

## JUST A RUN AROUND THE BLOCK

By Alex Rosenzweig

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Admiral Alex Rosenzweig set aside the padd he was reading as his desktop intercom unit beeped. He reached out and touched the control. "Rosenzweig here."

Nothing happened.

Alex paused, then sighed as he realized it wasn't the desktop 'com after all. It was his communicator pin. Tapping the insignia on his chest, he tried again. "Rosenzweig here."

"Coburn here, Admiral. I just heard from the Motor Pool. The *Hyperion's* ready for you. They want to know if you'd like to come up and check her out."

The Motor Pool was a name that Coburn used to refer to the small craft hangars at Star Fleet Headquarters, especially the ones on TerraMain Spacedock. *Hyperion* was the long-range warpshuttle that was assigned to Admiral Rosenzweig. An upgraded version of the Vulcan design which had served Star Fleet for nearly thirty years now, the *Hyperion* was of moderate size, but was able to hit Warp 7 when they pushed her and could defend herself long enough to get away if attacked. The shuttle was intended to get Rosenzweig where he needed to go, at least within reason, so he'd not need a starship sitting at his beck and call. It had taken a few weeks for the requisition to work its way through the system, but now the shuttle was on Spacedock and waiting for Alex to try her out.

"All right, Lieutenant," Alex responded. "I think I shall. How's your workload? Would you like to come along?"

"Love to, sir."

"Very good. Tell the...err...Motor Pool that we're on our way, and let's get going."

The two men quickly proceeded to the main transporter area, where they beamed up to Spacedock. They made their way to Hangar #18, where the *Hyperion* was in the last stages of being checked out for her flight. Several technicians looked up and came to attention as the admiral entered the bay.

"As you were," Alex said quickly. "I'm here to have a look around, but don't let me stop you from getting your work done."

"Yes, sir," said one of the techs. The others returned to their work, but the first one continued, "We should have her ready for you in a half-hour or so."

"Thank you, Lieutenant."

While the techs worked, Rosenzweig and Coburn strolled around the craft. Alex smiled, admiring the craft's smooth lines. Bill, on the other hand, was appreciating the changes to the basic design that he'd read about, but not yet seen firsthand. "This is going to be a sweet ship to fly," Bill commented. At Alex's look, he smiled. "I do have pilot training, Admiral. To be your aide, with the kinds of things you're going to be doing? I had to."

Alex chuckled. "Good point."

"I'm not piloting on this trip, though." Coburn pointed to the Andorian woman who had just entered the bay. She carried a padd and strode over to the shuttle with a purposeful expression. After

a brief discussion with crew chief, she approached Rosenzweig and Coburn.

"Admiral, Lieutenant Coburn, hello. I am Ensign Shralat. I'm on rotation to fly this shuttle for its proving run."

"Nice to meet you, Ensign," Alex said, smiling. He bowed slightly in an Andorian version of respectful greeting.

"The technicians assure us that *Hyperion* will be ready in just a few more minutes," Coburn said.

"I was checking that, myself," Shralat replied agreeably. "I don't get to pilot for a VIP very often. I'd hate to have anything go wrong."

Alex had the grace to look slightly embarrassed. "Now, Ensign, I'm just someone who's been working at this sort of thing a bit longer. Once we get out there, I expect you to do your job, just as you would with anyone."

"Of course, sir," Shralat replied. "But, if I could be so bold, it's not like there hasn't been buzz all around HQ about you. The Battle of Voranis has been the talk all around Spacedock for over a month. And that Fleet Admiral Smith specifically went out to meet with you when he cut your reassignment orders didn't stay secret for long."

Alex looked at Bill with a touch of good-natured reproach. "Umm, Bill...? Did you know about this?"

Now it was Coburn who looked a bit embarrassed, and his voice revealed a somewhat stronger Texas drawl. "Well, sir, umm... Yes. The word was around pretty quickly. Voranis was pretty major. A number of pretty important high-ups were spending a lot of time on the Darnath problem, but let's face it, you were the guy in the field."

"I was just doing my job," Alex demurred.

"But doing it well, sir," said Shralat. "And it was appreciated by a lot of people."

Alex didn't...quite...blush. Well, not too much, anyway. "Thanks. It *is* good to be appreciated."

Just then, the crew chief waved to the three officers from over by the shuttle. "All ready for you," he called.

"Thank you, Ensign," Rosenzweig responded. He looked at his companions. "Shall we?"

"Let's," Coburn said.

The three boarded the warpshuttle and settled into their seats. Shralat began running the standard preflight checks, while Coburn and Rosenzweig looked around at the craft's interior. The basic layout was fairly standard for a Star Fleet warpshuttle, although the large cabin also bore several signs of having been modified for use as an administrative vehicle. To one side was a small desk with a computer terminal, and forward of the docking port were a pair of fold-down bunks, with a small food synthesizer next to them. Analytical and research equipment was neatly stowed on the other side of the cabin. The forward, cockpit area had four seats, and three more were positioned in the main cabin section. Just forward of amidships, on each side, were the head and the airlock, with suit and equipment lockers mounted next to

the airlock. In general, the design balanced functionality with enough comfort for a moderate-length journey.

