

## THE BEACON

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The starship *U.S.S. Avenger* cruised calmly through interstellar space. Her current mission, a charting assignment in an outer sector of the Federation, was proceeding uneventfully, and the sciences teams had charted several systems in detail for the first time and significantly improved on the available information about several more. Two worlds with intelligent life and significant civilizations had been observed, and information had been sent back to Star Fleet to allow the assignment of ships to conduct more extensive, in-depth studies of those systems.

Captain David Lynch, the *Avenger's* commanding officer, had to admit that he wished that the *Avenger* could get an assignment of that type, but he understood that while the ship was fully capable of such missions, it was also capable of a lot more than were the dedicated science ships. The *Avenger*, therefore, got the first looks at systems like these, but the research vessels were the ones to spend weeks or months in one system, learning in detail about its planets, and sometimes its people.

Still and all, the *Avenger* got plenty of opportunity to do its share of going where no one had gone before, and Lynch had few complaints on that score. While the ship was out in between the stars, though, he took advantage of the "quiet time" to get caught up on that bane of any CO's existence: paperwork. The reams of administrative documentation rarely used actual paper anymore, but the old term had survived the centuries. Whether they filled paper or digital files, though, it was a rare commanding officer that did anything more than tolerate it, and Lynch was no different than most. Still, he appreciated the chances to stop it from backlogging, when those chances were offered. As a result, he was spending much of Alpha Shift in his ready room, reviewing everything from fuel consumption reports to the personnel jackets of several new personnel who had recently transferred aboard. Among those were two new communications officers, newly aboard to replace Lieutenant Jaycee Nielsen, who'd transferred to the Security Division, and Fleet Captain T'HoD, who'd recently left the crew for parts unknown, and quite possibly classified.

Lynch had left the bridge in the charge of Commander Setak. The Vulcan executive officer, always a calming force, had also spent much of his Star Fleet career learning to understand, and thus be able to work with, more "demonstrative" races like Humans and Andorians. To his way of thinking, it was only logical to do so. Consequently, he was often more relaxed than many Vulcans. What he did share with most members of his species was a continued

fascination with everything around him, which had served him well during the years he'd spent in Sciences. It had also, though helped him greatly as he'd moved into command/leadership roles, first as a division chief and now a starship XO.

For much of the shift, the best way to describe the day would be "placid". Most of the bridge crew were looking forward to getting through the shift without incident and moving on to off-duty pursuits, whether they'd be research, recreation, or just plain sleep. The chatter was relaxed, with only Commander Elbrun busy at the Sciences station, coordinating the sensor usage for the charting of surrounding space. She was the first one to notice something unusual, a stray bit of directed energy.

Moments later, though, a chime sounded at the Communications station. Ensign Cohen, the young specialist on duty, slipped on her earpiece receiver and listened intently. Then she tied in the universal translator. The signal, she concluded, wasn't linguistic in the conventional sense, but still seemed geared to capture attention. There was something about the subharmonics that, well, tickled the brain.

"Commander Setak?" Cohen said. "I'm picking up a signal. It's not a message, per se, but it sure seems to want us to pay attention."

"Put it on the speakers, please," the exec requested.

"Aye, sir." Cohen tapped several controls, and sound washed through the bridge. Everyone, almost reflexively, stopped to listen for a moment, at least. Setak raised an eyebrow as his more sensitive hearing picked up harmonics that some of the others likely missed. After a few moments, he turned toward Communications. "Can you get a fix on the origin of the signal?"

"I'll try, sir," Cohen replied.

"I got some readings of unusual energy just before Ensign Cohen picked up the signal," reported Elbrun. "They might be related. I'll try to scan back, as well."

"Very good, Commander," Setak replied. He turned to the Helm station. "Lieutenant Romany, all stop. Hold our position." Then he tapped the chair-arm intercom control. "Captain Lynch to the bridge."

A moment later, Lynch stepped through the turbo-lift doors. "What have we got?" he asked, stepping down to the bridge's lower command well. Setak smoothly vacated the command chair, and Lynch settled into it equally smoothly.

"A signal, Captain," the exec explained. "It is apparently primarily an attention-getting transmission, rather than a full message. I took the liberty of asking Mr. Romany to take us out of warp to improve our probability of locating the source of the transmission."

"That's fine, Setak," Lynch said. Then he turned to first Cohen, then Elbrun. "Any luck so far?"

"I think I'm having some," Elbrun replied. "Just before Ensign Cohen reported the signal, I'd picked up a pulse of directed energy. Thinking the two might be related, I ran a sensor scan, and I not only think they are in fact related, but I've plotted a vector backward from the point at which we first received the signal. Correlating the energy with the signal reinforced that conclusion. There's a system along the track of the signal, about 9 parsecs from here."

"Fascinating," Setak said.

"Is it charted?" asked Lynch.

"Charted, yes, but unexplored," Elbrun said.

"Maybe it's worth taking a look," Lynch said thoughtfully.

"It'd be a good chance to see something new," Elbrun opined.

"Setak?" asked the captain.

"I believe that we could pursue this line of investigation without significantly compromising our mission objectives," Setak replied.

"Good enough for me," Lynch said with a smile. "Lieutenant M'reen, plot a course for our target system."

"Alrready plotted, sirrrr," the Caitian navigation officer responded. "And now laid in to FGC-8712."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Mr. Romany, ahead warp factor 5."

"Aye, Captain," Romany replied. His fingers played over the controls, and the ship sped back into warp, en route toward FGC-8712.

"What's our ETA?" asked Lynch.

"A little over nine hourrrs," M'reen supplied.

"Okay," said Lynch. "I might as well see if I can finish some more paperwork. You have the bridge, Setak."

"Yes, sir," Setak acknowledged. Lynch stood up, and Setak returned to his seat in the command chair. After, one more glance around the bridge, the commanding officer stepped back into the turbo-lift.

It was early in Gamma Shift when the *Avenger* arrived in the FGC-8712 system. As the ship passed several of the outer planets in the system of 15, the astrophysics specialists were analyzing the star and the worlds that revolved around it. One fact became clear very quickly: FGC-8712 was, or at least had been, a variable star, one of a class of stars which periodically grew much brighter than usual, releasing large amounts of radiated energy. It wasn't clear whether it had always been that way, or whether something had changed it, but even if it had been variable for a long time, suggested the astroscintists, it apparently had experienced a period of unusually intense activity several thousand years ago.

Scanning the system's inner planets, the *Avenger's* researchers found mute evidence of the star's activity. The surfaces of those worlds were scorched, as if they'd been flash-burned. The fourth planet, it appeared from the initial scans, had originally been very much like Earth, though it seemed now to resemble Vulcan much more. Still the initial

readings that caught the most attention were hints of refined metals and other suggestions of an advanced civilization.

The *Avenger's* Second Officer, Lieutenant Karza Tyrune, was in command during that shift. She turned to the Assistant Chief Science Officer, Lieutenant Emery Rush. "Are we safe to explore the inner planets?"

Rush nodded. "I think we are. Unless the star decides to suddenly flare up again, after a few thousand years, the local environment would be back to normal."

"Really, wouldn't the energy from a flare disperse pretty quickly, anyway?" asked Ensign Dar-Cherok from the Helm.

"The raw energy likely would," said Rush, "but where it impacted matter, the effects could be very far-reaching. Some irradiated matter might in turn stay radioactive for years, and that doesn't account for heat effects from the flare's gases. No matter how you look at it, it would be very nasty at the time of the event, and likely for a long period after. But after thousands of years, I think the biggest danger would be deep radioactivity."

"Have we located the source of the signal yet?" asked Tyrune.

"We're scanning for it, but it appears to be a highly directional signal. That's why it took so long for it to be detected," Rush noted.

"Okay. If need be, we can do a sweep all around the system," Tyrune said.

"I'm focusing on the frequencies at and near the one at which we first detected the signal," added Ensign Roberts from Communications. "If that doesn't work, I'll expand the frequency range, in case what we detected originally had been affected by deep space phenomena."

"Very good, Ensign," replied Tyrune. "Thank you."

