the office's door chime.

The panel slid aside, and a Terran male wearing Lieutenant J.G.'s bars waved me in. "Hi," he said. "Commander Re'ming'ton's not in right now, but I'm her assistant." He paused for just a moment and looked at me. "You're new, aren't you?"

“Yes, sir,” I replied. “I’m Ensign Donovan. I just came on board.”

“And you’ve already found the Rec Deck.” The Lieutenant smiled, but I wasn’t quite sure what to make of it. “I’m Paul Hennings, Assistant Chief of Rec-reation.”

“I was just curious about the ship’s rec facilities,” I said. “I’m due in a briefing at 1400, so I was looking around ‘til I had to get there.”

Lieutenant Hennings handed me a datacart. “This is the ‘pre-packaged’ rec briefing. Commander Re’ming’ton and I made it last year for new crewmembers. It’ll probably answer most of your questions. And if we did our job right, it’ll make you laugh, too.”

“What’s Commander Remington like?” I asked.

Hennings shook his head. “No. Not Remington. Re’ming’ton,” he said, emphasizing the glottal stops. “Despite the similarity to a Terran-style name, Commander Re’ming’ton is not Human. Actually, she’s Galeve` Mohnan.”

“Oh!” I exclaimed. At Hennings’ curious glance, I went on, “I saw her in the mess hall a little while ago. She was sitting with a Kyonan.”

“That’d be Lieutenant Graevyn, our Chief Navigator. They’re very close friends.”

“Oh. I see.” Things were starting to get interesting. I wondered what Re’ming’ton was like. Then I returned my attention to Mr. Hennings. “Thank you, sir,” I told him, lifting the cart.

I left the office and wandered over to the reading area. I sat down on a cushioned chair and slipped the cart into a reader slot. True to Mr. Hennings’ word, the program was in fact very funny, and told me a lot about the *Avenger*’s innovative recreation programs, including the very popular artistic expression events and high-tech carousels.

After I’d been reading for a while, I glanced at my wrist chrono. Oops! It was nearly 1350 Hours! I had ten minutes to get to Lt. Commander Ciufu’s office, not too short a time, but still less than I’d wanted. I hurried to the closest doorway and left the Rec Deck.

Reaching Lt. Commander Ciufu’s office, I touched the door chime control. There was the soft sound of the chime from within the office, followed by a tenor voice replying, “Come in.” The door slid open, and I entered the small room. Mr. Ciufu gestured to a chair. His desk had a pile of datacarts on it, and it looked like he had a **lot** going on.

“Welcome, Ensign,” he said. He smiled, and went on. “Please excuse the mess. I only took over this post a few weeks ago, and we’ve been kind of busy. Why don’t you sit down, and I’ll be right with you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

As Lt. Commander Ciufu began moving datacarts around his desk, he spoke. “It’s fortunate that you were available. I wasn’t sure how we were going to handle that opening. Lt. Commander Green had been very emphatic about her transfer-request to the *Thagard*. I didn’t hear all the details, but I did hear that her conversation with Vice Admiral Rosenzweig wasn’t a nice one. He was not happy.”

“Why didn’t he deny the transfer?” I asked. There was nothing that required a CO to approve a transfer, or HQ, for that mat-

ter. I had heard of the *Thagard*, but didn’t know that she would have a priority need for a linguist, especially in a small crew.

“I don’t know,” Ciufu said. “I wasn’t consulted, because I wasn’t Chief Science Officer at the time.” He shrugged. “But the transfer was granted. Then we moved Lieutenant J.G. Chan into Lt. Commander Green’s spot, leaving the opening that you’re filling.”

Mr. Ciufu proceeded to give me a broad rundown on the operation of *Avenger*’s Sciences Division and how I’d fit in. The linguistics staff was pretty small, with only Lieutenant Chan, myself, and one other lab tech, although there was some overlap with the Communications staff. That would make my role pretty important. I liked that.

After he finished the obligatory lecture, Mr. Ciufu led me over to the Social Sciences Lab. The Linguistics personnel used the workstations here as their primary on-duty venues...if we weren’t being called upon to aid in diplomatic functions or serve on landing parties. I quickly looked over the console, and was pleased to see that it was a pretty standard design. Then I was introduced to Lt. Commander Aleatha Travers, the *Avenger*’s Chief Scientist in charge of Social Sciences. Mr. Ciufu told me that she was married to Tom Colgan, whom I’d met earlier. All the linguists would report to her directly. She seemed very nice, and I got the distinct impression that she got more out of her subordinates through encouragement than intimidation. I quickly decided I was going to like serving with her.

Following the trip to the lab, Mr. Ciufu decided it was time for me to get cleared for bridge access. “You will have to serve a bridge shift periodically,” he told me. He went on to explain that Vice Admiral Rosenzweig was pretty laid back about bridge access, once a crewmember was properly cleared for service aboard the *Avenger*. Most of the crew could get there if they needed to. By the same token, it was expected that one would not abuse the privilege. Of course, if there was a security alert, things got real tight real fast, but that, too, was expected.

Back in the Chief Science Officer’s office, Mr. Ciufu ran my ID through the standard security protocols, then checked with the Security Division to make sure I was cleared. The Security Chief, a surprisingly unassertive man for his post, gave me the okay.