"Like it, Admiral?" asked Coburn.

"Yup," Rosenzweig replied. "Maybe not *quite* all the comforts of home, but it's actually a lot nicer than the last time I'd been on one of this class of shuttle." Alex thought back nearly twenty-five years, to a mission he'd commanded while he was chief science officer of the *Revere*, a survey flight out beyond the edges of Federation space. He and the team that had been selected had used a warpshuttle of this type, as well. Two and a half decades later, the outside might be the same, but clearly the equipment and the interior outfitting reflected the advances since the mid-2270s.

At Bill's questioning look, Alex told the story...or at least an abbreviated version of it.

After a short time, he realized that Shralat had also been listening, and that she was done with her preflight checklist. He smiled at her. "Sorry, didn't mean to go on about it. Everything ready, Ensign?"

"Yes, Admiral," Shralat replied. "It all checks out."

"All right, then," Alex said. "Let's take a ride, shall we?"

Shralat smiled. She tapped the communication control, and leaned forward just slightly. "Spacedock Control, this is the warpshuttle *Hyperion*. Request clearance to launch."

"Shuttle *Hyperion*, this is control. You are cleared to go."

"Thanks, Control. *Hyperion* deploying."

Shralat leaned forward, her fingers nimbly dancing across the control panel. Outside, the bay doors slid open and the darkness of space beyond beckoned to them. Softly, carefully, Shralat lifted the shuttle from the bay's deck surface, then gently nudged the craft forward until it cleared the bay. Gradually, it picked up speed, leaving Spacedock behind it and following the curve of the Earth in an ascending orbit.

"We're clear, Admiral," Shralat reported, a tone of distinct satisfaction coloring her voice. "Any preferred destination?"

"Let's take the Grand Tour," the admiral said. "Lay in a course for Jupiter, then Saturn, then Uranus, then Neptune. If I remember right, they should be in roughly the right positions for us to avoid too much backtracking."

"Aye, aye, sir," Shralat answered. A moment later, she added, "Course plotted, Admiral. At current speed, we're just about two hours from Jupiter. Should we speed up?"

"No, I think we'll take it gradually to Jupiter. We'll pick up speed when we head toward Saturn. Let's let *Hyperion* find her space legs on this segment."

Shralat smiled, "Yes, sir," she said.

As the *Hyperion* accelerated smoothly away from Earth, Rosenzweig leaned back and gazed for a moment at the viewer, just watching the stars. Then Coburn leaned across and handed him a padd.

"Didn't think you were going to get away from the unfinished business, did you?" he quipped at the admiral's ever-so-slightly irritated look. "You still have an adjutant to pick."

Alex mock-sighed. "Damned with an ever-efficient aide," he stage-muttered, then cracked a smile.

"Damn right," Coburn answered, even as he, too, was smiling. "Somebody's got to keep track of that stuff for you."

"And you do it well."

"But I can't do it all, so we need to find you that adjutant."

"Okay, okay," said Rosenzweig.

"So I pulled the files of fifty of the most likely candidates for you to check out."

"Fifty, eh?"

"Surely you'll be able to find someone out of fifty, Admiral."

There was a slightly mocking edge to Coburn's voice, not enough to be real mocking, but enough to be teasing.

Alex cocked an eyebrow, Vulcan-like, at his aide, but otherwise let it pass. He leaned back and began to scan through the names in the index. There were a few he recognized, both from his years working in deep space and his more recent weeks back on Earth. But about thirty names down the list, a name seemed to jump out at him, taking him back several years to his command of *Avenger*. His eyes widened as he scanned the entry and studied the details on the officer in question.

Ever observant, Coburn leaned forward just a little. "Admiral? Something?"

"I think we've found our adjutant, Bill," Alex said simply. He handed Coburn the padd.

"Captain Rhonda E. Green," Bill read aloud. "Currently Staff Administrator, Social Sciences Department, Star Fleet Sciences, Fleet Deep Space Headquarters. Previous assignments include *U.S.S. Medallion*, *U.S.S. Thagard*, *U.S.S. Avenger*..." He stopped, and looked up at Alex. "So you've served with her before."

"Yup. One of my better officers."

"Why did she leave the *Avenger*?"

"Combination of things. She and I had a few disagreements, and she was also seeking greener career pastures."

"Think those disagreements would get in the way of your working together?" Alex glanced sidelong at Bill for just a moment, but it was a fair question.

"Based on my read of her record here," Alex said thoughtfully, "I think we'd actually do rather well. Our views have both evolved a bit, and I think that'll serve us in good stead."

"You've already made up your mind, haven't you?" Bill said.

"Yup," Alex affirmed. "When somebody like Captain Green falls into your lap, y'don't argue."

"Are you sure you don't even want to look at any of the others?"

"Oh, I'll look," Alex responded with a smile, "but I doubt it'll change anything."

Bill made a note on his own padd to contact Captain Green as soon as they returned to Earth. He knew that Alex would indeed read the other personnel records, but he had also quickly come to know that the admiral, once his mind was made up, was not easily swayed from whatever course he'd set for himself. And that meant that Bill should start getting used to having Green around.

