

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

THE AEON ADVENTURE

By Alex Rosenzweig, based on the ST:RPG Adventure "Continuing the Line", by Dale Kemper

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8709.17:

The U.S.S. Avenger has entered the Aeon Star System under orders from Star Fleet to conduct a routine survey of the system. Our sensors have detected 1 Class M world, planet VI, orbiting this Type F star. I have therefore directed that we take up orbit around this planet for further study."

Rear Admiral Rosenzweig switched off the log-recorder and leaned back in the command chair. On the main viewer ahead of him, the brown, blue, and white globe of Aeon VI expanded slowly.

"Approaching standard orbit," reported Ensign Martinez from the helm station.

"Good." Rosenzweig glanced at the navigator. "Mr. Ross, plot a 3,000 kilometer altitude."

"Okay." The Avenger's chief navigator programmed in the orbit parameter. "It's in, Admiral. Final approach."

Suddenly, alarm lights flashed on. From sciences, Captain Jon Lane said, "We're picking up objects on orbit insertion. There're about 30 of them."

Rosenzweig nodded. Glancing toward the weapons/defense station, he ordered, "Full shields. Sound yellow alert." Lieutenant J.G. Pajion nodded tersely.

"Shields up."

"Jon, what've you got on those things?"

"Just a minute, Alex. Okay, here it comes. They're using a thruster of some kind for propulsion. They're roughly cylindrical in shape, varying in size from 3 to 8 meters. The casings have assorted devices on the outside, but there's not enough information to guess about their uses. No life readings."

"Robot vehicles?"

"I think so."

"Are they hostile?" As Rosenzweig asked the question, he noticed the turbo-lift doors open and Captain Vosseller step onto the bridge. The exec's attention flicked to the screen and back to Rosenzweig, the word "hostile" having caught it.

"I don't know."

"What's going on?" Vosseller asked.

"Encounter with something. Robot ships of some kind."

"Maybe not ships," Lane interjected. "They could be just robots."

"Whichever," the admiral replied. "Just find out what you can about them."

"They're reaching orbit," reported Ross.

"They're also moving into a regular formation," Lane said.

"Evasive action, sir?" asked Martinez.

"Not yet." Rosenzweig turned toward communications. "Lieutenant Elkins, transmit linguacode friendship message."

"Aye, sir. Here goes." He pressed switches. Several moments later, he shook his head. "No response."

"One response," said Lane. "Here they come."

"Admiral, they're launching missiles," reported Pajion. "We have full power to the shields."

The missiles flashed through space, only to impact on the Avenger's shields and harmlessly explode. By the time the second wave had hit the ship, the hostility was without question.

"Go to red alert," Rosenzweig ordered. He thumbed the intercom. "Engineering."

On the engineering deck, Lt. Commander Newcome hit a switch. "Engineering. Newcome here."

"John, how's our deflector power?"

Newcome glanced over to the power-flow monitor station, where Ensign McCabre was keeping a close watch on the all-important deflector-allocation readout. The Scotsman gave Newcome a thumbs-up.

"Ever'thing's just fine. No drain at all," McCabre said. Newcome repeated the news back to the bridge.

"Outstanding. Thanks, John. Bridge out."

The attack went on, with combat robots, as Lane had taken to calling them, moving in while barraging the Avenger with a continuous spray of lasers and missiles. Lane reported that the robots were divided into 3 distinct classes, each of which had varying amounts of lasers, missile launchers, armor and shielding, claw-arms, and maneuvering thrusters. The attack itself was relatively ineffectual. Newcome and McCabre reported that, despite everything that the combat robots were hurling at Avenger, the deflectors remained rock-solid. On Rosenzweig's strict orders, no response was given to the attack.

The robots soon seemed to realize that they were getting nowhere. Abruptly, several of the larger units altered course and sped toward the Avenger.

"They're gonna ram!" said Vosseller.

"Looks like," Ross agreed.

At the admiral's glance, Pajion nodded. "Shields at full."