“Good!” said Mr. Ciufu. “Let’s take a ride up to the bridge. I need to check on a few things, anyway. You’re with me.” I followed him toward the nearest turbo-lift.

Just as we were approaching the doors to the lift station, I heard a low, background hum and a faint vibration ran through the ship. I tensed just slightly. Mr. Ciufu noticed. “You’ll get used to it quickly enough. That was the impulse engines engaging. I think we just pulled out of orbit.” Well. I felt...stupid. Star Fleet Academy graduate, and I’m getting tense when my first starship assignment turns on its engines. What was going to happen when something **important** came up? I hoped I didn’t do something dumb like freeze at the sensors or slobber all over my console or otherwise make a fool of myself.

“Relax,” Mr. Ciufu told me, noticing my concerned expression, I guess. “After only a couple of weeks, you’ll know most of the sounds the ship is likely to make. Then you’ll just have to figure out what the unlikely ones are.”

We stepped into the lift. “Bridge,” said Mr. Ciufu, and there was a slight shifting sensation as the elevator car moved across

the hull, then switched directions and rose up through the main shaft. Arriving at Deck 1, the lift stopped and the doors slid apart, revealing the Main Bridge. As with most starship bridges, this one, too, was a hive of activity. I was relieved to note that it was fairly standard in design, although a quick glance at several of the stations told me that the officers operating them had customized the control arrays to personal specs. Others were using the default console configurations.

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig was directly ahead of us, sitting in the center seat. He was talking to the helmsman and navigator as Lt. Commander Ciufu and I came onto the bridge. "...you reach terminal range, take us to warp factor 4 and hold course for the Neutral Zone."

"Aye, sir," replied the helmsman. The navigator—whom, I noted, was the Kyonan I'd seen earlier—nodded as she entered course calculations into her console.

"The Neutral Zone?" I asked Mr. Ciufu, trying not to sound too nervous.

The Chief Science Officer nodded. "We're taking a turn at keeping an eye on the Rihannsu. They've been acting antsy since the Khitomer Conference."

Rihannsu? Oh, he meant Romulans. Rihannsu was what they called themselves, except when they were around other races. Then they used the names the other races used, apparently trying to keep as much information about themselves **to** themselves as they could. Even so, the Federation had learned a lot about them through some impressive intelligence operations.

"Make sure we're in touch with the Amastra on the way in," the Admiral said to the officer at Communications. The female Lt. Commander nodded in response.

"What's the Amastra?" I asked Mr. Ciufu.

"A perimeter action ship assigned to the sector we'll be entering. I'm sure Admiral Rosenzweig just wants the CO to have a heads-up that we're coming in to help out...just so there are no surprises." I nodded, and then we walked over to the Sciences station.

Mr. Ciufu stopped at one side of the station, and touched a few controls. Both of us watched one of the smaller viewers, which displayed a computer operations readout. The officer on duty, a Vulcan, snatched a curious glance periodically, but seemed to be keeping his mind on his own work, watching long-range sensor displays.

Admiral Rosenzweig then swung toward Sciences. "Hello, Mr. Ciufu. Mr. Setak, anything on the sensors?"

"Negative, Admiral. I am maintaining a full scanning sequence, but there is nothing untoward to the limits of sensor range."

"Thank you, Lieutenant." Then the bearded Admiral's gaze fixed on me. "Welcome to the bridge, Ensign. Are you settling in okay?"

"Yes, sir," I said quickly. "Mr. Ciufu's been giving me the briefing and brought me up to the bridge with him." I looked around at all the activity. "It's not like the simulators, as hard as they try to make them accurate."

Admiral Rosenzweig smiled. "As you'll see, the character of the people is always a crucial factor." Before he could say anything else, though, a question from the navigation officer caught his attention and he turned away from me. Looking toward her, I caught

her eye for a moment. She smiled, just a little, at me. Listening to the conversation, I realized that she was the ship's Chief Navigator, and that she and the Admiral were planning strategy.

"Ensign?" Guiltily, I jumped. It was Mr. Ciufu, who wanted my attention on the Sciences station, where—really—it belonged.

"Sir?" I asked softly.

"Let me show you something." He reached past Mr. Setak and tapped a series of commands into the console. On one of the upper viewers, a series of translation mappings appeared. I recognized the languages involved as Klingon and Romulan, along with Federation Standard.

"Why the Klingon?" I asked. "We're nowhere near the Klingon border."

"Well," said Ciufu, "as you know, not all the Klingons like the treaty. A number of renegade families are trying to disrupt the peace. Some of them have decided that the Rihannsu are the appropriate allies in this fight."

"So it's possible we might run into some of those disgruntled Klingons?"

Mr. Ciufu nodded. "Exactly. And if that happens, we'll need the translators fully up to speed, especially in dialects other than the official Imperial one. Some of the renegades are using other dialects as a way to demonstrate their unhappiness with Chancellor Azetbur's government." He looked at me. "How's your Klingon?"

"I'm pretty familiar with the official dialect," I told him, "and I got some practice with a couple of the others...though I wouldn't exactly call myself proficient, sir," I hastened to add.

"How about your Rihannsu?"

"Not as good as the Klingon, but I could hold my own for a while."