The *Hyperion* flew smoothly out toward Jupiter. As the shuttle made passage through the asteroid belt, Shralat tried a few maneuvers, using asteroids as course guides. Both Rosenzweig and Coburn quickly pronounced themselves satisfied with the shuttle's maneuverability, and Shralat agreed. With that determined, and after a quick courtesy transmission to the Jupiter ComCon station, they set a course for Saturn.

"Let's ratchet up the acceleration," Rosenzweig told Shralat. "We have some distance to cover before we reach Saturn, so let's let *Hyperion* stretch her legs."

"Aye, sir," Shralat replied. Her expression was all business, but both men could hear the smile in her voice. Humans and Andorians weren't **that** different.

Steadily, the shuttle increased its speed, going in smooth steps up to half, then three-quarter, then full impulse. Only an occasional vibration gave any hint that a bit of in-flight calibration might be needed. And each time, Shralat responded smoothly and efficiently, and the vibrations died off as quickly as they had appeared.

"At this speed, we'll reach Saturn in about an hour and a half, sir," Shralat reported. "Do you have any instructions for then?"

"Let's check out her orbital maneuvering," Coburn suggested. "No better place than Saturn."

"No better, indeed," said Rosenzweig in reply. "Do it, Ensign."

"Doing it, Admiral," Shralat replied, "or, at least, programming for it." And again, there was that smile in her voice. Bill and Alex exchanged glances, confirming their shared thought: Their pilot might be all business on the **surface**, but underneath, she was having a heck of a good time.

The flight to Saturn was a smooth and uneventful one, and when they reached the planet and began the test maneuvers, it quickly became clear that the technicians had done their jobs exceedingly well. *Hyperion* performed almost flawlessly, and whatever small imperfections the warpshuttle had were readily ironed out in the field trials. Alex was on the verge of concluding that they had already achieved their basic goals, and all the rest was icing on the cake. That didn't bother him much; he was relishing the chance to be away from Headquarters and out in space, even if it was still in the Sol System. It was then that things changed.

"Admiral," Shralat said, her eyes narrowing, "I'm getting a low-level transmission. Civilian. Sounds like... Sir, it has a distress tag."

Rosenzweig was on his feet, moving forward to stand by the pilot's console. "Can you isolate it?"

"It's coming in intermittently, but I think I can get a fix on it."

"Let me see what I can do," Coburn said, turning to a side console just behind Shralat's seat. He slid into the chair and switched on the displays. A few seconds later, he added, "Okay, getting a fix on their position. Hmm.... They're... in the Kuiper Belt between Saturn and Uranus."

"The Kuiper Belt? Prospectors?" Rosenzweig raised an eyebrow. Most prospectors had fairly good safety systems.

"No," Coburn said, "I don't think it's a prospector." He spoke haltingly, as he concentrated on the task of trying to enhance the signal resolution, or even make contact. "The signal pattern just doesn't seem right for that." A few moments later, he nodded to himself and looked over at his companions. "I think I've gotten the signal cleared up. Switching to audio."

Coburn tapped a couple of controls, and a scratchy voice filled the cabin, underlain with static. "Mayday, mayday..." Alex raised an eyebrow at the old term. "My craft has hit an asteroid and is disabled. I can't break free, and I figure I have about an hour or so of air left. My distress beacon has malfunctioned and won't deploy. Oh, god, I hope someone can hear this..."

"Can you get a fix on the origin point of the signal?" asked Rosenzweig.

"I'm trying," Shralat said. "This is strange. Something's...distorting the readings in the direction the signal's coming from."

"Radiation?" asked Rosenzweig.

"There's radiation of some kind," said Coburn, but I don't think that's the cause. It's more like a symptom."

"Can we get in there?"

"I think so, sir," said Shralat, "if we're careful."

"Then do it."

Shralat worked controls, and the *Hyperion* swung around and headed for the apparent source of the signal. As they closed in on the Kuiper Belt, the signal grew stronger. Strangely, the shuttle's navigation systems seemed to be feeding data that was increasingly "fuzzy", as if the fabric of space itself was fragmented in the area from which the signal had come. Shralat took to using visual readings and a sort of sextant-like device to gauge her approach.

"It's not quite dead-reckoning," she explained, "but it means we don't have to rely entirely on the nav-sensors."

"Well," said Coburn, "a convenient plot device."

Alex just shot him a look. Coburn winked.

As they closed in, both the sensor readings and communications improved. They soon located the asteroid and were able to get into spotty contact with the pilot of the craft, which turned out to be a solar sailer.

"Why were you flying so close to an asteroid?" Rosenzweig wanted to know.

The pilot, a young man named Ahmed, replied with some exasperation, "It wasn't exactly something I'd **planned**, Admiral. I know the rules of sail-flight. But my navigational equipment quit working right, and I ended up on top of this asteroid. I tried my emergency thrusters, but they weren't working. No, actually, they were working. They were just not having any effect. It was like the laws of physics weren't working!"

"I am getting readings of some kind of strong EM distortions," Coburn interjected, "and some gravimetric oddities, too. I don't know what's causing it, but I'm feeling pretty safe in saying it's damn weird."