"Let's see what they can do," Rosenzweig said. "Hold on."

The attacking robots impacted against the shields. They were instantly destroyed, converting into fireballs of energy tearing through the shattered casings. The bridge jolted from the impacts, with crewmen grabbing onto solid objects for support.

"Alex, we've taken damage on our forward port shield. Another 2 or 3 attacks like that and we could lose it."

"So they're not completely useless against us. All right." He swung around to face the weapons station. "Lieutenant Pajion, give me a full pattern of photon torpedoes set for area burst. That should give them pause."

"Torpedoes ready, sir."

"Fire."

The photorps fired outward from the weapons pod, racing into the group of robots. They reached the midst of the group and scattered. They then detonated, multiple flares of destruction lighting up the area. When the glare subsided, only shattered debris remained.

"Hmm," said Rosenzweig.

"I guess it gave them pause, all right," Vosseller commented. He glanced over at Elkins. "Andy, get damage reports."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"Secure from red alert," said Rosenzweig. "Jon, what do we have on that planet?"

Lane examined the sensor readouts. "Okay, here it is: Diameter: 11,700 km, a bit smaller than Earth. Gravity: .9 g. Surface area: 4.59 x 10⁸ square km, 94% of which is land. As we've seen, no moons. It's hot. It's dry. It's barely capable of sustaining humanoid life, right on the borderline for a Class M designation at all. What water there is outside 2 big, shallow lakes is all in underground springs. The one interesting thing is some consistently high mineral readings."

"Maybe the planet will at least be **useful**," Vosseller said.

"Well, there's no life on it at all," Lane said. "In fact, we're detecting only 1 significant source of energy. We're focusing on it now."

"Admiral, we're in orbit," Ross reported. "Smooth as silk without those robots."

"Good. Hold 'er steady, Matt."

"Alex, I have those readings." Rosenzweig swiveled around toward Lane. "There's a dome-like complex located on a flat wasteland near the equator. The energy levels in and under it are going up."

"Alex," Ross interjected, "I have something interesting here."

"What is it?"

"I traced the ascent-curve of those robots back down to the planet, and the structure Jon's found is right where it looks like those things came from."

"Could they have come from the structure?" asked Vosseller.

"We can't rule it out," Lane answered.

"Are there any more of those things around?" Rosenzweig asked.

"No. Not a one."

Rosenzweig leaned back in his chair. "We should definitely find out more about this thing."

"I agree," Lane said.

"We'll send down a landing party. We need a science officer, an engineer, and a security team. Make it 2 regular security specialists and 2 from the special missions force." The admiral looked at the exec. "Bob, will you take care of it?"

"Sure, Alex." Vosseller leaned over Lane's sciences console and keyed up personnel files. Jacking in a readout board, he began to file his recommendations into the board's memory. Soon, he was done. He handed the board to Rosenzweig.

"Let's see here," said Rosenzweig. "Okay. Gabe Wiener from Sciences." He nodded. "Gabe's electronic wizardry should come in handy. From engineering...John Newcome. Yeah, Jamie can hold things together up here. And from security, Tom, Ensign Mamma, Ensign Santiago, and Ensign Sackson. Sounds good. But are you sure Tom should be put into the middle of this himself?"

Vosseller bent down. "Alex," he whispered, "if he doesn't get off this ship for a while, he's gonna be blasting the furniture. Some planet-time, especially a situation like this, is exactly what he needs."

"All right. Have them report to the transporter room in 10 minutes."

"Got it." Vosseller walked over to communications and handed the board to Elkins. "Have these people in Transporter Room 1."

"Aye, aye, Captain." The assistant chief of communications opened the general-call channel. He read off the names and instructions.

Commander Wiener was in his cabin. He was seated at his desk, intently studying a journal article. As the intercom cracked on, he glanced up. He heard Elkins read off his name as the party commander. Pressing his desktop intercom switch, he said, "Wiener to bridge. Acknowledging announcement."