It was amid the mountains of the sixth planet, the outermost of the smaller, terrestrial-type worlds, that the source of the signal was finally located. In a deep valley protected by the mountains in a high range, the signal ranged outward, only detected at certain angles. Rush theorized that the placement of the transmitter must have been to protect it from the flares. He also concluded that it was very likely a safe area for the ship and crew to investigate.

"Okay," said Tyrune. "I don't see anything that requires us to wake up the Captain or XO, but I'm sure Captain Lynch will want to make the decision to commit to exploring the beacon, so let's do a wide sweep around the inner system, with a quick pass by the fourth planet, then out toward the sixth in time for the shift-change."

At the Navigation station, Lieutenant Benteen nodded and turned to her console to enter the course parameters and lay in a projection that would do what Tyrune had described. A few moments later, she turned back to the command chair. "Course is plotted and laid in, Lieutenant," she said with a smile.

By the time Alpha Shift's personnel were coming on duty, the *Avenger* had completed its pass over the fourth planet. It had been a sobering reminder of the fragility of

civilization and the incredible resiliency of life. All around the planet were the remnants of a civilization that seemed to have reached a level roughly equivalent to Earth in the mid-21st Century. That, though, was as far as it would ever go. It was at that point, apparently, that FGC-8712 entered a cycle of massive flares, flares so massive that, in the end, they literally scorched the surfaces of the system's inner planets, and melted eons worth of ice on the surfaces of the outer planets or their moons. What was striking, though, was the fact that there was no sign of the beings, themselves, that had built the now dead civilization.

Tyrune, just before going off-shift, ordered the ship to hold station at the L-5 Lagrange point between FGC-8712-IV and its largest moon. That way, Captain Lynch and Commander Setak could make the decision about which planet to investigate first. When she finished her report and left the bridge, Lynch gazed at the main viewer for several minutes. Then he looked at Setak. "Let's investigate this planet first, then go back out to planet VI. No reason to go running back and forth."

"Agreed," Setak said with a nod.

"Ms. Elbrun, scan for sites that look the most promising for learning about what happened here."

"Aye, Captain," replied the Chief Science Officer. She turned to the Sciences console and began checking the current sensor readings against the data gathered by Lieutenant Rush.

"Let's also move back into a high standard orbit," Lynch told the Helm Officer.

"Yessir," Commander Ragin replied, adjusting her controls.

The *Avenger* steadily dropped down from L-5 to standard orbit, taking up a position roughly 8,000 kilometers above the planetary surface. As she orbited, Elbrun scanned the surface, and Lynch paced. Oh, he wasn't completely oblivious about it, but he nonetheless found that he couldn't sit still. Finally, Setak turned from where he stood near the Sciences station, and after a moment's observation, he stepped down into the lower command well.

"Captain." Lynch turned to look at him. "I understand your anxiousness and desire for things to move forward, but please be aware that you are making your crew nervous." Setak's voice was soft and understated, but Lynch could suddenly tell that his proper, Vulcan first officer was teasing him. The message hit home, though. The best way for a captain to make his crew uncomfortable was to appear so, himself. He recalled a lecture from James Kirk on that subject when he was at the Academy.

He quirked a smile at Setak. "Point taken, Commander," he said quietly. With that, he moved back to the command chair, switched the display on the chair-arm console, and began to monitor the engine output readings. It wasn't massively productive, but at least it kept him busy while he waited for the Sciences staff to do their jobs.

After a couple of hours had passed, Elbrun turned from her station. "Captain, I have some information."

"What is it?"

"I've isolated several locations that look promising as sites that might have records that could tell us what happened here. They also look reasonably safe to access."

"Details?" Lynch wanted to know.

"One location is a relatively intact structure in the center part of one of the major cities. We think it may be an archive or a hall of records or the like. Another looks like a secured facility, a bunker or similar military installation. A third is in a mountain canyon, where it looks like the rock protected it from the worst of the flares."

Reviewing the data from the Mission Ops station, Commander Van Houten said, "If we're still concerned about using transporters, then either of the first two sites would be better choices. They're pretty easily reachable with shuttlecraft, but that one in the canyon would be a real problem."

"At the same time, though," Elbrun said, "the canyon location will probably be the best protected from the residual harmful effects of the flares, and thus would pose less threat to personnel on the surface."

"But what about getting them there?" asked Lynch.

"We could beam them into an open area of the canyon about a kilometer from the structure," suggested Van Houten. "With basic low-level rad gear, they'd be safe enough from any leftover radiation."

"All right." Lynch had heard enough. "Outfit the shuttle *Kismet* for a landing near the bunker, and we'll prep a landing party on foot to go into the canyon." He turned to Elbrun. "Choose personnel from your division, and coordinate with Commander Van Houten from Operations and Lt. Commander Jayanti Sahir from Security for supporting personnel."

"Aye, sir," Elbrun said with a smile. As she turned back to her station, Setak turned to Lynch.

"Captain, request permission to join the landing party beaming down to the canyon. As a Vulcan, I will be well-equipped for the physical demands of the mission, and my sciences background will allow me to effectively contribute to the investigation."

"Good points," Lynch replied. "Do it."

It wasn't long before the arrangements were made. Setak, it was decided, would command the landing party bound for the canyon site, while Elbrun would lead the team aboard the *Kismet*. The shuttlecraft was being prepped in Hangar Bay 1, and the two parties met in the main briefing room on Deck 2 to plan their respective approaches.

"I've studied the terrain around the canyon," Setak said. He touched a control on the console at one end of the table, and a map flashed onto the wall viewer. "If we beam down here," and he indicated a spot on the map, "we'll be able to enter the canyon only approximately .64 kilometer from the facility. This will not leave us exposed for a dangerous length of time."

"We've not detected any evidence of large animal life," added Lieutenant Rush, "so our preliminary conclusion is that fauna should not pose a significant issue."

"The canyon itself is quite stable," reported Lieutenant Chin, the geologist. "We believe that any weak parts of the structure were likely compromised at the time of the flares, since the heat and radiation would have undermined the canyon's structural integrity. What's left are basalt and heavy granite, though in appearance it still looks a lot like wind-carved sandstone."

"Says a lot about the forces that affected that feature," Rush added.

"Yes, it does," Setak agreed. "I hope to spend a brief time analyzing the geophysical properties of the canyon's structure while we're on the surface."

Lynch, who was also at the meeting, said, "That's fine, but don't get distracted. You'll be on short-time down there. I want you to minimize your exposure until and unless it's shown to be perfectly safe."

"Of course, Captain," Setak said. "In order to maximize our efficiency, I have requested that Lieutenant Chin be a part of the landing party. Her job will be to concentrate on the geological analysis."

"I'll be coordinating with Commander Setak to handle the investigation of whatever we find inside the structure," said Rush. "We have Mr. Donovan joining us to handle linguistics duties, and Ensign Sibanda," he nodded to the young officer who hailed originally from the Zimbabwe region on Earth, "to handle the computer science matters."

"And I'll be going for security," added Lieutenant Dekker.

"Very well," Lynch said. Then he turned to Commander Elbrun. "And your team?"

"Mr. Negron will be coming with us for security purposes," said the Betazoid science officer, and Ensign Kelly—"Kareeka Kelly nodded"—will serve as our shuttle pilot."

"Nice to get a chance to fly, sirs and ma'am," Kelly said with a smile. Others in the room nodded. As transporters had grown both safer and more capable, small craft pilots had less and less to do, though it was still widely felt that transporters would never replace shuttles and the like completely.

"As for the rest of the sciences complement," Elbrun continued, "we have Ensign 1st Class Swift-Runner covering linguistics, Lieutenant McGwynn for cultural aspects, and Ensign 1st Class Ryan to do environmental studies." Although the shuttle could carry more personnel easily, it had been decided to limit the size of the landing party to six, in case they had to be pulled out quickly by transporter.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Lynch said, "good luck. Let's see if we can find out what happened here."

"Aye, Captain," said Elbrun with a smile.

As the two groups of crewmembers filed out of the briefing room, Lynch beckoned to Setak. The Vulcan walked over to him. "Sir?"

"I think you've got the harder job, but have someone monitor Elbrun and her party, as well...just in case."

"Of course, sir, though I believe they will all perform satisfactorily."