Ahmed obviously heard Bill, as he rejoined, "See? That's what I mean! I did what I was supposed to do, and my equipment did what it was supposed to do. But it didn't work."

"Understood, Ahmed," Rosenzweig responded. He turned to Shralat. "What about us? If we get that close, will we run into the same kind of trouble?"

"I think I can compensate well enough," Shralat said. "Our systems are more hardened against radiation than a sailer's."

"But that doesn't change the fact that there shouldn't be anything like that going on out here **at all**," Coburn pointed out.

"We do have a mystery," the admiral replied. "But first, we have a pilot to save. Ensign, take us in slowly, and advise if you run into any problems."

"Aye, sir," said Shralat.

Slowly, the *Hyperion* eased its way toward the asteroid. Coburn kept a close watch on the sensors, and as they got closer, his eyes narrowed.

"Admiral, take a look at this." Alex shifted so he could see the display screen. Bill pointed at a graphic. "The radiation seems to be coming from a really small area. It's highly concentrated right there."

"As if there was something **on** that asteroid," Rosenzweig said softly.

"Right."

"But there shouldn't be anything there, right?" asked Shralat.

"Correct, Ensign," Rosenzweig answered. "There shouldn't be, but there is." He paused for a moment, trying to think of any Black Projects that Star Fleet might be operating in the outer Sol System. Unfortunately, he was drawing a blank.

"Admiral," Coburn said, "that level of radiation is going to cause one problem for us. We're not going to be able to just grab Ahmed and his craft with a tractor beam. We're going to have to find some other way to get him."

"Do we have grapplers aboard?"

"No, sir," Shralat said. "No one imagined we'd need something like that."

"Environmental suits?" asked Coburn.

"Full stock of eight, sir."

"I'm not exactly thrilled with the idea of having to do an EVA," Bill added, "but I can't think of anything else right off."

"s okay," Alex replied. "I can't, either. Looks like an EVA it'll be, then." He turned back to Shralat. "Reopen the channel to Ahmed."

Quickly, the officers explained the situation to the sailor. Ahmed was able to confirm that he had a suit, although he'd been avoiding using suit air until it was absolutely necessary.

"Well," Alex told him, "you can avoid it for a little bit longer, but when we come outside, we're going to need you to be ready to come out, so we can get you aboard *Hyperion* and to safety."

"All right, Admiral. Will do. But...umm..."

"Yes?" prompted Alex.

"What about my sailcraft?" It came out in a rush, almost as if Ahmed was embarrassed to be asking that question. Alex exchanged looks with Bill.

"I'm sorry," he responded. "I doubt we'll be able to recover it."

There was a pause, then, "Oh. All right. I'll figure something out later."

"Let's get **you** saved first," Bill said into the 'com.

There was a rueful chuckle on the other end. "Sorry. Didn't mean to sound ungrateful."

"s okay," Alex said, "but let's keep ourselves focused. Ahmed, sit tight. We'll be there shortly." He nodded to Shralat, who closed the frequency.

"Rich kid?" suggested Coburn.

"Probably," Rosenzweig. "Maybe worried about how he's going to explain losing his sailcraft to mom or dad."

"Least he'll be around to do the explaining."

"Yup. Well, let's get to it. "Bill, get on the sensors. We need to know where he is, especially relative to the radiation source."

"I'm on it," Coburn replied. A few minutes later, he looked back up. "They're about two kilometers apart. The sailcraft is to the relative north."

"Can you get us a rough map of the area?"

"Yessir." Coburn again turned his attention to the sensors, and soon, an image of the area appeared on his viewer. "Hmm..." Bill said softly.

"What?" asked Alex.

"There's something about the radiation source. That's...weird..."

"What about the space-time distortions?" Alex pressed.

"It seems all tied together, but the sensors still aren't getting clear readings."

"Okay, what about Ahmed's sailcraft? Can we get to it all right?"

"I believe so, Admiral," Shralat responded. "I'm starting to move us in."

Rosenzweig turned to Coburn. "Let's get the suits. We need to get ready." Both Shralat and Coburn turned to look at him. "What is it?"

"You're going out, sir?" Shralat asked. "I thought—"

"No, I'm going," Alex answered with a smile that brooked no argument. "Let me guess. You're not used to senior officer types getting their hands dirty."

"Umm... Not like this," Coburn admitted.

"**Get** used to it," the admiral said firmly. "Not only was my deal with the Fleet Admiral for a post which lets me get out in the midst of things, but I **like** to get my hands dirty." He winked. "Comes from being a ship's captain for so many years."

After another moment, Coburn grinned back. "Okay, sir. I'll respect that deal." He levered himself out of his chair, and headed across the cabin to the suit lockers. Rosenzweig followed.

The two men quickly pulled out environmental suits and clambered into them. It took only a few moments to run the standard safety checks, and then they glanced forward to the pilot, helmets in hand. "Are we ready, Shralat?" asked Rosenzweig.

"Moving into position, Admiral," the pilot reported. "We're holding steady five kilometers above the surface."