In the security section, Commander Wilson banged his hand down on his desk. "It's **about** time," he exulted. Glancing past the 2 ensigns he'd scared half to death, he grinned at Lieutenant Kassenoff. "I'm getting **off** this ship for a while."

"Just be careful, sir," said Kassenoff.

"Don't worry, Marc. I have no intention of getting myself killed." Death in the security ranks was a way of life on most starships, and if you couldn't hack it, you got out. *Avenger's* first assistant security chief--Lt. Commander Kathleen Sickles--had been killed about 8 months into their mission. Her death had hit then-security chief Captain Karl Roussell hard. They had worked together for years, all the way back to postings on the *Constitution*. Within 2 weeks, Roussell had handed Rosenzweig a request for transfer to the Academy. At last report, he was quite happily teaching new cadets the ins and outs of security work. Wilson, meanwhile, had been appointed chief of security, a job he seemed perfect for.

Kassenoff nodded. "Glad to hear it."

"You're in charge while I'm gone," Wilson added.

"Yes, sir."

With that, Wilson headed for an equipment bay. A few minutes later, he returned, his duty uniform having been replaced by full armor. Then he was out the door.

Shortly thereafter, the 6 members of the landing party convened in the transporter room. Ensign Eaton, the on-duty specialist, issued field-jackets, tricorders, and phaser IIs to Wiener and Newcome. He also issued phaser II's with reserve packs to the security personnel, except for Ensign Santiago, who got a phaser rifle. Everyone got communicators. When the whole group was properly equipped and checked out, they moved to the platform. Eaton went back into the operator's booth, where he hit the intercom switch.

"Bridge. Transporter Room 1 here. We're ready when you are."

"Stand by," Elkins replied.

On the bridge, Lane turned to Rosenzweig. "We can't beam them into the complex. The dome is made of an unknown, extremely dense material. We **might** get a transporter beam through it, but I wouldn't take the risk."

"Then let's not," the admiral said. "Any suggestions as to where we **should** put them down?"

"Actually, yes." Lane keyed up a map of the area around the structure and indicated a location. "Here. It's what looks like a landing platform, near an open entrance. It looks ideal."

"Of course," said Vosseller, "it could be a trap."

"Yes, it could," said Rosenzweig. "But I don't see any other choice, save packing up and getting out of the system."

"Yeah. I don't think Star Fleet would be too happy if we just left."

"Not to mention Tom." Vosseller grinned at Rosenzweig's comment, and the CO swung back to Lane. "Okay. Do we have anything else on the structure?"

"Best I can tell is that the inside is filled with a series of control relays and power transforming areas. They read similarly to our fabrication units. There are also some underground levels giving off sporadic energy readings. But they're enclosed in the dome material, too."

"So that's it?"

"That's it."

"Okay. Send the platform coordinates to Mr. Eaton." Rosenzweig swung to communications. "Mr. Elkins, have Ensign Eaton beam them down when they're ready."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Elkins sent the message down to Eaton, just as the beam-down coordinates came through on the console.

"Here they are," Eaton told the assistant communications chief. "I'll have them down soon. Transporter room out." He switched off the 'com to the bridge and re-channeled to the platform. While setting in the coordinates, he asked, "Are you all ready?"

"Let's get going," Wilson said. Wiener nodded.

"Okay. Energizing now." Eaton engaged the units. The 6 members of the landing party were surrounded, then absorbed, by cylinders of blue-white light. The light faded, leaving an empty platform.

In the bright light of Aeon, the appearance of the 6 masses of glowing energy was much less overwhelming. It did its job, though, and faded out to leave 6 persons standing on the landing stage.

Wiener flipped open his communicator. "Beam-down complete." He closed it and traded it for his tricorder.

All 6 members of the landing party looked around. Their attention was dominated by the dome rising in front of them. They spared the burning landscape around it little attention, as ship's sensors on the *Avenger* had indicated no life and indeed little of anything worth close investigation.

"Let's go in," said Newcome.

"I agree," Wiener replied. "Security detail at ready."

"I think I'm capable of handling my people," Wilson said testily.