"Good," Mr. Ciufu said. "I'm going to put you and Lieutenant Chan on making sure that these algorithms run properly. I don't know if we'll really need them, but better safe than sorry."

"Yes, sir," I answered.

Mr. Ciufu glanced at his wrist chrono. "Meanwhile, I think you're due in sickbay in the next few minutes."

I looked at my own chrono. "Uh, you're right, sir. Permission to...?"

"Granted," he told me. "Sickbay's on Deck 7. Report to the SoSci Lab tomorrow at the beginning of Alpha Shift. For now, you're dismissed."

"Thank you, sir." I beelined for the turbo-lift doors. Stepping into the lift, I was passed by a large, red-haired man with a merry—but slightly devilish—expression. He was wearing command white on his collar, shoulder strap, and sleeveband.

Glancing at me, he nodded. "Hello, Ensign. New aboard?"

"Yes, Commander," I answered, having noted his pins. I looked up at him. He was a very large man, and his expression was one of confidence...great confidence. "I just boarded this morning."

The man looked at me. "You'd be Ensign Donovan, yes?"

"Yes, sir." I was surprised that he'd recognized me. Evidently some part of that surprise must've shown on my face, because he nodded. "I read your dossier when you were assigned here." He stuck out his hand. "Bob Fillmore, Second Officer."

"A pleasure, sir." I shook his hand, then sketched out a salute. It wasn't my best, but it was pretty good, if I do say so myself.

“Bob?” Commander Fillmore looked over his shoulder, and I followed his gaze, to see the Admiral standing by the railing. “Let the young man go; he’s due to see Wendy...right now.”

“Oh!” Commander Fillmore took a quick step back. “Why didn’t you say something, Ensign?”

“Sorry, sir,” was about all I got out before the lift doors slid shut. As the lift descended, I thought I could hear him saying, “‘Sorry, sir.’ Hmph!”

The lift changed direction on Deck 7, and deposited me at the stop nearest the Sickbay complex. I walked down the corridor ‘til I found the main entryway. Entering Sickbay, I stopped and looked around. I was soon met by a woman in a white Fleet Medical uniform.

“Hello, Ensign. I’m Lieutenant Bush. What can I do for you?”

I nodded respectfully. “Ensign Charles Donovan, ma’am. I have an appointment for a physical. Or, that’s what my terminal said.”

Bush looked at her padd. Then she nodded. “There you are. Your terminal was right.” She smiled at me. “Come on. Let’s go get you prepped.” She led me into the examination room and indicated the central examination table. “Have a seat right there and take off your jacket,” she told me. I followed her instructions, while she tweaked a few controls on a panel near the table. Then she went into the next room.

A few moments later, another woman came out. She was around Bush’s height, but her hair was lighter. She had a face that just looked like she smiled a lot, and she was smiling. She walked over to me and held out one hand, while scooping up a mediscanner with the other. I shook her proffered hand.

“Hello, Ensign,” she said. “I’m Doctor Wendy Fillmore, the Chief Medical Officer.”

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am. I’m Charles Donovan.” Then the significance of the name hit me. “Fillmore? Are you and Second Officer Fillmore...?”

She smiled. “Yes, Ensign. The other Commander Fillmore and I have been married for a couple of years now.”

“It must be nice to be able to serve with your husband,” I opined.

“It is,” Dr. Fillmore answered. “Now, let’s see here...” She applied her attention to the scanner and the table monitor read-outs. Then she brought me into an adjoining room, where several devices that looked like exercise machines were set up. Lieutenant Bush was there, too, and she nodded as I came in.

“Why do we—?” I began. The doctor’s response was straightforward.

“Medical scanners are all well and good,” she said, “but they can’t tell everything about you. We need to see you in different states of physical exertion and observe how your body reacts.”

I couldn’t help it. In response to Doctor Fillmore’s words, a stray thought flitted through my mind. Lieutenant Bush looked up sharply. “That will be quite enough of **that**,” she said. That was how I found out that she wasn’t Human. It turned out that she was part Bajoran and part Xeonian. The former part of her heritage gave her a prickly disposition when pushed the wrong way, while the latter gave her telepathy. Talk about a no-win scenario...

Embarrassed, I finished the exam as quickly as possible. I was pulling my jacket back on when another woman—this time in the typical Star Fleet jacket with a medical pale green tunic under-

neath—walked in. She was very pretty, with mid-brown skin, dark hair, and a sunny disposition. She wore the insignia of a Lieutenant. I shook my head, just a little, wondering if the Avenger’s whole senior med-staff was composed of women.

“Hi!” she said, coming straight up to me. “How are you?”

This was asked in a very direct manner, one that brooked no dissembling. “I’m a bit tired from the exam, but otherwise fine.” Then I put on my best charm-the-ladies smile. “Ensign Charles Donovan, at your service, ma’am.”

I have a feeling that it didn’t work as well as I’d hoped, although she did smile back. “Perhaps. But right now, we’ve got to make sure you’re really ready for a long space voyage.”

“Ma’am?” I asked, starting to feel confused.

“I’m Doctor Stephanie Richardson, Mental Health Department,” she said. “Come with me.” She started to walk toward the door.

“But—” I began, wondering if Dr. Fillmore knew about this.