Rosenzweig nodded as he and Coburn attached thruster packs to their suits. All the diagnostics showed that everything was ready. "All right," the admiral said. "Signal Ahmed and tell him that we'll be exiting the shuttle in a few minutes. If he can get as much altitude as possible, we'll rendezvous with him and bring him back here."

"Aye, sir. But... What if he can't gain altitude?"

"Then we'll go down and get him. I can't imagine it'll be much of a problem, given the low gravity, but we'll see."

Shralat nodded and turned to her console. Alex and Bill entered the airlock and the inner hatch sealed.

As the outer airlock hatch of the *Hyperion* slid aside, Bill Coburn stood at the edge of the opening and gazed out at the vista that lay before him. The dull gray of the asteroid's rock-strewn surface spread out below the shuttle, contrasting sharply against the blackness of space above the horizon-line just a few kilometers away. A flashing light caught his attention, and for a split second he thought back to his childhood, sitting out by a lake and watching the sun reflect off the water. Then he focused again.

Switching on his suit-com, he said, "I can see the sailer's beacon."

"Me, too," Alex acknowledged. "Can you see anything in the area of the radiation source?"

Bill peered out beyond the sailer. "Nope," he reported. "Not a thing."

"Guess it's not on the surface, then."

"Probably not."

The admiral nodded. "If there's time, we'll check it out in more detail. Let's worry about getting Ahmed now."

"Right." Bill tensed slightly. "I'm gonna step off now."

"Acknowledged," Alex said behind him.

Coburn gingerly stretched his foot out, and then pushed himself away from the shuttle. "So far, so good," he reported. Rosenzweig acknowledged and moved up to the doorway. Coburn glanced out toward the crashed sailer, searching for Ahmed. After a moment, he spied the young man's emergency suit, a bright orange dot against the gray. "I see him. Starting toward him now."

Coburn activated his suit thrusters. Using gentle bursts, he drifted away from the warpshuttle. Getting comfortable that the suit was operating properly, he tapped commands into the control unit on his forearm. As he floated farther from the shuttle, he kept an eye on the readouts tracking his range to Ahmed. He almost didn't see the first red light.

The combination of the alert telltale and a shrill alarm tone grabbed Bill's attention a split-second before his suit thrusters went out of synch, sending him into a tumble. He grabbed for the control unit, and was able to kill the thrusters, but couldn't do a thing about the damn tumbling. He fought the urge to close his eyes against the vertigo brought on by the whirligiging starfield and asteroid, struggling to avoid plummeting toward the surface below.

A second later, he felt an impact, and his tumbling jolted to a stop. He opened the eyes he'd ended up closing, anyway, and found himself staring into Admiral Rosenzweig's concerned face. Wrapped around them both was a thin cable, stretching back to the shuttle. The admiral reached behind him and tugged, and the cable began reeling them back in.

"You okay?" Alex asked over the suit 'com.

"Yeah." Coburn caught the shakiness in his voice, and consciously steadied it.

"I saw your thrusters go all wonky, and grabbed the emergency tether."

"Alex, how did you get out here? Your thrusters worked?"

"Well... I leaped."

In the few seconds it took for Bill to assimilate that, they made it back to the *Hyperion*. As they re-entered the lock, Rosenzweig signaled Shralat.

"Sir, are you and Lieutenant Coburn all right?" she asked.

"We're fine," Alex responded, "just a little shaken up. Signal Ahmed and tell him that it's going to take us a little longer to come get him."

"Aye, sir."

While Shralat spoke to Ahmed, Rosenzweig and Coburn finished cycling through the lock. Carrying their helmets, they came back into the cabin. Settling back into one of the chairs, Alex looked straight at Bill. "We're going to need another plan."

"Well, doing it conventionally isn't gonna work," Bill said.

"Nope, it doesn't look like it will. So, what can we do **unconventionally?**"

"Can we get the control unit inside some kind of shield?"

"Even if we knew what kind of effect this was, wouldn't it take too long to build a shield for a thruster suit?"

Coburn tapped a control, bringing up an inventory display on a viewer near where he was sitting. After a moment, he shook his head. "Yeah, with what we have on board, it would. We're just not prepared for this complicated a situation."

"Wait a minute," Alex said, just before Bill switched off the display. He pointed at what he'd just noticed. "Backup emergency tether?"

"Just in case the first one gets screwed up—" Bill stopped in his tracks, and stared at Alex for a moment. "Are you suggesting...? Do we try hooking these things together??"

"Make a double length line. Are they strong enough?" Alex asked.

"Considering what they're designed to be able to hold, they better be," Bill answered pointedly.

Alex chuckled briefly. "Good point," he commented.

And then they were on their feet and heading for the supply locker.

"Shralat," Alex was talking over his shoulder, "tell Ahmed that we are working on another solution. Have him stand by for more instructions."

"Aye, sir," Shralat responded. She turned back to the shuttle's communication panel and hailed Ahmed.

While the shuttle pilot was reassuring the young sailor, the Admiral and his aide hurried into the airlock and began attaching the second tether line to the one already in place. The procedure took only a few minutes. When they were done, they stepped back out of the lock. Alex turned toward Shralat.

"Ensign, how's Ahmed holding up?"