"Sorry, Tom," Wiener said. "But let's go."

"Right. Sackson, you're on point."

"Yes, Commander."

With Sackson a few paces ahead of them, they cautiously entered the structure. Standing at 1 point, they gazed about the high-ceilinged chamber. Newcome unlimbered his tricorder and began scanning the room with it. A moment later, he glanced at Wiener.

"Gabe, I'm getting some data. Most of this stuff," he said, gesturing to the blocky structures around them, "is computer equipment, all encased in material similar to the shell of this building. It's resistant, but not impervious, to phaser fire."

Wiener had aimed his tricorder at the nearest block, then shifted it. "Hmm. Following what appear to be circuitry lines, the equipment is tied into a central core 22.5 meters straight ahead of us."

"But," Wilson said, "we can't go straight. Anyway, how do you know their computers are anything like ours?"

"Similarities in structure. Given that, certain consistencies have to hold."

"So we should go to the core?" asked Mammana.

"Yes," Wiener replied.

"Which way?" asked Sackson.

"Let's try to the right." The group moved down the indicated passage. On one side, the wall was smooth. On the other, it shifted back and forth in a series of corners. Soon, they came to a branching passage. Sackson looked back. Wiener had his tricorder out.

"Left branch," said the assistant science officer.

"Okay." Sackson started to edge around the corner. Moving forward, they went past the next branch and kept going straight.

Suddenly, a combat robot flew around a corner some 10 meters ahead of them. They threw themselves against the walls as laser bolts sizzled past them. The security team fired phaser IIs. The first 3 shots struck the robot, but didn't seem to affect it.

"Santiago, where's that rifle?" snapped Wilson.

"Charging, sir. 20 seconds more." He ducked as another laser beam slashed over his head.

Mammana keyed her phaser to disrupt and fired. This time, a section of the robot blew apart. It canted to one side, but got off another laser shot. Then Santiago stood up and leveled the rifle.

"On disrupt," ordered Wilson.

"Yes, sir." Santiago fired. The beam struck the robot, which blew apart.

"Down!" yelled Wiener, as shrapnel scattered down the corridor. Then all was quiet. "Everybody okay?" Getting answers in the affirmative, he stood up again. "Let's go." They'd barely gotten 2 steps, though, when another beam flashed from the left. Santiago grabbed his arm and went down, dropping the rifle. Mammana scooped it up and sent 3 blasts in rapid succession toward the robot. Sackson and Newcome added their beams. A third of the robot's midsection was blown apart. It slowly spun until it was hanging on a horizontal axis, parallel to the floor. Then it drifted away.

Newcome pointed in the direction from which the combat robot had come. "That way." They started down the passage.

"Are you okay?" Sackson asked Santiago.

"Yeah. No problem. It just winged me."

"All right."

Then, from behind them, yet another robot attacked. A laser beam glanced off Wilson's shoulder-plate, and the security chief spun and fired. Wilson's fire-pattern distracted the robot until Mammana was able to aim the rifle. Several rifle-shots destroyed the robot.

"That was too close," Wiener said. "We need more help."

"Then call and get some help," said Wilson.

"We can't. We can't get a communicator signal through the dome."

"Damn."

"Let's keep going," said Newcome.

"Right."

"Which, I think, is also our direction," said Wiener. And they headed around the corner. But when they saw another corner, they weren't so sure.

"Let's try it, anyway," Newcome suggested.

They rounded the corner and started down the passage. Then yet another robot swung around a corner farther down. This time, though, the security team was ready. Three beams from phaser IIs and one from the rifle struck the robot. It was rapidly disabled.

"Don't these things ever give up?" growled Wilson.

"Of course not," said Wiener. "They're computer-controlled robots. That's why we have to get to the core."

Wilson fixed him with a look. "I was being rhetorical, Gabe."

"Fine," Wiener replied in a dry tone.

"I wonder how they're doing down there," Rosenzweig said into the air on the bridge.

"No word from them," Elkins reported.