“Are you going to have an argument with me your first day here?” she said, looking straight at me.

“I don’t want to, Doctor, but what about Dr. Fillmore?”

“Oh. Don’t worry. This is all arranged.”

I almost said, “What’s all arranged?”, but managed to refrain. I suspect that kept me out of a **lot** of trouble. I followed her out the door and down a short stretch of corridor. Then she stopped at another door and touched the switch next to it. It slid open. She motioned me into the room. It was about the size of most ship-board offices I’d seen, ‘though it looked more comfortable. There were two chairs and a low table in the middle of the room, and a recessed desk and computer terminal on one side. Another wall had a large viewer, and plants occupied all four corners. The lighting was diffuse but clear, and the room looked like a good place to relax in.

Dr. Richardson gestured me to a chair. “Have a seat.”

I obeyed, and she sat in the other chair. Picking up a padd from the tabletop, she began asking me questions, listening attentively even while entering information. That surprised me; it’s not easy to do. We started talking about why I decided to join Star Fleet. Then we moved to my experiences at the Academy and all the different kinds of people I met there. She seemed pleased that I got along well with non-Humans. I guess enough anthropocentrism still made it through the Academy that it was a concern. Given the variety of species I was there with, I couldn’t see that it would be much of a problem. In almost all of my classes, if you were any kind of racist, you were in **BIG** trouble.

After a while, when we had gotten through most of my Academy time, Lieutenant Richardson leaned back. “I think that’s about enough for today,” she said. I stole a glance at my chrono, and got a surprise. I’d been there for an hour and a half! It didn’t feel like it; Dr. Richardson was easy to talk to. She stood up, and I followed suit.

“Thank you, Doctor,” I said.

“You’re welcome,” she replied. “If there’s anything I can do, don’t hesitate to make an appointment.” A few ideas ran through my mind, but I decided that bringing them up wouldn’t be too bright a move, so I just thanked her again. Then she dismissed me, and I went back to Sickbay. Finding Dr. Fillmore, I was told that I had a clean bill of health and sent on to wherever I had to be next.

I met Maria on the Rec Deck at 1900 hours. “So,” I said, “where are the best synthesizers on the ship?”

“You mean other than the one in the Admiral’s quarters?” she asked with an impish grin. “I’d say my quarters, but I’m not that good a cook. Also, I don’t have a synther there. Come with me.”

I followed her to a lounge situated near one corner of the Rec Deck. It was quiet and subdued. I liked it a lot. A few tables were set up in the middle of the room, with some food synthesizers on one side and a viewer on the other. We ordered up our meals and chose a table set so the viewer’s image served as a backdrop for our conversation. That image was, just now, a starfield.

“I think that’s a feed from the main viewer up on the bridge,” Maria told me. “Mr. Padovan said we should make rendezvous with the Echo in the next few hours.”

“Maybe we’ll see it,” I said thoughtfully.

“Maybe.” Then we turned our attention to each other. I picked up the glass of brandy I’d selected and raised it higher.

“To my first friend on the Avenger,” I said, smiling at Maria. She smiled back and touched her glass to mine. I sipped at the flavorful drink and let the feel of it suffuse me. From Maria’s expression, she had picked a drink she liked, too.

The meal was a very enjoyable one. Maria had been right; the synthers here **were** quite good. The ambience was nice, too, very much like several quiet restaurants I’d been to while at the Academy. After the meal, though, we decided that someplace a bit cozier was called for. Once again, I deferred to Maria’s greater experience on this ship, and let her lead me to a lounge on the opposite side of Deck 5, not far from the arboretum. Here, too, viewers substituted for ports, but several couches faced the viewers, laid out as if they were in fact windows. Sipping hot cappuccino, we sat together on a couch and watched the stars. Our conversation wandered through many topics, including our pasts and our futures, experiences and hopes, and how nice it was to have someone with whom to share the wonder. Eventually, we left the lounge and went to Maria’s cabin, where—to my delight—I discovered that she most certainly **could** cook.

The next morning, I headed for the Rec Deck before Alpha Shift started, in search of breakfast. I walked through the doors and headed for the center of the room to see what there was to see. As I crossed under the edge of the balcony which overlooked Main Recreation, I suddenly became aware of a long, flexible, furred...rod? right in front of my face. Unfortunately for me, I was walking way too quickly to stop in time, and bumped right into it. Abruptly, it was yanked up-ward and out of sight. Confused, I shook my head. “I need a cup of coffee,” I muttered to myself.

At that moment, up above me, a furred face appeared over the balcony railing. At the same time, the tail—for that was what it was—looped around and “pointed” in the general direction of the food synthesizers, indicating that they were on the upper level. Looking up reflexively, I realized that the person I was looking at was the Galeve’ Mohnan I’d seen yesterday. She was wearing a jumpsuit reminiscent of a Class B Star Fleet uniform, and sported Commander’s pins.

“Uh...good morning, ma’am,” I said. Abruptly, I was startled to see her vault over the rail and land in a semi-crouch right in front of me. She grinned...at least, I’m pretty sure it was a grin.

“The Admiral hates it when I do that,” she said in a semi-conspiratorial tone, as she stood up. Somehow, I felt as though I was being let in on the joke. Still, the way I looked at it, the Admiral did have a point.