"Oh, I don't doubt that. It's just, in a city environment like that, more unexpected stuff can happen."

"Indeed," Setak replied, "but let us trust in their skills and training." The Vulcan looked more closely at his commanding officer. "Tell me, Captain, what is truly bothering you? Somehow I doubt that you are truly that concerned about the capability of our crew to deal with the unknown or unexpected."

Lynch sighed. "No, I'm not. There's just something about this whole thing that's setting off my spidey-sense."

Setak looked at him curiously. "Spidey-sense?"

"Old Terran fiction," Lynch explained with a wry chuckle. "20th to 21st Century. Spiderman. It's a way of saying that some instinct is bothered by this place, and I have learned to trust those instincts."

"Ahh," Setak replied, nodding sagely. "I understand."

With that, Setak left to join the rest of his landing party in Transporter Room 2. Lynch returned to the bridge, where he would be able to monitor both teams at once.

With her landing party securely strapped into their seats, Elbrun looked over at Kelly. "Ensign, let's fly."

Kelly tapped a control on her console. "Flight Ops, shuttle *Kismet* here. We're ready to go."

Lt. Commander Rigoni, the *Avenger's* senior-most shuttle pilot, who also doubled as chief flight officer, responded from the control booth overlooking Hangar Bay 1. "Very good, Ensign. Take care of the ship, now."

"Will do, sir," Kelly said with a smile.

"Depressurizing hangar," said Ensign Belax ga Arth, an Edosian pilot who was operating the hangar control station. A moment later, he added, "Opening bay doors." The large doors at the aft of the bay slowly slid open, with sparkles from a few remaining ice crystals of frozen atmosphere. Beyond the doorway, the stars and the curve of the planet below shone against the darkness of space. The grav-plates on the hangar's deck powered down, and the *Kismet* rose slowly, its thrusters pushing it toward the doorway. A moment later, it was through and gradually accelerating away from the ship, dropping between and below the warp engine nacelles. Leaving the ship behind, it steadily fell toward, and then into, the atmosphere of FGC-8712-IV. The crew gazed out through the windows, or into viewers, caught up in the vistas outside the craft. Moments later, the *Kismet* dove into a deep cloud bank, and the view became a wash of white. Ensign Kelly kept a watchful eye on her instruments, smiling as she made deft adjustments to maintain their course.

The shuttlecraft landed on an open field near the bunker. The building seemed largely intact, a consequence of it having been built of tough, degradation-resistant material that had also been constructed to resist attacks from hostile forces. The field, though once having evidently been cared for, was now increasingly wild, with dense grasses and trees gradually encroaching at its edge. Slight variations in topography had led to the formation of several ponds, as well, around which Kelly guided the shuttlecraft

before bringing it to a gentle touchdown about 30 meters from the entrance to the structure.

The hatch slid open and the crew emerged, gazing around at the low structure and the slowly decaying complex beyond. The air was warm, but not uncomfortable, and fresher than they'd expected. "But, then again," noted Cameron Ryan, "the plant life has seemed to recover from the environmental shock of the flares in ways that animal life never did."

"And plants," added Elbrun, "tend to be good at cleaning up environments, even if it takes a lot of time."

"Right," Ryan agreed.

Ahead of them was the bunker that was their target. Negron and Elbrun pulled out tricorders and studied the readings, trying to get a feel for the best way to enter the structure.

"Looks like the door is reinforced, but not as thick as it might have been, compared to similar structures on other worlds at tech levels comparable to what we think was the case here," Negron said thoughtfully.

"Let's see if we can get in, then," Elbrun said.

Meanwhile, Setak's landing party had donned light anti-rad gear over their field uniforms, and stood in Transporter Room 2. As the executive officer arrived, they moved to the platform. Setak joined them, after gathering his preferred field equipment, and then turned to face the officer in the operator's booth. "Ensign Alane, please energize."

"Aye, sir," Alane said, operating the controls. She nodded and smiled as the six members of the landing party were transformed into columns of lambent blue-white light. They briefly illuminated the room before fading into nothingness. Alane touched a control on her console. "Bridge, Transporter Room 2. Landing party has beamed down."

"Thank you, Ensign," came the response from Lynch. "Bridge out."

On the planet's surface, the six columns of energy flared into existence, and then again faded, leaving six Star Fleet officers. Chin, Rush, and Setak immediately activated their tricorders and began scanning the area. "Commander," Rush said, "the most direct route to the facility is this way." He pointed toward a narrow slot in the cliff beside which they stood.

Chin was alternating her gaze between the orangey sky and the almost fluid lines of the rocks of the canyon. "It's amazing. These rocks might have patterns like sandstone, but that's mostly granite."

"I can only imagine what it must have been like," Rush commented, "to be here when the flares came through, and superheated winds all-but-melted the walls of this place."

"I'm pretty sure that I wouldn't have wanted to be here," Donovan commented wryly.

"Probably neither did the locals," commented Rush.

"Perhaps our time will be better spent seeking clues to what happened to them," Setak interjected. "Those clues most likely lie ahead of us, within the canyon."

"Yeah, we should get a move on," Rush agreed.

"I'll take point," added Dekker.

And with that, the landing party moved into the canyon.

The first attempt to enter the building, a fairly straightforward attempt to "jimmy" the bunker's electronic lock, didn't work at all. Negron was fairly certain that the electronics were so old that they probably weren't functional enough for the attempt to make a difference.

"I guess the only way will have to be a brute force approach," said Ryan.

"It looks like it," replied Elbrun.

Negron said, "I'll get started," and headed back to the shuttlecraft to get equipment with heavier firepower. He returned a few moments later with a phaser rifle.

"Y'know," McGwynn said, "Normally I'd be uncomfortable with blowing holes in what might qualify as an historic structure, but given that it might be our only way to find out what happened here, I think I can live with it." Negron chuckled, and Elbrun smiled.

"In general, I'd agree with you," said the chief science officer, "but as you say, it might be our only chance."

"And it's not like there's anyone here who's going to get upset at us for disturbing a sacred site," commented Swift-Runner.

"Yup," Elbrun agreed.

"So should we get down to business?" Negron held up the rifle.

"Do it," Elbrun commanded.

Negron leveled the rifle and began firing steadily at the edges of the doorway. He focused on the locking mechanism, in hopes that if it could be breached, the door might open with a minimum of damage to the rest of its structure. Suddenly, the young security officer found himself sprawled on the ground, looking up at the pained face of Ensign 1st Class Swift-Runner. Next to them was a charred section of ground.

"Utina!" he heard McGwynn shout.

"Oh, that smarts," the linguist groaned, just before she slumped down on top of Negron.

Extricating himself from under Swift-Runner, Negron saw a nasty looking burn slashed across her back. Elbrun had tapped her commbadge and was speaking urgently. "Yes, Ensign, bring the medkit, and make sure it has burn treatments. She touched the insignia again, turning it off, and knelt by Swift-Runner. Satisfied that the specialist was alive, she looked at Negron. "We assumed that everything was dead. Looks like we were wrong."

"Maybe it is now," said Ryan, pointing. Negron followed his gesture to where a smoking socket was visible in the side of the structure, from which a laser weapon now hung inert.

"Sorry, Commander," said Negron. "I assumed that if there wasn't even power for the lock, there wouldn't be for

weaponry. I was obviously wrong.” He looked sadly to where Ensign Kelly had brought the medkit and was applying an analgesic spray to her back.

“When we get back to the ship, you’re going to owe her a drink,” said Kelly tartly. The others all turned to look at her. “Yes, she’s going to be fine, but I don’t think she’s going to be up to much walking around for a bit.”

“Can you get her back to the shuttle?” asked Elbrun.

“Yeah, I’ll be able to,” Kelly said. “We’ll wait for you there.”

“Good. Thanks,” the science officer said.

Negron, meanwhile, was scanning the structure with a tricorder, hunting for evidence of any more lasers. Finding none, he showed Elbrun his results. “Let’s get in there,” she said, perhaps just a bit fiercely. “Back to work, mister.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Negron said. He leveled the rifle and resumed the task of cutting his way into the structure.