"A little nervous, sir, but doing all right."

"Good," the admiral replied. "Now, what I need you to tell him is that we're about ready here. If he's set, we'll make another attempt. I'll be outside in just a few minutes—"

"Sir?"

Alex turned to face Bill. "What is it?"

"Due respect, sir, but I should be the one to do this." Alex started to open his mouth, but Bill forged ahead. "Sir, I appreciate that you are used to operating in the field, and, like you said, getting your hands dirty. But there are still times when it is not necessary for you to put yourself at undue risk, and in my opinion, this is one of them. I can do an EVA and get Ahmed just fine, and in case anything does happen, well, then I'll go doing something good. But it's not worth risking a senior officer."

"I appreciate what you're offering, Lieutenant," Alex said, "but I can't ask any officer under my command to place him or herself into danger if I'm not willing to do so myself."

"Oh, I think you're safe there. You're plenty willing, sir. You'll have no complaints from me on that score. But I still would feel better about this if you'd just let me do this."

The two officers went back and forth for a few more rounds, but in the end, Coburn was the one who would be conducting the spacewalk. Rosenzweig would again be the one standing by in the lock, monitoring Coburn's progress.

The admiral tapped his suit-com. "Shralat, are you in contact with Ahmed?"

"Yes, Admiral," the pilot responded.

"Tell him we're about ready for the second try. Also, I want you to try to get us down to about three kilometers above the surface, if you can. But the minute you start having any troubles, you stop. Understood?"

"Understood, sir." Shralat smiled to herself. Here was an admiral willing to see how far the envelope stretched.

"Good. Mr. Coburn will be leaving the airlock in the next few minutes. He'll flash his beacon twice, and when Ahmed sees that, he should get as high as he can. I don't recommend using thrusters, but the gravity is low enough that he should still be able to get aloft."

"If he isn't careful," commented Shralat, "he might be able to reach escape velocity."

"Good point," Alex agreed. "Remind him of that. In fact, if he can do it, have him get as far as he can in our direction."

"Yes, sir, I'll tell him."

"Thank you, Ensign. Rosenzweig out." With a tap on the control, Alex cut the channel and returned his attention to the task at hand. He turned back to Coburn. "You set?"

"Set as I'm gonna be," Bill responded.

"Okay. Shralat is bringing the shuttle as low as she can. Let's get the lock open."

Shralat glanced down at her console as she saw the indicator light come on, telling her that the airlock was open. She tapped her comm-link and opened a channel to Ahmed. "Ahmed, this is *Hyperion*. Are you ready?"

"Yes, ma'am," the response came back, "but I have a question."

"Go ahead."

"I was going through my supplies, and I found a can of compressed air. It's supposed to be for cleaning the panels, but I was wondering if it'd work as a thruster gun."

Shralat's antennae twitched. It was an interesting idea. "Let me alert Admiral Rosenzweig and Lieutenant Coburn."

"All right."

The young pilot quickly signaled her crewmates and told them what Ahmed had said. The response was a positive one.

"Listen carefully, Ensign," Rosenzweig told her. "Ahmed should stick to the plan, with the exception that he should bring the air can. When he gets airborne, and is sure he's heading in the right direction, he should release a short burst from the can. If he is **not** sure, don't use the air, 'cause we could end up having a much harder time reaching him if he goes off-course at high speed. Understood?"

"Aye, sir," Shralat said. "Let me make sure Ahmed does."

"I'll stand by," the admiral said.

The pilot passed the information to Ahmed, who dutifully acknowledged it. Once everyone was in synch with the plan, Rosenzweig clapped Coburn on the shoulder and pointed out. Bill programmed a microsecond burst into the thruster controls, and, with a hand carefully positioned over the manual cut-off switch, stepped out of the lock. With his other hand, he hit the activation switch, and the thrusters flared briefly to life. They all held their breaths as the tiny rockets pushed the lieutenant away from the craft, and then guttered out, as they were supposed to. Steadily, Bill drifted out, with Alex paying out the tether line behind him.

As he reached a distance of a hundred meters, Bill tapped another control, and the suit's beacon flashed once, then once more. From ahead and below, Bill saw Ahmed's orange suit rising up from the surface of the asteroid.

"Got visual contact," he reported. He could feel the tether still unreeling smoothly behind him, and guessed he had another good 40 or 50 meters of line.

"I see you, Lieutenant," Ahmed said softly. "Can I try my air can?"

"How's your orientation?" asked Coburn.

"Best as I can tell, I'm heading right for you. Not more than a couple of degrees off, if that much."

"Okay, then," Coburn responded. "Go for it."

"Here I come," Ahmed said.

"Ready or not," Bill whispered to himself as he saw Ahmed shift slightly, extend an arm, and aim his air can back.

Ahmed balanced himself carefully, then aimed his air can. He released a brief jet of air and sped up in moving toward Lieutenant Coburn. Satisfying himself that he was still heading in the right direction, he hit the switch a second time, letting himself speed up a bit. Ahead of him, he could see Coburn steadily growing in his field of vision. But something seemed...off. Ahmed narrowed his eyes, and judged he was a few degrees off course. He extended his air can again. "Wait!" exclaimed Coburn, but it was too late. A quick burst of air, and Ahmed was angling where he shouldn't be.