“But, Commander, why does he hate it?”

“He’s worried that I might fall wrong and break my neck,” she replied, her voice tinged just slightly with sarcasm but mostly with amusement.

“And you won’t,” I said, making of my comment a statement, not a question.

“Right,” she responded emphatically. “A Human might under similar circumstances, but my people are built differently. Jumping from heights like that is almost second nature to us.”

Of course, I seized the opportunity. “Almost?”

“Well, there is some **slight** possibility—”

“Ah, ha!” I grinned. Normally I wouldn’t talk this way to someone so much my senior in rank, but not only did I feel included in the joke, but Commander Re’ming’ton was very easy to be comfortable with. “So he just might have a point.”

“Well, perhaps...”

“And not wanting one of his crewmembers to hurt herself, he’s asked you not to.”

“More or less.”

Now I was defending the point of **her** superior. “Then why would you want to go against his orders?”

“It’s not as if he specifically ordered me—”

“So he requested?”

“More or less.”

“Then why ignore it?”

“Because...” Now she was looking exasperated. “Oh, never mind.” I thought about it for a split-second, then decided to shut up for the moment. There’d be ample time to pick this up again later. Besides, I really did need to get some coffee.

“All right, ma’am. Coffee’s upstairs, right?”

“The synthesizers’re upstairs.” Nodding my thanks, I headed for the small ‘tween-levels turbo-lift.

I reported for duty promptly at the beginning of Alpha Shift. The doors to the Social Sciences Lab slid apart at my approach, and I gingerly entered the lab. Lt. Commander Travers looked up from her workstation and smiled at me.

“Welcome, Ensign.” She gestured toward the console I’d been shown yesterday. “Have a seat. We’ve been monitoring Romulan communications in this sector, hoping that nobody’s planning any aggressive moves.”

“So you’ll want me to take point on that?”

“Yes. We’re tracking both military and civilian signals, but our main concern is making sure the Romulans understand that we mean them no harm, and also being sure that they don’t get the drop on **us**.”

“All right, Commander.” I sat down at the console and brought it off the stand-by mode in which I’d found it. Quickly, I had the ship’s translators humming away. Slipping a receiver into my right ear, I concentrated on the subspace chatter in which I was suddenly immersed.

At first, I wasn’t aware of anything amiss. The few unscrambled military signals we were able to grab onto seemed

prosaic enough. The civilian signals were a little odder, but it didn't seem far enough off to worry me. As I listened, I ran enhancement routines through the computers to get the translations a little more "on target". That was when I began to notice it: there was something...off about the translations. The more I tried to enhance and correct them, the more oddly and subtly skewed they got.

It wasn't the kind of thing you'd notice right off. It wasn't as if you'd say, "Why not come over for tea?" and the translator would render, "Your mother wears Army boots." But it wasn't quite right. I was rather surprised that the *Avenger's* computers would be that off. As a fleet flagship, she had several staffers aboard from Star Fleet Intelligence, and every data dump of new translation updates should've been fired straight into the main computer's linguistics banks. But this... this was weird. I looked up.

"Lt. Commander Travers," I began, "I think we have a problem." She was at my side in an instant, and I showed her what I'd discovered. Her eyes narrowed, and then she tapped the intercom control on one side of the panel.

"Travers to Lieutenant Chan. Get over to the SoSci Lab as soon as you can."

"Chan here." The Lieutenant sounded sleepy. "I'll be right there."

After she'd signed off, Lt. Commander Travers looked up at me. "She just came off duty. I hate to do that to her, but we need her here."

Just then, one of the other techs poked his head into the lab. "There's a Romulan ship heading this way! The Admiral's trying to talk to them."

Travers hit a control sequence, and one of the viewers lit with an image of the bridge. On the bridge viewer was an image of one of those newer Romulan warbirds, the dual-layered design with a Klingon primary hull and boom stuck on the front. It was large and reportedly quite nasty.

The viewer image shifted to a head-and-shoulders shot of a Romulan commander. He looked very upset. Vice Admiral Rosenzweig looked confused. He kept trying various tacks to defuse the situation. The Romulan would start to relax, nodding and agreeing with Admiral Rosenzweig, then suddenly would look outraged and again threaten our imminent destruction. Each time this happened, the Romulan would get angrier and Admiral Rosenzweig would get more confused.

"Computer," I said, "display the Romulan translation of our signal on viewer 4." The viewer in question lit with multiple lines of text. The first line was in Romulan, with a translated line of Standard directly below it. I was confused. Every few sentences, something completely inappropriate was appearing. But how could the Vice Admiral be **saying** those things?!

"Compare this translation to Vice Admiral Rosenzweig's words." This command came from Lieutenant J.G. Chan, who had arrived and was now standing next to me. A second line of Standard appeared below the translation.

"That's not the same!" I exclaimed.

"Correct," Chan responded. "But why?"

"It looks like the problem's in the system," I replied.

"But where?"

"I wish I knew."

Chan looked thoughtful for a moment. "Did you check the translation database?"

"Not yet," replied, feeling abashed. It was an obvious thing, but...