It wasn’t long before the powerful phaser beam broke through the door, and its pieces fell away to the side. There had been no further interference from any remaining security systems, leading to the suggestion that the power to that single laser might have been a single surviving link.

“So just bad luck, eh?” grumbled Negron, who was still upset at what had happened to Swift-Runner.

“Keep focused, please,” Elbrun said softly. She empathized with his feelings, but they had a job to do.

With the door now removed and the way open into the bunker, Negron eased forward, his phaser rifle leveled. Moving slowly, the Star Fleet officers entered the structure.

Elbrun consulted her tricorder. “It looks like the computers are located about 50 meters that way.” She pointed down the corridor. The group walked slowly but steadily, scanning as they went.

“Looks like pretty standard construction for the tech level,” said McGwynn. “Titanium, concrete, steel rebar. It’s heavily reinforced, unsurprisingly, considering that it was probably originally a military installation.”

Soon, the group reached the location that Elbrun had pinpointed as where to access the computers. Several terminals ringed a central table surrounded by chairs that looked pretty much like chairs on most Federation worlds.

“Looks like these people were pretty much humanoid,” Ryan commented.

“Yes, it does,” Elbrun replied. “Probably will make deciphering their language easier.”

“That’ll be helpful, with our linguist down for the count right now,” commented McGwynn. Considering that she was now the closest they had to a linguist, Elbrun thought that she could be forgiven the slight edge in her voice.

Elbrun scrutinized the equipment. “I want to see what happens if we run some power through the system,” she said. Negron handed her a power cell, which she hooked up to an adapter that she hoped to link to the alien computers. “Okay, here goes…” Using her tricorder as a control unit, she slowly brought up the power levels. Slowly, a viewer on one of the terminals in the room’s center began to glow with light, and gradually brightened.

“Looks like you’re getting something,” said McGwynn.

Abruptly, the screen came fully to life, a wash of graphics and alien characters racing across the display. “Now it gets interesting,” said Elbrun. She looked at McGwynn. “Ready to see what you can figure out?”

McGwynn sat in one of the chairs, and tapped gingerly at a set of control keys set in front of the display screen. “It’s going to take time to figure this out,” she said. “I doubt there’s going to be a primer for users who don’t speak or read the language.”

“Can we reach the ship?” asked Ryan. “Maybe we could tie into the computers and reinforce the tricorder.”

“Good idea,” said Elbrun. She couldn’t, though, get a signal through.

“It’s probably the building,” said Negron. “If we’re right and it was a military bunker, it’s probably hardened against radiation and high-energy attacks, and a communicator signal would have trouble getting through.”

Elbrun thought about that for a moment, then nodded. “You may be right. I’ll try from outside. Mr. Negron, you’re with me. The rest of you, stay put.” She headed out of the room and down the corridor, periodically attempting to reach the ship. She didn’t get through, though, until they’d actually gotten back outside. Once she got through, she explained the situation.

“We’ll need to make sure that we can sustain a comm-link if we’re going to tie-in the ship’s computer,” said Lieutenant Nguyen, who was manning the sciences station for this shift while the division’s senior officers were planetside.

“What if we beam down some signal relays?” asked Lt. Commander Thompson from the Communications station. “Set one up outside the entrance, and then run a line of them down the corridor to the room where the computer’s set up.”

Lynch thought for a moment, then nodded. “I think that’ll work,” he said. Turning toward Nguyen, he asked, “Are conditions good enough for safe transport?”

“I believe so, sir,” Nguyen replied, after a quick check of her sensor displays.

“Good.” Turning to Thompson, he continued, “Get in touch with Ops and Engineering, and get a supply of relays to Transporter Room 1, on the double.”

“Aye, Captain,” Thompson responded.

Within a quarter hour, the relays materialized near the entrance to the bunker. “We have them, *Avenger*,” Elbrun reported.

“Good,” replied Lynch. “Let us know when you’re ready to tie in to the computers up here.”

“Aye, sir,” the chief science officer replied. Gathering the rest of the landing party, she got everyone to help set them up. Soon, she reported back to the *Avenger*, “We’re ready.”

Thompson said, “I’ve got the link set up to the computer. All they need to do is tie in like they usually would.”

Returning to the room in the bunker where the computer terminals were located, the landing party resumed their translation efforts. With the computing power of the ship's computer supporting the translation effort, it wasn't long before bits and pieces of the ancient language started to make sense. They were aided along the way by results from the parallel efforts being pursued by Commander Setak's party at the canyon facility.

Things had gone rather more smoothly for Setak and his team. Carefully moving through the canyon, they reached the structure they'd sought in about 90 minutes. The building was nestled down in a pocket of the canyon, one which appeared to have been carved in a swirl of wind, dust, and flame. The structure was well-sealed, but in contrast to the obviously-military bunker, the entrance was not designed to prevent entry. The door was sealed for protection against the elements, but opened readily once the appropriate catch was found.

After gaining entry, the landing party found the interior layout designed to encourage discovery and understanding of its message. Among the aids to understanding was the primer that had been absent at the bunker.

"Apparently," Setak opined, "whoever prepared this facility had a very different mind-set from the military thinking at the other facility."

Donovan, who had been in touch with the ship and had learned of the other landing party's difficulties, arranged for the transfer of the data via the relays set up at the bunker. He was especially concerned when he learned what had happened to Ensign 1st Class Swift-Runner, and relieved to also learn that she would be all right.

In the end, the information at both locations conveyed a single story. It told of the decision to flee the planet with as many people as possible, and to retreat toward the outer worlds to make the choices necessary for long-term survival. What was left unsaid was what happened after that, since no trace of habitation had been seen among the outer planets.

"But what they also don't say," Donovan observed, "is anything about a beacon left to signal other beings. So maybe they only came up with that idea after they'd left this planet."

"That's a good point," Rush agreed.

"It would appear," Setak commented, "that our quest to understand what has happened in this system will, in the end, lead us to what first drew us here."

"That beacon on the sixth planet?" asked Sibanda.

"Indeed," replied the executive officer.

A signal to Elbrun's team confirmed that they had come to essentially the same conclusion, and the decision was made to return to the *Avenger*. As Setak's party hiked out of the canyon, Elbrun's team gathered their equipment and prepared the *Kismet* for liftoff. Both teams did as much analysis of their environments as possible, since it remained

unclear when, or if, they would be back again. The *Kismet* took to the air shortly before the other group exited the canyon, but Setak and his team, courtesy of the transporter, actually made it back to the ship first.

Once the *Kismet* set down in the hangar bay, a medical team took charge of Ensign 1st Class Swift-Runner and hustled her off to sickbay. Negron went with her, too, still feeling badly about what had happened on the surface. Lieutenant Konrad Baader, the Doctor of Physical Medicine, assured the worried security officer that Swift-Runner would be just fine, though.

Placing Lieutenant Rush in charge of writing the after-action report, Setak and Elbrun headed back to the bridge, where they knew that Lynch would be waiting for them to report in. As they stepped off of the turbo-lift, he immediately turned to face them.

"Ms. Swift-Runner?" he asked.

"Doctor Baader says she'll be fine," Elbrun said. "She's in sickbay now."

"Okay," Lynch said with a nod. "Good to hear. So," he went on, "there was really no hint of what happened to the people of this planet aside from that they left?"

"The final entries in the records we found said that they evacuated to the outer planets to stay alive until they could plan a longer-term strategy," Setak explained. "We will continue to review the data we recorded, but it appears that earlier entries dealt more with the mechanics of the evacuation process, including how to handle the response when the population came to understand that there would be no possible way to evacuate anything close to everyone."

"And what we found stopped at the point where everyone left, not even saying where they were going," Elbrun added.

"But with no evidence of any continued habitation in the system, they had to have gone somewhere," said Lieutenant Nguyen.

"Also unanswered is the question of why they would construct a beacon to attract attention to this system," Setak said. "It would seem that the choice to do so was made after they left this planet."

"Could they have hollowed out asteroids to make habitats?" wondered Lieutenant Rupprecht, who was manning the Engineering station.

"We'd have detected power emissions, though," Elbrun answered, "unless the habitats were so insulated that nothing leaked. But then what about communications, or craft moving through the system, or some other sign of habitation or activity?"