"Damn!" he exclaimed.

"Don't do anything else," Coburn's voice sounded sternly in his helmet. Then he heard the lieutenant talking to the admiral. "How much line do I have?" After a pause, Coburn continued, "I'm gonna have to risk another thruster burst if I'm going to be able to catch him." Another pause. "Yes, sir, I will. Out." Then Coburn turned his attention back to Ahmed. "Okay, here's what's going to happen." Tersely, he outlined a set of directions for Ahmed to follow, concluding with, "And do **only** that. This is life or death, not some flight simulator you can reset if you screw it up. Understood?"

"Y-yes, Lieutenant," Ahmed responded. Carefully following his instructions, he oriented himself and stretched out his arms and legs, trying to make himself the largest possible target. Coburn was still expanding in his view, but was also clearly not quite directly ahead of him. Could he even reach him? Ahmed wondered worriedly.

Warily, Bill watched as Ahmed hurtled toward him, arms and legs outstretched. A quick glance at his readouts told him that he was still out of reach. "I'm going to fire a two microsecond burst. It's gonna use up all my slack, but if we're real lucky, I'll be able to grab Ahmed and hold him without snapping the tether."

"All right," Alex's reply came back. "Be careful. Good luck."

"Yeah... Thanks."

Alex fell silent, and Bill knew his boss was trying not to distract him. He kept himself focused on the task at hand. His finger hovered over the firing button for the thrusters, while he counted down in his head. Getting to zero, he tapped the control, and felt the jolt as the thrusters shoved him forward. He reached out, fingers splayed, stretching...and grabbed hold of Ahmed's wrist, just as the tether reached its maximum extent and started to snap back. For one brief moment, Bill's world contracted to a precarious balance between mass, momentum, and tensile strength. And then the tether reached its limits and began to drag them back. For another second, the battle narrowed even more, to Bill, his gloved hand, and Ahmed. He held his breath, knowing it had all come down to this one moment in time. But his grip held, even through the wrenching of his shoulder and the jolt of the tether against his back.

"I've got him!" Bill exclaimed.

"I'm pulling you in," Alex responded. Bill could feel the tug of the tether as it drew him and Ahmed back to the shuttle.

'Is it over?' The soft voice was Ahmed's, and Bill twisted slightly to look into the young man's faceplate. Their eyes met, and

the lieutenant realized that Ahmed was just realizing that the worst was over. He was in Star Fleet's hands!

"It's over. You'll be back aboard *Hyperion* in just a few minutes."

"Oh, thank god," was the soft reply. "And...thank you, too, sir. I almost thought I wasn't going to make it."

"There were one or two moments there when I wasn't so sure either," Bill answered. Ahmed glanced quickly at him, and realized that the man who had just saved him wasn't joking. He shuddered.

A few seconds later, they were drawn alongside the *Hyperion*, and Admiral Rosenzweig was reaching out to grab hold of them and pull them into the airlock.

The lock cycled, pressurizing around them. A few moments later, the lights flashed green and the inner door slid open. Rosenzweig pulled his helmet off and stepped into the cabin, with Coburn and Ahmed close behind.

Ahmed looked around, taking in the cabin and its furnishings. He could see that it was a very well-appointed craft, while obviously not too fancy to be a working vehicle, the combination being the biggest reminder that this was an admiral's shuttle.

He then abruptly became aware that that admiral was gazing slightly amusedly at him. He drew himself up. "Admiral Rosenzweig?"

The older man nodded. "You would be Ahmed." It wasn't a question.

"Yes, sir," Ahmed confirmed.

"You're very lucky."

"I know it, sir. And I apologize for inconveniencing you and your crew."

"To be honest, I'm less concerned about inconvenience than I am about how and why this happened." Rosenzweig tossed him a jumpsuit and pointed at the shuttle's small head. "Go get changed and we'll sort this out."

Ten minutes later, they were all out of their suits and sitting in the cabin. Shralat had pulled the shuttle back up and away from the asteroid, and felt comfortable enough at that point to leave it under computer control so she could join the discussion.

Ahmed began by giving a bit of background on how he'd come to be out there in the first place. As Coburn had surmised, Ahmed's family was one of the leaders of the community on Martian Colony Four. They'd been vacationing on Titan. Ahmed was on a break from his university studies, and had gone with them. While they were there, he'd managed to convince his parents to let him rent a sailcraft for a run. Although he was mostly used to the courses near Mars, he had been able to sell them on the idea, and he got the craft and a lift to one of the standard start-points out beyond the edge of Saturn's moon system. The course was designed to take several days to traverse, and featured a close approach to a clump of Kuiper Belt asteroids.

All had gone well until Ahmed looped in for a close look at a few of the more nearby chunks of rock. The first two were typical enough, but when he approached the third, his nav-sensors started acting all screwy. He tried to compensate, but the on-board computer fought him, struggling to get its programming to reconcile the bizarre input it was receiving. The problem was that as things got worse, the emergency systems took over. That included the backup thrusters. And to make it even worse than

that, whatever was befouling the sensors was also confusing the emergency navigation system, which meant that Ahmed was also having a hard time controlling his craft.