"Well, **do** it, Ensign," Chan snapped. There was no time now for recriminations. I fell to the task, calling up the database and running random vocabulary checks. Everything looked normal, at least in the random sample I'd pulled.

"Vocabulary database looks good," I said.

"Then we have to check the operating segment," Chan responded. She began calling up the algorithms. I noticed that she was working with the generic ones, so I focused on the ones dealing with Romulan. I wasn't sure that these were fully reliable, though, so I also pulled up what available dictionaries there were in the main research databases.

"Wait a minute..." I was seeing an odd pattern. When certain common Standard word-patterns occurred a given number of times, the algorithm always displayed the same instruction-line, directing the translator to a certain part of the Romulan vocabulary. After that, there were variations, but even so, the contextual analysis routines should not always assume the same response was proper. The Romulans had their rituals, same as Humans, but this was inconsistent. When I described this to Lieutenant Chan, she asked, "What part of the vocabulary is being pointered?"

I made a quick check. "Ah, hah! Invective. At a predetermined point, this algorithm is making it seem to the Romulan commander that Vice Admiral Rosenzweig is cursing him out, demeaning his ancestry, impugning his honor, or something similar." I hit the intercom switch quickly. "Bridge."

"Bridge. Klufas here."

"Mr. Klufas, this is Ensign Donovan from Linguistics. Sir, there's a problem with the universal translator programming. It's spitting out bad translations at predetermined times. Tell Admiral Rosenzweig to stop using the ship's translators. Use handhelds until we can get this fixed."

There was a long silence. Then the Vice Admiral's voice came over the channel. "Explain that, Ensign. The Rihannsu commander is 'on hold'."

"Admiral, the translation algorithms for Romulan have been subtly altered so that they insert invective at key points in a communication. That's why the Romulan commander is getting so upset."

"So every few minutes, I'm insulting him?"

"Yes, sir, in essence."

"Great," growled Admiral Rosenzweig, after a pause. I exchanged glances with Lieutenant Chan and Lt. Commander Travers. "How did this occur?"

Chan leaned in. "Admiral, we can't be certain yet, but I'd have to say sabotage."

"Sabotage?! How?"

"We don't have enough information on that yet, sir," Travers responded. "But we'll get some for you."

"Good," Rosenzweig said, his voice stabilizing. "Recommendation for corrective action?"

"Admiral," I said, "do you have access to a portable universal translator?"

"Not at the moment," the Admiral said.

"I'll have a yeoman run one up there," Lt. Commander Travers told him.

"When it gets there, sir," I went on, "hook that translator's memory unit into the shipboard translator. It should be uncorrupted, and at least reasonably accurate, depending on when its memory was last updated."

"Very well," the Admiral said. "Wish us luck."

While Lt. Commander Travers sent Yeoman Greatrex up to the bridge with a translator (after we had checked and verified its memory), Lieutenant Chan and I began examining the algorithms themselves. Not only did we want to know how they were structured, but we needed to know when they'd been last updated and by whom, if that data was listed.

Most of the algorithms looked fine. They hadn't been touched in nearly a year. Some of the Romulan language feeder-instructions had seen revision about 6 months ago, but Lt. Commander Travers said they'd dealt with Rihannsu within that time without incident.

Meanwhile, word down from the bridge was that, once the portable translator had been hooked in, the problems disappeared. The situation was explained to the Romulan commander, and he accepted it, apparently noticing that the insults had suddenly stopped. As everyone relaxed, Vice Admiral Rosenzweig displayed a little of the diplomacy he had a reputation for, and the conflict was resolved. Understanding that this was a "showing the flag" mission, not a prelude to a military strike, the Romulan commander backed his warbird off. The speculation was the Romulans didn't feel ready for a war just yet. Apparently, though, they also weren't ready to let us wander around the Neutral Zone unwatched, either, because the ship didn't leave outright, but pulled back into Romulan space.

After the Romulan ship left, we all breathed a little easier. Lieutenant Chan and I turned back to the task of figuring out what had been done to the algorithms.

It took considerable searching, but we eventually found the problem. It was a knotty one, too. It turned out that the Romulan translation algorithms **had** been tampered with...by an expert. Although there were no recent date-tags in the regular routines, a scan of the protected backups showed that the files there were different from those in the standard banks. Clearly, something had happened.

Lt. Commander Ciugo, after he was informed of what had happened, tried a few investigations of his own. He was the one who found the proper time-stamps. Whoever had entered the changes had done so in the last day, and had deleted all evidence of the tampering from those files. It was a neat job.

Of course, once we'd gotten that far, it became a matter for Security. Our initial theory was correct; we had a saboteur on board. Lt. Commander Csuti, the Security Chief, and the Security Officer in charge of the Intelligence Department, Lt. Commander Warren, arrived in the SoSci Lab only a few minutes after we signaled them. Mr. Csuti startled me. I guess I was just used to the stereotype of Security Chiefs as large, burly officers with steely expressions. It's stupid; I should've known better. Well, if I hadn't then, I did after I met Lt. Commander Csuti. He was fairly short, quiet, and possessed of a sleepy expression. He tended to let his subordinates do most of the talking. In fact, he often gave the impression that he barely had any idea of what was going on. When I

first met him, I was very worried about this ship, all of a sudden. I found out later that appearances could be very misleading. Mr. Csuti knew exactly what was going on. Often, his relative quiescence was carefully planned ahead of time in the Security Office, precisely for the purpose of confusing potential adversaries.