"Course not," said Lane. "We couldn't get a communicator signal through it, remember?"

"Right. Sorry, sir."

The turbo-lift doors split, and Lt. Commander Fillmore walked onto the bridge. He made a sharp right and walked over to sciences. Handing Lane a computer cart, he shook his head.

"It's no good, sir. We did a full chemical analysis of that dome, at least to the limits of the sensors. Density is incredible, but the material itself..." He shrugged. "It doesn't correlate with anything I've ever seen before."

"All right. Thanks," Lane said.

"Sure," said Fillmore. He glanced at the viewer and its image of the brown sphere over which they orbited. "Any word from the landing party?"

"Not a thing," Rosenzweig said.

On the planet, the landing party was approaching another cross-passage. Suddenly, Newcome exclaimed, "Wait! I'm picking up—" A robot roared up right next to them. They whirled. The robot extended a claw, hooking it into Sackson's armor. With a yell, she was yanked off her feet. Another claw clamped down around her neck. She choked and struggled. Santiago, who had repossessed the phaser rifle, fired at the robot. The blast tore out a chunk of its armor, and it swung toward the rest of the landing party. Sackson, with herculean effort, aimed a kick at a servo on the claw's support arm. It sparked and the claw jerked down 5 degrees. The claw tightened, and the security guard moaned in distress. Newcome dove at the robot, firing as he went. It seemed to just brush him away, an illusion quickly destroyed as he hurtled into the wall. Then the robot appeared to grow tired of the fight. It flung Sackson aside, throwing her into the wall. There was the clunk of the armor hitting the wall, and the dull crunch of bones shattering. Sackson crashed down and fell to the floor in a heap, where she lay motionless.

"Damn you!" yelled Wilson at the robot, firing repeatedly at anything that looked like a sensitive electronic component. Slowly, buffeted by phaser fire, the robot retreated. It began to flee around the corner. Before it had gotten 10 meters, though, several shots penetrated its armor. It blew apart, scattering debris up and down the passage.

When the security team came back, Wiener was running a tricorder scan over Sackson. He reached out and closed her eyes.

"Well?" asked Wilson.

"I'm sorry," Wiener replied.

"God damn this place," the security chief growled. He handed Wiener the fallen guard's phaser and went to scoop up her body. Wiener caught his arm.

"Tom, leave her. We're going to need you at full mobility. If we can get to the core and shut down this place, we'll come back and get her."

"You're right," said Wilson. "Let's go."

With a last look at Sackson, the landing party regrouped. Wiener double-checked that Newcome was okay, then pointed.

"That way." And they were off again.

7.5 meters, 3 robots, and a shattered arm later, they were standing inside the outer bay of the central core. Wiener pointed to the right, and they moved on. Then yet another robot swung around the corner. With a curse, Newcome fired. Wilson and Mammana joined him. The robot was soon reduced to slag.

"They're protecting the core," Wilson said. "If we can shut it down, it'll take care of those mechanical monsters, too."

"Let's go," Newcome agreed. Abruptly, a robot swung around the corner ahead of them.

"Oh, no," said Santiago. Then a laser beam flew over their heads from behind them.

"This arch. Now!" ordered Wiener, diving and firing. The group fled through the archway, in time to see yet **another** robot coming from inside.

"Full phasers, both ways, then drop!" yelled Wilson. They fired, 2 in one direction and 3 in the other. They hit the floor as both robots fired lasers. The robots' beams hit each other. Another round of phaser fire disabled the robots.

"No waiting," said Wiener. "Inside." They backed into the core area. "Tom, you and the guards watch that entry."

"Right," Wilson answered. As Wiener and Newcome turned to the computer, the security chief shouted, "There's more of 'em!"

"Blast the computer!" said Newcome. Wiener nodded, and they started firing on the unit. A scream behind them said Mammana had been hit.

"I can't hold 'em!"

"A minute more, Tom!" Wiener closed, then opened, his eyes. "Fire!" Their beams hit the computer, and it suddenly went dark. Seconds later, several loud thunks could be heard. Then Wilson came around the archway, supporting Mammana.