"So our only real chance of getting answers is still that beacon," Lynch summed up.

"Assuming that there's something else there beyond just an attention-grabbing pulse," commented Elbrun.

"True," replied the Captain. "Well, let's go find out." He turned the command chair forward, so he could face the helm and navigation officers. "Lieutenant Benteen, set a

course for FGC-8712-VI. Mr. Romany, when you have the course, one-third impulse.”

Both officers acknowledged and turned to their stations. A few moments later, Romany said, “I have the course. One-third impulse.” The *Avenger* steadily pulled away from FGC-8712-IV, and headed outward toward the system’s sixth planet.

The trip took only about an hour or so, time which Commander Elbrun used to review the data that had been gathered about the sixth planet. That world was slightly larger than Mars in the Sol System, with a thin atmosphere. Landing parties would still need environmental gear, though, to visit the surface. Unlike on the fourth planet, though, there was little concern about lingering radioactivity in the environment, so suits could be more about providing warmth and pressure, rather than shielding.

When the ship reached the planet and settled into orbit, they resumed scanning for the source of the signal. It wasn’t long before the valley in which the signal beacon was located was again located. As the ship moved into orbit above the beacon, though, the signal abruptly cut off.

“It would seem, Captain,” Setak suggested, “that our presence has been detected.”

“Yeah,” said Lynch, “but why just cut off? Is it possible that the whole thing was all just a shout of, ‘We were here!’?”

“Maybe so,” said Thompson from Communications. “The drive to be remembered is a strong one.”

“Who wants to be forgotten, right?” added Romany.

“A lot of people do things just so that they’ll be remembered, and have throughout history,” Rupprecht added thoughtfully.

“And here we are,” said Elbrun, “a few millennia after this star flared up and fried its inner planets, thinking about these people and what happened to them. I guess it worked.”

“I think we should stop just sitting and remembering,” said Lynch, “and get on with finding out what actually happened. Ms. Elbrun, put together a landing party.”

“Aye, Captain,” responded the Chief Science Officer. She turned to her station to select personnel. It wasn’t long before she transferred her recommendations to Lynch’s chair-arm console. He looked them over, and added his approval.

“Have them meet Mr. Setak and yourself in Transporter Room 2, and get outfitted for the surface conditions.”

“Yes, sir,” Elbrun replied, and Setak nodded. Then they headed for the turbo-lift doors. There was a pair of soft hisses, and they were gone.

Arriving in the transporter room, the two senior officers were promptly handed lightweight environmental suits, designed specifically for low (but not no) pressure environments without concerns about radiation. They stepped into an adjacent staging area to change, and returned a couple of minutes later. Already suited up and

on the platform were Lieutenant Dekker, Lieutenant J.G. Xiao from Engineering, Lieutenant Donovan, and Lieutenant J.G. Rhana Ebran. Setak and Elbrun joined them, and then turned back to the officer standing in the control booth.

“Lieutenant Themri,” Setak said, “you may energize when ready.”

“Aye, sir,” responded the Andorian transporter officer. He ran his hands over the controls, and the six crewmembers on the platform were surrounded and enveloped by columns of blue-white light. A moment later, he once again faced an empty platform. Tapping the intercom control, he reported, “Bridge, the landing party has beamed down without incident.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” came the reply. “Stand by.”

“Affirmative,” said Themri, as he cycled the transporter into stand-by mode.

On the planet’s surface, six columns of blue-white light flared into existence, and then faded, to leave the *Avenger* landing party standing on the valley floor. They turned slowly, gazing around through their helmets at the landscape in which they found themselves. Setak touched a control on his suit that activated its communicator.

“Report,” he asked.

“Looks like we’re all here and in good shape,” Elbrun said.

“Yes,” Xiao said, her soft voice distinctive. “But what should we be looking for?”

“I think,” said Donovan, “that.” He pointed, and the others followed his gesture. About 150 meters from where they stood, a structure was built low to the ground. It looked very much like the bunker on FGC-8712-IV, reinforced and protected from the environment. On the structure’s far side, though, a spire stood, upthrust, reaching skyward.

“That spire must be the transmitting antenna,” said Elbrun.

“That is likely, but not absolutely certain, of course,” Setak replied.

“Of course,” Elbrun said sagely. “After all, out here, things are rarely certain, right?”

“Only the laws of physics, but occasionally not even them.” Elbrun gave Setak a sidelong look, to which he responded with only a raised eyebrow.

The group walked the last 150 meters, and soon found themselves standing at what they assumed was a hatch, with a small control panel built into the wall next to it. Setak raised his tricorder and scanned the wall, looking for any hints as to which control would open the door. Xiao was doing the same, and she pointed to a turquoise colored, square-shaped control.

“I think it may be this one,” she said.

“I believe that you may be correct,” Setak agreed.

“Anything to suggest that a weapon might be hooked to this door?” asked Dekker, the barest hint of emphasis on the word “this” reminding the team of the surprise that had awaited Elbrun’s party at the bunker on FGC-8712-IV.

"Not that I can see," replied Xiao.

"Let us make the attempt," Setak said. "Further speculation is unlikely to benefit us."

Xiao nodded and pressed the control. For a moment, nothing happened. Then, slowly, the door slid aside, revealing a short, empty corridor extending into the structure. At its far end, another heavy-looking door remained closed.

"Looks like you guessed right," said Donovan matter-of-factly.

"Now let us see if we can learn what has happened to the people who once lived among these worlds," Setak said, stepping through the entryway.

"Does it look like this might be an airlock?" asked Ebran, looking around. "It's hard to imagine that they wouldn't have wanted people to get out of heavy suits."

"Let's see if there's a control panel on the inside walls," Elbrun answered.

After a brief search, they located what Xiao identified as controls linked to the door, and potentially to other systems. "I think it is an airlock," she said. "Let me try."

"Please keep your suits on until we can establish a safe environment," Setak said. It would seem to be common sense, but Setak had, over the years, found that even "common sense" bore periodic repetition.

Following Xiao's lead, they eventually isolated what seemed to be controls for an airlock system, and a set of symbolic instructions for its proper use. Carefully, they followed the instructions, and were rewarded by the outer door's closing and the soft hiss of air entering the enclosed area. Elbrun unhooked her tricorder from her environmental suit and scanned the air entering the chamber.

"Oxygen-nitrogen mix, but higher in oxygen content than we're used to," she said. "Slightly more trace gasses, as well. Breathable enough, at least for the amount of time we're likely to be here."

"Keep me under observation," Setak said. Elbrun nodded, and the Vulcan carefully began to release the seals of his helmet. There was a soft hiss as the suit's pressure equalized with the surrounding atmosphere. Setak removed the helmet, and slowly inhaled, then exhaled. "I can feel the effect of the richer oxygen content," he said, "and the air is slightly stale, but aside from that, it seems acceptable."

After another minute had passed without ill effect, Setak nodded, and the other members of the landing party removed their helmets, as well.

"Yeah, a little musty," said Donovan, but it still beats suit air."

"It does, yeah," agreed Lieutenant Dekker.

"Guess we're agreed," said Elbrun. "But we should probably get on with finding out what happened in here."

"A fair point," Setak replied. He pointed to the controls by the inner door. "Will those gain us access to the interior of the structure?"

"I think so," said Xiao. She turned her attention to the panel. "Just a moment..." She adjusted several controls,

and shortly thereafter, the inner door slid open. "There," she said with a satisfied smile.

"Good work," Elbrun told her.

"Thank you, Commander," the engineer replied.

With the way now clear, the landing party made its way farther into the structure. As they exited the lock, they were surprised to see a series of glowing bars flashing in sequence down the hallway. At the end of the corridor, the lights formed a pattern around a roughly trapezoidal doorway, clearly indicating that it was where visitors were intended to go.

"It would seem that we have passed the tests and are being invited in," Setak said.

"Tests?" asked Dekker.

"We followed the beacon's signal, followed it to this planet, found this installation, got the door open, figured out the airlock, got it closed behind us, and got this place repressurized," said Elbrun. "I think they figure that if we did all that, we've earned the chance to know what's going on."

"Then let's do it," Donovan chimed in.