When he saw the big gray asteroid seeming to tumble toward him, Ahmed knew he was in trouble. Fortunately, he reacted quickly and got his emergency suit on. He also overrode the thrusters and turned them off. Those two actions likely saved his life. It was less than five minutes later that the sailcraft plowed into the asteroid.

"I was really lucky that the cabin held together," Ahmed commented. He shook his head soberly. "If I'd had to switch to the air in my suit right when I crashed, I'd never have lasted. As it is, I am really glad you showed up when you did. I didn't have much cabin air left."

"We're glad we were in the area," Rosenzweig replied. "Answer a question for me. Could you see anything on the asteroid that looked strange or unusual?"

"I really didn't get a chance to do more than glance at it until I hit the ground," Ahmed answered him. "I was too busy worrying about staying in one piece."

"And once actually **on** the ground, you obviously weren't taking random EVA jaunts."

"Exactly, sir."

"Okay, then." Alex nodded to Shralat, and then fixed Ahmed with a look. "Want to see if we can find anything strange?"

"Sure!"

"But, Admiral," Coburn interjected, "even **our** sensors weren't working so well in all this."

"And we're not going to depend on the sensors," the admiral replied. He turned toward the pilot. "Ensign, back us off to the point at which we first detected any sensor problems. Plot a complete orbit of the asteroid."

"Aye, sir," the Andorian responded. She moved back to her console, and a moment later, the shuttle was moving back from the asteroid.

"If we're not going to depend on the sensors," Bill continued, "how are we going to find whatever it is you're looking for? Umm... Do you **know** what you're looking for?"

"Actually," Alex replied, a shadow of a grin flitting across his face, "I don't have the first clue. I'm also taking a chance that we'll just literally see something. We're going to use a visual scope, point it at the asteroid, and see what we see."

Bill paused for a moment, considering that. Then he smiled. "It's almost **too** simple," he commented, "but why not?"

"Exactly. Can you rig the scope?"

"Aye, sir." Coburn focused on his task, and a few minutes later, turned back and reported that he was ready.

"Ensign," Rosenzweig said to Shralat, "please take us into the orbit you've plotted." Shralat nodded affirmation, and tapped the command sequences into her console. The shuttle smoothly swung into a high orbit around the asteroid.

"I'm tracking the highest concentration of sensor distortion and using that to guide the visual scan," Coburn reported.

"Good job, Lieutenant," the admiral responded.

Slowly but steadily, the shuttle orbited the asteroid, snapping an image every few seconds. Rosenzweig was reminded of the image sets from old 20th Century satellites as he watched the pictures come up on the viewer. At first, all that was visible was gray rock and dust. Alex had begun to wonder if his brilliant idea

wasn't so brilliant after all. He started to shrug and order Shralat to set a course for Titan.

"Admiral, wait!" Rosenzweig swung around to face Coburn.

"I see something...I think." Bill was enlarging and focusing an image on one of his screens.

"Ensign, hold our position," Alex said quickly.

"Aye, sir," Shralat answered briskly, "holding."

Alex hurried over to the console that Coburn was manning, Ahmed at his side.

"I was recalibrating, and correlating with the sensor distortions. Check *this* out!" Bill tapped a control, and the image on the viewer shifted. "See that?"

Rosenzweig leaned closer. "What the...?" His voice trailed off. There, on the screen, at the center of the sensor-distortion area, were structures. They weren't Human-built, it was clear. They also weren't architecture he recognized from any culture he knew about. But they were unquestionably artificial.

"Well, well, well..." he muttered. Glancing at Ahmed, he commented, "It looks like someone or something was responsible for your mishap. But who...or what?" He turned to Bill to order a scan, and growled to himself.

"Sir?"

"I was going to ask you to run a scan to see if we could determine the age of those buildings, but of course the sensors won't let us get good readings to do that."

"Nope," Bill affirmed.

"All right, then. So we have a mystery that this craft isn't equipped to solve. So we'll get Star Fleet on it." He smiled. "Bill, record the coordinates of the asteroid."

"Already on it, sir."

"Excellent. We'll advise Star Fleet Command once we clear the area, and they can send out a research ship. One way or other, we will find out what this is all about...and why we never found anything out here before."

"Sir?" Ahmed asked, a little diffidently. "Could you do me a favor?"

"What might that be?" asked Alex.

"When you do figure out what's going on, could you let me know? I already have some serious explaining to do to my mom and dad, not to mention the sailcraft rental place."

Alex smiled. "Oh, I think we can manage that. But first, let's get you back to Titan and your parents. And I'll be happy to speak to them for you. After all, thanks to you, our proving run turned out to be even more thorough than we'd planned."

Ahmed smiled back with the biggest smile Alex had yet seen from the young man. "Thank you, sir!"

"You're most welcome. Meanwhile, let's get us underway. Ensign, set a course for Titan. Let's get our young friend back to where he belongs. Best speed."

Shralat smiled, faced her console, and smoothly took *Hyperion* onto her new course.

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