Mr. Warren, on the other hand, struck me as very much what you'd expect from an information security specialist. He was bright, incisive, and very quick. He had a keen sense of how things should work and what was needed to organize them. He impressed me almost immediately.

The two of them sat down at the console we had been occupying and quickly began running various routines. I soon lost track of precisely what they were running, but it looked like some sort of records-check. After several minutes, they looked at each other. Then they looked at Lieutenant Chan and me.

"Somebody was in here," Mr. Warren said.

"Who?" I asked.

"Interesting question," said Mr. Csuti. "The input-identifications have been encrypted. And there's no reason for that to happen unless whatever was being done was unauthorized. And it happened last night." He looked at me. "Who do you think might've done that?"

"I don't know, sir," I answered honestly. I was confused at that point. Was I a suspect? I'd come on board the ship just yesterday. "Whoever did must've been pretty good with computers to mask an input record like that."

"I agree," said Warren. Then he tapped Mr. Csuti on the shoulder. "Bob? I have the decryption routine ready. Should I kick it off?"

"Oh. Yes." Mr. Csuti nodded, and Mr. Warren tapped a series of commands into the console. Unfamiliar graphics spattered across the screens. After studying them for a few moments, I realized that the decryptors were penetrating the logic structures built around the suspicious input-records.

"There!" Warren pointed at several blocks of numbers. The inputs were done remotely. Whoever did it knew the access codes to break into the linguistics databanks."

"Where did the inputs come from?" Csuti asked.

"Living quarters. Deck 6, Section 4." I held my breath. That was where I was quartered! "Cabin 64-087." I released my breath softly. Not my quarters.

"Who's assigned to that room?" asked Csuti.

"Ensigns Fineman and Semek." Mr. Warren looked up. "Fineman's a historian. He's no computer expert."

"That leaves Semek," commented Ms. Travers, who had been quietly listening for some time.

Lt. Commander Warren looked at her, nodding. Mr. Csuti moved to an unoccupied workstation and began calling up information. Mr. Warren returned his attention to my console. Confused, Lieutenant Chan and I looked at each other. She shrugged.

After a while, Mr. Warren looked up again. "He **had** to be good," the security officer said firmly. "Ms. Travers, look at this." He indicated the graphic on the viewer. "Each of these changes was the result of an insert process run through the system's programming editors. When the culprit entered the system, he left special 'program capsules' that—when the right inputs showed up—

opened and sent commands to alter key programs. A very impressive job," he went on, impressed.

Lt. Commander Csuti nodded. "And he did have the talent to do it." He pointed at the personnel file on the viewer he was studying. Ensign Semek, it appeared, had an A-5 computer rating, only two levels from the top. That was unusual in someone that young, but not impossible. It seemed counterintuitive, though, for a Vulcan to go hacking into computers for which he was unauthorized without a very good reason. That meant one of two things: either there was such a reason, or something else was goin' on.

"Either way," Mr. Csuti noted, "we need to speak to him." He tapped the intercom switch and called the bridge to update Vice Admiral Rosenzweig on the situation. The Admiral acknowledged. A moment later, I heard the communications officer's voice come over the speakers.

"Ensign Semek, please report to Briefing Room 1. Ensign Semek, please report to Briefing Room 1."

"Bob," came Admiral Rosenzweig's voice again, "you'd better send a couple of guards to get him...just to be sure. Bridge out."

Mr. Csuti acknowledged the order and signaled for Ensign Tartaglino and Lieutenant Berman to see to it that Semek actually did make it to the briefing room. As it turned out, that action was fortuitous. Much of what happened I heard about later, 'cause I was told to report to Briefing Room 1, as well, along with Lieutenant Chan and Lt. Commander Travers. The three of us went immediately, meeting Vice Admiral Rosenzweig, Commander Maldonado, and Commander Buonocore—the Intelligence Officer—who had a few questions of his own for Semek. Semek himself, on the other hand, did not go the briefing room. Instead, he bolted for the hangar bay. The scuttlebutt was a little muddled, but apparently he figured he'd have a shot at commandeering a shuttlecraft. Mr. Tartaglino and Mr. Berman gave chase and were joined by several other security guards in Hangar One, where they eventually stunned Semek as he tried to get into the shuttle *Odyssey*. After they determined that the stun shot hadn't actually hurt Semek, the security team dragged him back to Briefing Room 1, put him in a chair, and stood around him until he regained consciousness.

I wouldn't have wanted to be in Semek's shoes when he woke up just then, surrounded by angry Security guards and equally angry senior officers. Then again, I wouldn't have tried to sabotage the ship's communications, either. As soon as they were sure that he was coherent, Mr. Csuti and Admiral Rosenzweig took turns firing questions at Semek. On occasion, Commanders Buonocore and Maldonado chimed in with questions of their own. But it was no use. All of the questions were answered with naught but stony silence. No matter what approach they took, no matter what they said, Semek would say nothing. The most verbose he got was to say, "I would decline to answer that question." Needless to say, that did not endear him to our superiors.