"You did it, Gabe. The 2 robots out there just stopped attacking and fell to the floor."

"I think they were all hooked through the main computer here. My guess is that they've all been deactivated." Wiener had spoken while poking around the computer. He turned to face the security team. They were a sorry sight. Santiago held his injured arm close to him, while sear-marks could be seen on Mammana's right leg. Wilson looked okay, but he was sweaty and tired. "Tom, you need some rest. These two need rest and sickbay. Why don't you get them out of here and back to the ship. John and I will be okay here."

"All right," said Wilson. "See you soon." Just in case Wiener did turn out to be wrong about the robots, the security chief drew his phaser. "Let's go," he told Mammana and Santiago.

The robots **were** all deactivated. Working their way back toward the entrance, they passed 4 of them. The robots lay unmoving on the floor of the complex. Detouring only long enough to recover Sackson's body, the three hurried back to the entrance as quickly as they could.

When they got outside, Santiago could not believe how good it was to see the sky again, even if it was a pale yellow color. Wilson drew out his communicator.

"Avenger, come in."

"Avenger, Elkins here."

"Andy, have the transporter room beam us up. We have 2 injured, 1 dead."

On the bridge, Elkins turned to Rosenzweig. "Admiral, Mr. Wilson's signaled for beam-up. He reports 2 injured, 1 dead."

"Well, tell the transporter room to get them up. Get a medical team there, too."

"Yes, sir," Elkins replied, turning back to his station. Rosenzweig got to his feet.

"I'm going down to see them. Bob, you have the con."

Vosseller nodded and settled into the command chair as the admiral entered the turbo-lift. "One dead. Damn."

"If there were a lot of those combat robots down there," said Lane, "they're probably lucky it wasn't any more than that."

"Yeah," the exec replied.

The lift dropped Rosenzweig to G Deck near the transporter room. Striding down the corridor, he met the medical team he'd ordered. Commander Cohen was in charge, with Ensigns Milelli, Levy, Willment, and Isear right behind them.

"Hello, Admiral. Helluva way to run the day, eh?" Cohen said.

"Yeah, you could say that."

"Any word on how bad the injuries are?"

Rosenzweig shook his head. "Nope. Maybe Tom told Andy, but Andy didn't tell me."

"Great," Cohen growled. "Well, we brought the works, just in case."

"Good."

They reached the transporter room and hurried inside. Eaton was just wrapping up the beaming process, and the last vestiges of blue-white shimmer were fading from the crewmen on the platform. Seeing Rosenzweig, Wilson nodded.

Cohen ran a practiced eye over the security party, taking in the extent of their injuries. He glanced over his shoulder and quietly ordered, "Set up three."

Levy nodded, and she and Milelli knelt and began to lay out the antigrav stretchers. Willment, Isear, and Cohen moved to assist Mammana and Santiago. Rosenzweig went over to Wilson, who knelt near Sackson's body.

"What happened?" the admiral asked.

Wilson looked at him. "More of those robots were down there, guarding the complex. One of those treacherous hunks of metal snuck up on us around a corner. Ensign Sackson was on 'point'. She practically walked into it. Wasn't her fault, though. There wasn't anything we could do. It killed her before we could destroy it."

"Okay, Tom. Easy does it. Where're Gabe and John?"

"Still down there. Once we decided it was safe, Gabe wanted us to beam up. He was right, Alex. Mammana and Santiago need sickbay badly." He indicated to where the medical team was helping the security guards onto stretchers.

"All right. Tom, I want 2 more security people. We're also taking a sciences team down. Jon and I are going, too."

"Okay, Alex. I'll get you some people."

"Thanks. Then you go get some rest. That's an order."

"Aye, sir." Wilson followed the medical team with Santiago and Mammana out. Isear and Cohen lifted Sackson's body, put it on another stretcher, and took it away. The admiral knew it was on its way to post-mortem and then the stasis chambers.