"Agreed," Setak said. "Let us see what answers await us."

The group moved carefully down the corridor. As they reached the doorway, bordered in flashing lights, it slowly slid open, revealing several computer workstations and a large wall screen. The workstations promptly came to life and the large viewer began to glow, a soft, pearlescent silver-gray lighting its surface.

"And here I was going to ask if the equipment had power," Donovan said wryly.

"There seems to be power everywhere else," commented Elbrun. "Why not in the room they seemed to want us to find?"

"Yeah, I know," Donovan said.

Abruptly, an image appeared on the large viewer. It was a humanoid figure, with lavender skin and jet black hair, and it appeared to be both mammalian and male. The figure enlarged, the apparent camera coming in for a closeup. The view followed him as he walked to a workstation and sat down. And then he began to speak.

"You're on," Dekker said softly to Donovan. With a nod, the linguist activated his tricorder and tied in the universal translator module. The device hummed softly as it analyzed the alien speech, analyzing patterns and looking for meanings it might be able to recognize.

It took several minutes, but gradually the translator began to make sense of the man's language. Once the initial barrier was breached, full translation came quickly, and the man's tale truly began to unfold.

"We had known for some time that our star had become unstable," he was saying as the translation settled in, "but even then, it required an immense commitment to do what needed to be done." He went on to describe the initial movement of as many of the fourth planet's natives--they called themselves Baranin, and the planet Baranosh--to habitats in the outer reaches of the system. But many of the Baranin would not leave their world, even in the face of

likely destruction, and in the end, the difficult decision had to be made not to spend time and resources compelling people to leave who would otherwise refuse. So everyone who was willing to leave, and could be accommodated, was packed onto ships and brought to the massive habitats which had been built among the outer planets, at a distance believed safe from the worst effects of the star's flares.

The flare cycle lasted several months, and then subsided. But the damage had been done. Most of the animal life, and the vast majority of the Baranin, had been lost. A few people survived in protected facilities, but so much of ecosystem had been devastated that they could not survive for long, and in the months that followed, the people in the habitats grew accustomed to hearing signals from Baranosh, the voices of those left on the planet pleading for help. There were debates about trying to rescue them, but again and again, it was decided that the resources that the surviving Baranin still possessed were needed for them, not in attempts to recover those who had insisted on remaining behind. Gradually, one at a time, the signals stopped.

The remaining Baranin lived on in their habitats for nearly 270 Earth years. At first, they were wary of even returning to Baranosh, fearful of conditions on the planet. Later, they realized that while there might not be an immediate threat, the planet's ecosystem had been so badly damaged that it would be many more centuries before it would again be able to support baranoid life. There were also no other habitable planets in the system. Ultimately, the eyes of the Baranin turned outward. The question, though, was how to transform that outward look from mere rumination to practical reality.

The answer came just over two centuries after the flares. Scientists on several of the habitats had been researching technologies that could be used for starflight, including everything from "cold sleep" suspended animation to relativistic speed propulsion. As do so many such discoveries, the one that unlocked the stars came quite unexpectedly. Instead of a warp drive, the Baranin first found a way to manipulate space so that even lower-power drives could propel vessels at appreciable percentages of the speed of light. From there, it was only a matter of time until a way to sidestep the light barrier could be realized. Once that happened, the stars were finally opened to the Baranin people.

Even with the technology for starflight in hand, it would still be over 65 Earth years before the Baranin could reach outward in large numbers. Vast resources had to be marshaled to enable the people living in the various habitats to reach for the stars. At least this time, there weren't any dissenters. Everyone agreed that the habitats could not be an indefinite solution, and for all its risks, starflight in search of a new home was the best option. So while the great ships were being readied, astronomers actively scanned the skies, and sent out probes, in search of a promising target system.

Fortunately for the Baranin, their system had a number of fairly close stellar neighbors, with several stars enough like their own to be good candidates to have Baranosh-like planets. After a thorough survey of nearby systems, with both high-velocity probes and powerful telescopes, they concluded that the most likely target for a successful migration lay in orbit around a star roughly four parsecs distant. As best as they could tell, the third planet out from the star was a very close analog to Baranosh. Even better, the star seemed much more stable than their own. The result was predictable; it took very little time for a vast majority of the Baranin to decide that that system would be the target of their interstellar voyage. The journey would take about 30 years to complete, even at trans-relativistic speeds, but the great ships were being designed for much longer journeys, since there was still the possibility that, as promising as the target planet seemed, it might not prove as ideal as hoped.

With the target settled upon, and the ships being prepared, a decision was also made to leave a message behind, as had been found amid the ruins when exploratory teams had finally returned to Baranosh. This one, though, would be directed outward, to the universe at large.

"The beacon," Elbrun said. "That's their message."

"More precisely," answered Setak, "the beacon was their way to get our attention. What we are seeing now is the message."

The Baranin wanted to make sure, whatever might happen to them as they journeyed to the stars, that the universe would know that they had been from this place, and what had befallen them. So the records were prepared, the facility was constructed, and the equipment was prepared to transmit the signal into space to alert passers-by that someone had been there.

By the time the ships were ready, the message had been prepared. In a somewhat poetic solution, it was arranged that the signal to activate the beacon, and the recordings placed in facilities on both Baranosh and the system's sixth planet, would come from one of the ships carrying the Baranin on their journey to the stars. There was some concern that a failure might delay their departure, but in the end, everything worked perfectly.

"And now," said the man on the viewer, "you have heard our story. I am Marad, the last leader of the Baranin in this star system. I wish you well, and ask that you remember us. Farewell."

Marad stopped speaking, and the viewer gradually faded to blackness. The landing party from the Avenger looked at each other, trying to assimilate what they'd seen and heard.

"That message is about 2,700 years old, based on my readings of this structure," said Ebran. "Amazing that the equipment works so well after all this time."

"They really wanted to make sure that they'd be remembered, didn't they?" added Elbrun.

"I wonder what happened to them," said Xiao.

"Me, too," replied Donovan. "We could do an analysis of the languages of nearby civilizations and see if there are any similarities to what we know of...Baranese?"

"That would be a beginning," Setak agreed, "though whether Star Fleet Command will assign this research to the *Avenger* or to another vessel remains to be seen."

"Maybe, if we can bring them something conclusive when we report in at the outset, they'll be more willing to let us do the follow-up," suggested Elbrun.

"Perhaps," the exec replied. "In the interim, I suggest that we return to the ship. We have found that for which we came."

"Yes, I agree," said Elbrun.

"Well, back into the suits," sighed Donovan.

"Lieutenant," Setak said, "you are still wearing your suit, merely having removed your helmet."

"Oh, you know what I mean," Donovan got out, before he turned around and saw Setak watching him with a "gotcha!" expression on his face. He sighed, and muttered, "Wiseass," under his breath.

"On occasion, yes," Setak replied, drawing laughter from the rest of the party. Donovan wanted to sigh and roll his eyes, but in the end gave up and chuckled.

For the next several minutes, no one spoke, as the landing party focused on suiting back up. Once they were all checked, and the suits were confirmed to be working properly, the group made their way back to the airlock. Cycling through, they soon were again standing outside the structure, gazing up at tower that housed the transmitter that had led them to this system.

"In a way," Elbrun said, "I almost feel sad to leave this structure behind."

"How so?" asked Setak.

"I keep thinking of it as a lonely sentinel, having kept a watch for so many years."

"Commander," the exec replied, "while the image is poetic, please keep in mind that this is merely a structure which houses machinery, machinery which has performed a function it was designed to perform, in accordance with programming created a long time ago. It will not miss us, nor, really, was it ever truly aware in a conscious sense, that we were here."

"I think I like the poetry better," said Ebran, to chuckles from the others, except, of course, Setak.

For his part, the executive officer tapped a control on the suit-arm panel. "Setak to *Avenger*."

"*Avenger* here, sir," came the reply.

"We are ready to return to the ship. Please alert the transporter room."

"Aye, sir." A few moments later, Lieutenant Themri's voice replaced that of Lt. Commander Thompson. "Transporter Room 2 here. I'm locking on to you now."

"Energize when ready," Setak instructed.