As I watched the interrogation, I began to notice something odd about Semek. At first, I had taken his silence for that kind of reserve that most Vulcans were trained from an early age to be able to adopt. But as I watched, I realized that wasn't it at all. His kinesics were wrong. There was much more tension visible than a Vulcan would have allowed to show. I could see the Admiral beginning to look oddly at Semek, as well.

"Sir?" I asked him. "Do you see something...wrong about Semek?"

"Wrong? What do you mean?" Now the Vice Admiral was dividing his attention between Semek's interrogation and me. Gods, but I hoped I wasn't being an idiot!

"Is it just me, sir, or are his kinesics off?"

"His..." began the CO. He looked straight at me, then turned back to Semek. "I knew I was seeing **something** 'off'," he said. "But what could it be?"

"Sir, could..." I paused, then started again. "Could he be a Romulan?"

"A Rihannsu...?" The Admiral looked thoughtful. "But he passed his physical." Then his expression hardened. "On the other hand, those things can be faked." I looked at him curiously, and he explained, "The Romulans only left Vulcan a couple of thousand years ago. That's not really enough time for a major divergence in species evolution. You'll find almost no difference between the typical Vulcan and Rihannsu." Then he turned to Mr. Csuti. "Bob, take Mr. Semek to sickbay. I want a detailed examination; to answer the question of whether he might be a Romulan."

"Yes, sir," said Csuti. He turned to look at Semek. "Okay, Ensign. On your feet."

The guards saw to it that Semek did reach his feet, and he was hustled out the door.

I didn't get to go along to see what happened, but the ship's grapevine (BBS "Common Room" and elsewhere) got hold of the news quickly enough. Once Semek was hauled into sickbay and run through a battery of scans, it was certain. He was, in fact, a Romulan. A little research on Commander Buonocore's part brought us the verification that he must also have been a spy. It was a neat trick; there **had** been an Ensign Semek just graduated from the Academy. During the time we were vacationing, we found out, Semek had gone missing, and now it seemed we knew why. The Roms must've grabbed him and substituted an operative in his place to come to the *Avenger*. When we were assigned to patrol near the Neutral Zone, it was a golden opportunity to get some... value out of the operative.

Keep in mind that most of the above was speculation. The only things we **knew** were that the man aboard the *Avenger* who claimed to be Semek was in fact a Romulan, and that the Semek who had just graduated—for whom this man was a lookalike—had disappeared. I suspected that there would be questions from the Federation to the Romulan Empire over this. Somehow it seemed that the Romulans just didn't want to get into the spirit of détente.

Meanwhile, "Semek" (he refused to give us his real name) was thrown in the brig. The word from my roommate was that there were several terse communications between Vice Admiral Rosenzweig and Star Fleet Command, before it was finally decided that the prisoner would be transferred to Starbase 29. After that, he was out of our hands, although everybody seemed to think that if he didn't cooperate he'd be spending some time in a penal colony, if he wasn't sent back to the Romulans instead.

And that's almost the end of the story. The only postscript was mine. The next day, I'd reported for duty to the SoSci Lab,

expecting everything to be pretty much normal. For the most part, it was, although I noticed a number of my crewmates smiling at me. I smiled back, and went to work. The only problem was that for the next couple of hours, everybody kept grinning at me. Oh, and Lt. Commander Travers fielded three different calls from the bridge, saying only, "No, not yet."

Finally, I went over to Ms. Travers. "What's going on?" I asked.

"Have you logged onto the Ship's BBS today, Ensign?" she asked me.

Actually, I hadn't. When I revealed that fact, five different crewmembers, including Lt. Commander Travers, immediately instructed me to do so. With all those fingers (okay, mostly fingers, but there was a talon and a tentacle, too) pointed at the console, the only thing I could do was to shrug embarrassedly, smile, and sit down at said console to log in.

What I found was a message in my "mailbox", directing me to switch to the General Announcements sub-board, then to BBS' Common Room, where general chatter was allowed pretty much free reign. As I began shifting through the screens, I saw Travers on the intercom, speaking softly.

Reaching the General Announcements screen, I saw my name in large letters. I froze. At the top of the image was the Vice Admiral's seal!

"Well," Travers prompted. "Read it." I started to continue reading when she added, "Aloud." I snapped my head around to look at her. She was smiling quite thoroughly.

I cleared my throat. "Umm... 'On behalf of the officers and crew of the starship Avenger, it is with great pride that I wish to commend Ensign Charles Donovan. His quick thinking, insights, and equally quick action proved invaluable in detecting and correcting sabotage against this ship, and preventing a potential interstellar incident. Let his actions be an example to us all. Also, let it be known that his name will be submitted for formal commendation to Star Fleet Command."

I stopped reading and switched to the Common Room. There, in addition to a less formal note from the Admiral, were congratulations and good wishes. Some were from people I knew, like Commander Maldonado, Commander Re'ming'ton, both Commanders Fillmore, Lieutenant Hennings, Lieutenant Richardson, Lt. Commander Ciufu, and of course Maria. Others were from people I didn't know. But everyone was happy, and many were saying so.

"Oh, my gods..." was all I could manage to say. Lt. Commander Travers walked over and put a hand on my shoulder.

"Welcome to the Avenger, Ensign."

-----FINIS-----