Rosenzweig walked around and stepped into the operator's booth. Excusing himself, he reached past Eaton and touched the intercom switch. "Rosenzweig to Lane."

"Lane here."

"Jon, how'd you like to go down to that planet?"

"Sure."

"Good. Get a science and engineering team together and meet me down here. Tell Bob he's still got the con. Rosenzweig out."

On the bridge, Lane looked up from his 'com. Swinging around, he faced Vosseller. "Did you hear?"

"Yeah," said the exec. "No problem. Have fun down there, Jon."

"Right." Lane keyed his intercom to shipwide. "The following personnel should report to Transporter Room 1 for landing party duty: Ensign Hornak, Ensign Kinkhabwala, Ensign Liszewski, Ensign Elovitch, Ensign Ambrose, Ensign Paul-Allen Bixler, Ensign McCabre, and Ensign Sica. Bridge out." Signaling for Lt. Commander DeLong to relieve him on the bridge, Lane slid in the side consoles and stood up. "See you later, Bob." Then he headed for the turbo-lift.

The team crowded into the transporter room, joined by Ensign 1st Class Warren and Ensign O'Rourke from security. They divided into 2 groups of 6 persons, one headed by Rosenzweig and the other by Lane. They beamed down, one group at a time.

When the second group had materialized outside the dome, Lane ordered Kinkhabwala to do an environment scan of the area around the complex. Warren went along, just in case.

"Jon, Gabe and John are supposed to be in the central core. We can't get a communicator signal **through** the dome, you said. What about from place to place inside it?"

Lane thought for a moment. "We ought to. The inside partitions are made of the same stuff as the dome, but they're not nearly as thick. Also, there's open space higher in the dome for signals to float around in."

"Let's hope it works."

"Yeah."

"Well, in we go," said Rosenzweig. He led the way through the opening.

Once inside, he flipped open his communicator. "Rosenzweig to Wiener."

"Wiener here, Admiral."

Rosenzweig looked at Lane. "That works." To Wiener, "Progress report, Gabe."

"Mr. Newcome and I are digging into this computer here. It's not too different from ours, though it is a little cruder."

"Where are you?"

"Still in the core area. Should we come out and meet you?"

"No. We'll come in."

Newcome broke in. "It's a bit of a maze, Admiral."

"Switch on your locator," Lane told him. "We'll track you with that." Rosenzweig nodded agreement. A moment later, a low pulse over the comm-channel indicated the directional beacon to be on.

"Let's go," said Rosenzweig. They headed into the maze. Carefully, they threaded their way through the passages. Following the beacon pulses, they soon reached the central core. Wiener and Newcome were working at the blocky computer unit, tricorders out and electronic components scattered on the floor.

"Do you plan on turning that thing on again?" Lane asked.

"No." Newcome was emphatic. "Did you see any of the robots?"

Rosenzweig shook his head.

"Just through that arch," the assistant science officer said. "There should be 2 of them. They almost got Tom. We just barely

blasted the computer in time. The computer controlled all the robots."

"We'll go take a look," the admiral said. "Be right back."

When they returned, Lane indicated the computer block. "We understand."

"You're sure that they all were controlled from here?" queried Rosenzweig.

"Oh, quite sure," Wiener assured him. "They're all disabled."

"Okay," said the admiral. He turned to the others. "I want you to break up into groups of 2. Go look around and see what you can find out. Keep in touch by communicator at regular intervals. If you don't find anything in 1 hour, come back here unless otherwise advised." The landing group nodded and moved out.

It was 20 minutes later that McCabre signaled Rosenzweig. "Sir, I've found the lower levels. It's a factory-complex. This must be where the robots are built."

"How did you get to it?"

"There're ramps on the sides of the dome. I followed one."

"Analysis?"

"Assembly procedures look pretty conventional, Admiral. I'd guess they're comparable to ours. There's nothing startling from an engineering standpoint."

"Okay. Take as many readings as you can and get back up here. Rosenzweig out."