"Energizing now," Themri acknowledged, and a moment later, the six crewmembers felt the transporter beam take hold of them. The Baranin building, the spire, and the valley walls faded around them. There was the usual moment of oblivion, and then the familiar

surroundings of Transporter Room 2 faded back in, with Themri standing in the operator's booth, in his usual spot at the controls.

The landing party removed their helmets, and Themri smiled and said, "Welcome back." Tapping the intercom control on his console, he continued, "Bridge, the landing party is safely back aboard."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Lynch responded. "Have them report to Briefing Room 1."

"Aye, sir. Themri out." The Andorian tapped the intercom control, and then looked at the landing party. "Well," he said, his antenna flicking forward, "you heard the man."

Several minutes later, the landing party had changed back into their regular uniforms and reported to the main briefing room on Deck 2. Captain Lynch met them there, and they quickly recapped what they had learned, assuring him that the details would all be in their reports.

"So let me get this straight," he said. "The survivors of this mess spent a few centuries in habitats, then built starships and went out into space to search for a new home?"

"That is essentially correct, Captain," Setak replied. "The inevitable questions become, where did they go, and what became of them afterward?"

"That may take some time to answer," Elbrun added. "For example, even after the link between the Vulcans and Romulans became common knowledge, and allowing that we know where, in the end, the Romulans wound up, intensive research has only begun to identify the path of their journey. We also know that not all of the ships that left Vulcan made it to Romulus, but we still don't know what happened to the ones that didn't."

"This could be a serious archaeology project," suggested Ebran.

"Unfortunately, I don't know if Star Fleet will let it be **our** archaeology project," Lynch said.

"Has there been some indication of restiveness on their part?" asked Setak.

"Not yet," Lynch replied, "but we did divert from an assigned mission, and they might want us to get back to it."

"Perhaps," Setak said, "but given the potential import of this discovery, and the fact that we already have the most information, it would seem logical to allow us to pursue the matter."

"Captain," Elbrun said, "we could just start looking into it, and then, by the time we hear back, we might be far enough along that it wouldn't make sense to pull us out."

"I wish it were that easy," Lynch answered with a chuckle, "but if they want to hand it over to, say, a dedicated research ship, that won't stop them." Elbrun started to open her mouth again, but Lynch held up a hand. "But, since I want to see if we can learn more as much as all of you, I say let's at least give it a try."

"All right," Elbrun said, "I'll get a research team on it. We'll see if we can find out anything about local civilizations that might offer a few clues."

"Very good," Lynch said. Turning to the rest of the group, he added, "Okay, everyone, dismissed. Back to your stations." The group nodded and filed out.

Returning to the bridge, Lynch and Elbrun resumed their stations, while Setak took his typical stance to one side of the command chair. Lynch turned to Elbrun. "Commander, the system you described as being the target for the Baranin... Is it on our charts?"

Elbrun called up charts at her station. "There is a system that matches the description in the recorded message, and is in the right place. It's FGC-8716. No other name is listed for it. It's charted, but not explored."

"Anything to suggest that it might have a technological civilization?" asked Lynch.

"Nothing to indicate a technological or non-technological civilization," Elbrun said with a shrug. "There's not enough information at all."

"Think we should go find out?" the captain asked with a smile.

"Yes, sir," was Elbrun's enthusiastic reply.

"I thought you might," Lynch said. He shifted his attention to the navigation and helm station. "Lieutenant Benteen, set a course for FGC-8716. Lieutenant Romany, once you have the course, take us to warp factor four."

Both officers nodded, and turned to their controls. A moment later, the low hum of the ship's impulse engines firing up was felt, and the main viewer showed FGC-8712-VI falling away.

"Five minutes until safe distance to engage warp drive," reported Benteen, monitoring the ship's approach to the planet's Danylkiw Limit.

"At your discretion, helm," Lynch said.

"Aye, Captain," answered Romany. A few moments later, he added, "Engaging," and on the viewer, the stars stretched briefly into streaks before the computers caught up and restored an image of more normal looking stars, derived from the subspace sensors.

The *Avenger's* course took it on a long, sweeping curve out of the FGC-8712 system, before the ship settled onto a steady course for FGC-8716. Benteen reported that the estimated time to reach the system would be roughly nine hours, and the crew settled down for the flight. The sciences teams were busy, though, studying the system that was now their destination, and looking for signs of a civilization. Lieutenants Donovan and Chan were working with the linguistics staff to break down the structure of the Baranin language, in hopes of being able to verify whether any civilization found was actually descended from the Baranin.

Several hours into the flight, however, Lieutenant Rush, the assistant chief science officer, who had been manning the station following a shift-change, found his attention held by an unexpected set of readings. He glanced up at Setak, who had remained on duty. "Commander, take a look at this." He tapped a control on his console, and one of the upper-tier viewers shifted to

show what the sensors were indicating. Setak rose from the command chair and crossed to the rail near the sciences station. He gazed up at the viewer.

"Intriguing," he said softly.

"Is that looking to you like something shadowing us, right at the edge of sensor range?" Rush asked.

"Indeed," Setak answered. "Coincidence? I wonder."

"If it is, it's a very convenient one," Rush said.

"I would agree," the exec replied. He moved back to the command chair. After a moment's consideration, he turned to the helmsman. "Mr. Dar-Cherok, take us out of warp. Maintain course at one-half impulse."

"Aye, sir," the Tellarite responded. His fingers moved across the controls, and the ship dropped out of warp.

"That did it," Rush reported, his light Scottish burr indicating his excitement. "The readings are resolving. It's a ship."

"All stop," Setak said. "Hold station here."

"Stationkeeping, aye," Dar-Cherok responded.

"The unknown vessel is slowing, sir," reported Rush. "It's also changing course toward us. Estimated time to intercept is roughly 35-40 minutes."

"Captain Lynch to the bridge," Setak said into the intercom.

"Lynch here. What is it, Setak?"

"Sensor contact with a space vessel. Identity unknown. Origin unknown. We have come out of warp, and are holding station here."

"Giving them a chance to catch up?" Lynch asked with a chuckle.

Setak **almost** smiled back. "In fact, yes, if they choose to."

"Keep an eye on them, and I'll be up shortly. If they do anything that looks hostile, let me know."

"Yes, sir."

"Thanks, Setak. Lynch out." With that, the captain closed the channel.

"Commander, the unknown has also slowed," Rush reported, "and is closing on an oblique angle. Looks like they're definitely trying for a non-hostile approach."

"That speaks well of them," Setak replied. "Continue to hold station, Mr. Dar-Cherok."

"Aye, Commander," acknowledged the helm officer.

For a time, all stayed quiet, as the *Avenger* and its crew waited to see what the unknown vessel would do. Lynch returned to the bridge, and Setak moved to the Mission Ops 1 station, configuring it as an auxiliary Sciences console. From there, he also examined the sensor readings as they came in. He paid particular attention to the indications that the unknown vessel was in communication with someone or something else. Quietly, he tied in the ship's linguistic analysis software, in hopes that, if the unknowns did attempt to reach out, they might be able to solve any translation issues more quickly.

It didn't take long for that approach to bear fruit. "Mr. Rush," Setak said, "please direct your attention to the readings I am transferring to you."

"Aye, sir," Rush answered, tapping a control to bring up the data feed. He studied the viewer for a moment, then looked over at Setak. "Am I crazy, or are we looking at a definite language similarity?"

"I do not believe you to be mentally compromised," Setak said dryly. "Please make sure that the Linguistics team sees this data."

"Will do," Rush acknowledged.

Soon afterward, Ensign 1st Class Swift-Runner—sounding much better, Setak noted—called the bridge to report that she also believed that there was some sort of link, linguistically.

"So," Lynch said, when Setak and Rush updated him, "have we found a link to the Baranin?"

"It's possible" Rush said, "but of course we won't know for sure until we speak to them. I have uploaded the data into the universal translator, though, which could help things along if we're right."

"Good work, Lieutenant," the captain said, nodding.

"Thank you, sir."

As the unknown vessel closed to within a few astronomical units, the sensor displays abruptly lit up. "We're being scanned, sir," Rush reported.

"What kind of scan?" Lynch asked.

"It's active, but not intrusive, and it isn't having any effect on our systems," Rush reported.