"Admiral," said Wiener, "I think we've accessed the memory unit."

"We're checking it out now, Alex," Lane added. "We ought to be able to read it soon."

Lane and Wiener focused their attention on connecting the alien memory circuits to a translator unit. Meanwhile, members of the investigating teams began returning to the core area. Rosenzweig took their reports on 1 side of the room, so as to stay out of the science officers' way.

About 15 minutes later, Lane looked up. "We've got it." Glancing down at his tricorder's viewer, he continued, "This whole complex is about 15,000 years old. It was originally supposed to be an outpost for planetary development. The race that built it lives—or possibly lived—on a planet like Vulcan, only somewhat hotter and drier. That's why this planet, though it needed some work, would be suitable for their use. The robots were used for both defense and development. Apparently interplanetary claim-jumpers were pretty common back then."

"But what happened to this race?" asked Newcome.

"The computer has no record of that," Wiener said.

"They just stopped coming," Lane added. "The computer was on automatic, so it just kept functioning, until a malfunction in the control circuits stopped the development process. That's why so much of this planet looks like a burned-out wasteland."

"Hmm," said Rosenzweig. "Yeah. Aeon's hot, but not that hot."

"Exactly," said Lane.

"Does it pose a threat to anyone?" asked the admiral.

The science officer shook his head. "I don't think so."

"Certainly not after what we've done to it," said Newcome. Rosenzweig chuckled.

"You're not kidding." The admiral glanced around, noting that everyone was back from their trips through the complex. "Well, we can do the rest from the ship. Let's get back."

The group packed up and left the core area. When they reached the dome's entryway, they were rejoined by Kinkhabwala

and Warren, who had finished their environment check. Lane flipped open his communicator.

"Lane to Avenger."

"Avenger. Centor here." On board, shift-change had taken place.

"Devorah, have the transporter room beam us up."

"Will do, Jon. Stand by."

A moment later, Ensign Padovan signaled from Transporter Room 1. "Energizing."

Rosenzweig, Lane, and part of the landing group materialized on the platform. The transporter specialist in the booth saluted. "The others are coming aboard in Transporter Rooms 2 and 3."

"Very good, Mr. Padovan. Thank you." He headed for the door. "Jon," he asked, as the sciences chief fell into step beside him, "we are technically off-duty, but do you want to come up to the bridge with me for a sec?"

"Sure, Alex." Lane flipped a data chip in his hand. "I want to feed this into the computer, anyway."

"Good. Let's go."

The turbo-lift doors split and Rosenzweig and Lane stepped out. Commander Newman held the center seat. Lt. Commander Dixon had the helm, while Lieutenant McManus sat at navigation. Lt. Commander Centor was at communications, and Lt. Commander Fillmore manned sciences.

Rosenzweig waved Newman back into the command chair, as the chief of operations began to get up. "Status, Ken?" he asked, standing next to the chair.

"All okay, Alex. Everything's running fine. It's been a quiet watch so far."

"Good. We're done here. Anything else can be run from the ship. I'm leaving the rest of the system survey in your hands and those of the third shift. If there's anything interesting, give me a call. Beyond that, have a party." Immediately noting reactions from McManus and Centor, he added, "Not literally, Ken."

Newman grinned. "Right. 'Night, Alex."

"Good night, Ken." As Rosenzweig headed for the lift, Lane joined him. "All done, Jon?"

"Yes," Lane replied.

"Let's go get some dinner."

"Sounds good." The doors closed.

Newman turned to Fillmore. "Is there anything more to do here?"

"Not a thing. I think, between Joe and me, we've been over this rock half a dozen times."

"Okay." Newman swung forward. "Lill, plot us a course to planet number 5. Chris, take us out when ready, half-impulse."

"Aye, aye," McManus said cheerfully, punching in coordinates. She hit the transfer key and glanced at Dixon, who nodded.

A low rumble went through the Avenger as the impulse engines cut in. The ship pulled away from Aeon VI and accelerated outward, on its way to the next planet.

-----FINIS-----