"Let's let them run it, unless there's any negative effect on the ship. Keep a sharp eye, Lieutenant."

"Aye, Captain."

Several more minutes passed, and then the sensors tracking the scans quieted, the viewers going dark. The unknown ship continued to slowly but steadily close in on the Avenger. Finally, it came to a stop a few thousand kilometers away.

"It's holding station relative to our position," reported Ensign Ben-Yavin from Navigation.

"Any more sensor scans or weapon power signatures?" asked Lynch.

"No, sir," answered Rush.

An indicator flashed at the Communications station. "Captain," said the officer on duty, "I'm receiving a transmission from that ship."

"On screen," Lynch ordered, "and tie in the universal translator."

"Aye, sir," replied Lieutenant Esparza. The main viewer shimmered for a moment, replacing the forward view with an image of what was unmistakably a control center. And standing in the center of the room, facing his visual pickup, was a man who clearly resembled the man whom the Avenger's landing party had watched in the structure on FGC-8712-VI.

It took only a few moments for the universal translator to determine what the man was saying, helped as it must have been by the earlier linguistic analysis. As the translator came fully on-line, the man's words became clear.

"—peating, and I hope that you can understand me. We have monitored your course from the sacred star of our ancestors' world. For many decades we have watched and

listened, knowing that our honored ancestors left a transmitter to tell star travelers about what happened to our progenitors so long ago. That you have come this way, is it a sign that our ancestors' message was heard?"

"Response frequency," ordered Lynch. Esparza nodded, and Lynch spoke, enunciating for the pickups. "This is the Federation starship *U.S.S. Avenger*. We are receiving your message, and we are able to understand you. We greet you in the name of the United Federation of Planets. You are correct that we heard the message from the beacon left by the Baranin. We followed it to the system from which we have just come, and were traveling this way based on a message we found."

There was a long pause, and then the man spoke again. "I am very happy to hear you say this. I am Leader Gabatrya of the Barnem, and my vessel is the *Wanderer*. Our history tells us of how our ancestors fled the world where we evolved because of a great cataclysm, and how we were forced to begin a new life among the stars. But we never forgot our homeworld, and our ancient records tell that some of the last of our progenitors to leave had established a beacon to let anyone who might hear its call know of what had happened. No one knew then whether those who went out into the dark would survive, and if, perchance, no one did, they did not want all memory of our race to disappear."

"And so, even as we built our civilization anew, we also watched our ancestral star, to see who might learn about us, and about what happened."

Gabatrya fell silent, and gazed expectantly at his viewer. "We visited your homeworld," Lynch replied. "It hasn't fully recovered from the flares, but we were able to survive there for the brief time that we were there."

"Captain, did you find any...descendents of survivors?" asked Gabatrya.

"I'm afraid not," Lynch told him. "But even according to the recording we found in the outpost on the sixth planet, by the time your ancestors left the system, there were no signals or any other evidence that anyone still lived on the fourth planet."

"We had thought as much," said Gabatrya. "Our own histories tell us that, in the end, our people chose to use resources they had to support their own survival, rather than search what was most likely a tomb."

"When it comes to such a choice," Lynch said, "our own history also offers many examples of decisions made to emphasize survival. And when an entire civilization is at stake, the hard choices can't be avoided."

"True, indeed," Gabatrya agreed. Then he shook his head a little and smiled. "But let us not waste all our time in sad reminiscences. Today is a happy day, for after so long, we have found new friends who have learned of our history and sought us out." He paused for a moment, then added, "Even if you were not quite sure what you might find, or that what you were seeking was in fact us."

"On the other hand," Lynch replied, "a big reason that we explore at all is to find new things, whether or not we

know ahead of time what we'll find, so meeting you is a happy time for us, too."

"I am, again, very happy to hear you say this," said Gabatrya. "Perhaps you would enjoy a visit to our planet. In the centuries since our ancestors migrated from Baranosh, we have made a home on Shohnbar, and our people live in peace."

"Peaceful contact with civilizations previously unknown to us is always to be welcomed," Lynch replied. "It is true that not all civilizations are peaceful, but we always try to be friends first, and hope for the best."

"We, too, seek friends among the stars," said Gabatrya. "We've only met a few different beings, but most seemed more..." He paused, seemingly thinking about the right word. "...stand-offish than friendly. At least, none were openly hostile or threatening."

"We've met enough different races to run the whole range," Lynch said, "from very friendly to actively hostile." He chuckled. "Friendly is a lot better."

"I should think so!" Gabatrya agreed emphatically. He paused, then continued, "Allow me to contact our Central Command, and arrange the details of a visit. It may take a short while. I hope that will not be a problem."

"No, that will be fine," Lynch assured him.

Gabatrya assured Lynch that he would be back in contact soon, and with that, closed the channel. As the main viewer returned to the forward view, with the *Wanderer* hanging against the starfield, Lynch turned toward Setak.

"Well, that was encouraging, at least."

"Indeed," the exec replied.

"Do we take them at their word?"

"I see no reason why not," Setak said thoughtfully. "I suspect that they may be asking themselves the same question. Likely one reason for alerting their homeworld is so that our arrival does not come as a surprise, or something that should be feared."

"We could tap into their communications," Esparza said. "We could listen in and see what they might be concerned about, if anything."

"But if we do that," Lynch said, "what does it say about our willingness to trust? No, these people haven't done anything hostile. If they had, it might be different, but for now, let's trust them."

"Yes, sir," Esparza said.

For several more hours, they waited. The pause was broken only by a brief signal from the *Wanderer*, letting the *Avenger* crew know that they were awaiting a reply from Shohnbar, and they themselves figured that the planetary leaders were talking the matter over. Finally, just as Lynch was starting to think that nothing would come of this contact, Esparza turned from her station and said, "Captain, the *Wanderer* is hailing us."

"On screen," Lynch told her. Esparza touched controls, and Leader Gabatrya appeared on the main viewer.

"Captain Lynch, I have good news. Our Governing Council has approved your visit and requested that the *Wanderer* escort your vessel to Shohnbar."

"Great!" Lynch replied. "We're glad to hear this, and look forward to seeing your planet."

"We shall transmit a course vector to you shortly. We do ask that you not diverge from that course. This will help avoid any confusion or accidents. The space in our star system can be crowded."

"We understand completely," Lynch replied. "Our home systems can be crowded, too."

Gabatrya smiled. "I'm glad you understand. One mistake we vowed not to make again was not having an emergency plan, in case our planet was ever threatened again. Our ancient records tell of far too many lives lost. So we have habitations throughout our adopted system."

"Terran history bears similar lessons," Lynch told him. "Even after we understood the dangers, it was a long time before we started really moving into space."

"Perhaps, if others come to know our story," Gabatrya said, "lives might be saved in the future."

"We've found that great good can come from what we learn in our explorations," Lynch said. "The history about which we learned on both Baranosh and the other planet in that system has already given us a lot to consider, and learning more of the story of your people can only add to what we're able to bring back to our own people, too."

"Even great disasters can hold lessons," Setak added.

"Too true!" agreed Gabatrya. "Well, I say the time has come to add another chapter to the story. Shall we go to our homeworld?"

Lynch glanced at Setak, who nodded. Rush flashed a thumbs-up sign. Lynch turned back toward the main viewer and returned Gabatrya's expectant smile. "Let's go," he said.

Gabatrya looked off-screen, speaking softly enough that his words were inaudible. A moment later, though, Esparza said, "Captain, we're receiving a data transmission. It looks like the course information we were told to expect."

"Send it to Navigation," Lynch ordered.

"Sir, it is course information to FGC-8716," reported Ensign Ben-Yavin.

"Set that course, and confirm with the *Wanderer* to make sure we have no translation issues."

"Aye, Captain." After a few moments, Ben-Yavin added, "It all checks out. Course plotted and laid in. Our instructions from the *Wanderer* specify travel at no more than warp five."

"Very well," Lynch answered. "Mr. Dar-Cherok, ahead warp factor five."

"Warp five, aye," replied the helm specialist. He touched controls on his panel, and the *Avenger* leapt into warp, on course for a new first contact.

-----THE END-----