

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

## AS OTHERS SEE US

By Alex Rosenzweig

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8802.23:

The Avenger has completed a preliminary investigation of Star System UFC-8546. The second and third planets proved to be Class M, and the third planet had a native civilization rating B+ on the Richter Scale of Cultures. No contact was attempted. We have forwarded a report to Star Fleet, and have recommended a follow-up survey by a better-equipped science vessel. Meanwhile, we have left the system and are proceeding to our next assignment."

Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig switched off the log-recorder and glanced around the bridge. All seemed quiet. The survey of UFC-8546 had been fatiguing for the ship's remote-sensing specialists, particularly the study of UFC-8546-III. Captain Lane had pulled double-shifts for several days, coordinating the incoming information, and the chief science officer was exhausted. Rosenzweig—with Commander Levy's concurrence—had ordered him to take a day off. Lt. Commander Fillmore was holding down the fort in his stead.

At helm and navigation, Commander Hunt and Ensign Abbott chatted quietly. As long as nothing unusual occurred, it was possible for them to let the computers do most of the work. Of course, it was rare that **nothing** occurred. The ship was making a steady warp factor 3, and no one anticipated any trouble.

"Admiral?" Lt. Commander DeMono was listening to a transmission with his earpiece receiver.

"What is it, Mr. DeMono?"

"Incoming signal from Star Fleet, sir. It's coded, with a SECLAR of 5."

"5?"

"Yes, sir."

"Patch it to my cabin. I'll take it there."

"Aye, aye, Admiral."

Rosenzweig stood up. "Mr. Hunt, you have the con." The helm officer nodded, and Rosenzweig headed for the turbo-lift.

Settling into his desk chair, the admiral activated his viewer and tied into the on-line message bank. He entered his security classification and called up the coding information for the message. Receiving it from the computer, he ran the signal through the decoder and put the result on the viewer. He leaned forward as he read it, and a smile lit his face.

"From: Admiral Bryan Ackermann, Chief of Operations, Star Fleet

To: Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig, Commanding Officer, U.S.S. Avenger

Stardate: 8802.23

Message: Effective immediately, you are to divert the Avenger to Starbase 32, and proceed to the main dockyards. The U.S.S. Tai Shan (NCC-2524) is now ready for commissioning and assignment to the 7th Fleet. Your crew

component presently training to serve aboard her will be needed. They will assume new posts aboard the dreadnought as soon as possible.

...Alex, give my congratulations to Ron. I know how hard he's worked for this. Tell him his requested command staff personnel have been approved. It's going to leave Avenger a bit short, but we'll get good crew for you. Don't worry. See you soon."

The text scrolled up the viewer and was replaced by the Star Fleet and Federation insignia. Then the screen blanked. Rosenzweig leaned back and grinned. Commander Blackman would be overjoyed! He and his people had worked extremely hard getting themselves ready for this. Since Captain Vosseller and another group of crewmembers had also been grouped into a training cadre, there had been a good deal of wagering—all strictly contra-regulation and all strictly unofficial, of course—over who would get a ship first. Well, a great many of his crew would soon be counting credits.

Rosenzweig reached out and touched the intercom switch. "Commander Blackman, this is Rear Admiral Rosenzweig. Please report to my cabin."

"Blackman here. On my way."

The admiral thumbed the switch again. "Bridge, this is Rosenzweig. Prepare to change course. Our destination is Starbase 32. I'll be back up in a few minutes."

"Sir? What's happening?"

"It's not serious, but stand by on the answer to that, okay?"

"All right, Admiral." Hunt didn't sound convinced.

"Just tell Mr. Abbott to plot the course. Out."

"Hunt out."

As Rosenzweig switched off the intercom, his door chime sounded. "Come." The door slid open and Commander Blackman entered the room. The commanding officer waved him over. "Have a seat, Ron."

"Thanks, Admiral. What's going on? Are we going to need the bees?" Blackman was the assault pod squadron commander. He and his team of crack pilots, not to mention the assorted other crewmembers who trained as backup pilots, kept the Avenger's squadron of killer bees in top condition. Oh, a few of the crew still tended to proclaim their affection for the old Arco and Tycho fighters, but killer bees had proven far more effective.

"No, we're not. Ron, I have some good news."

"Really?"

"Yes." The admiral turned, indicating the viewer. "Watch." He shifted slightly in his chair. "Computer, return last message to viewer."

"Working," the unit replied. The viewer again glowed with the text of Admiral Ackermann's message. Blackman read it, a smile slowly forming across his face. When he finished, he looked up.

"You mean they...?" Blackman could hardly dare to believe it.

"Indeed I do." The commander's face was suffused with a huge grin. Rosenzweig couldn't help but smile back. "Congratulations... Captain."

"I have to tell the others!"

"I thought you might. Go ahead. I should get back to the bridge, anyway." Blackman still stared at the now-blank viewer. "So what are you waiting for?"

"Hmm? Oh! Right." Blackman's smile now had a slightly apologetic tinge to it. He stood up and turned toward the door. Then he looked back. "Thank you, Alex."

"You're welcome."

And Blackman was out the door.

Rosenzweig exited the turbo-lift and the doors closed behind him. He moved to the command chair and settled into it. "Report, Mr. Hunt?"

"All quiet, sir. Awaiting your orders."

"Very well. Mr. Abbott, how's that course-change coming?"

"Plotted and laid-in, **suh!**"

The admiral grinned. Ever since Abbott had read Strangers From the Sky... He nodded. "Good. Mr. Hunt, warp 5."

"Aye, Admiral. Warp 5."

Rosenzweig hit the log switch.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental:

Responding to direct orders from Admiral Ackermann, the Avenger is now proceeding on course to Starbase 32. The pending addition of a new vessel to the 7th Fleet, the first in some time, will be an exciting event for us all, and key Avenger officers are looking forward to it with special interest."

The admiral looked up to find Lt. Commander Fillmore standing next to him. "Okay, sir, which group got the ship?"

"Have you got a bet on it, too?" the CO teased.

"No, actually. I was just curious."

"Oh. I think most of the rest of the crew do."

"Do you?"

"Hell, no. It wouldn't look good for the CO to be in on all of that."

"True. So, which group?"

Rosenzweig flicked his gaze left, then right, checking to see if anyone was looking. He crooked his finger, and the scientist leaned down and in. "Ron's group got the ship," the admiral whispered. "And keep it **quiet**," he warned, giving Fillmore a mock-glare.

"Okay. I will."

"Good. Now, anything on sensors?"

"All quiet right now, Admiral." Rosenzweig nodded, and then glanced over as a yeoman approached, report board in hand. He took it and read it over. Fillmore nodded to Yeoman Pfeffer and returned to the science station.

The Avenger cruised into the star system some 16 hours later, and came out of warp drive between the orbits of two outer planets. Rosenzweig was back in the center seat, but third-shift personnel held most of the other stations.

"Admiral?" Rosenzweig glanced toward Ensign Cuebas at communications.

"Yes, Ensign?"

"Starbase 32 sends greetings. They've transmitted approach vectors for the dockyard area; I've patched them through to the helm."

The admiral shot a look at the helm specialist. "Mr. Christensen?"

"Laid in and on the board, sir. We're ready to adjust course."

"Do so."

"Aye, sir." Christensen tapped commands into the console. At navigation, Commander Trask divided his attention between the young helmsman and his nav-plot to avoid any stray asteroids.

The Avenger proceeded through the system's asteroid belt. As the ship cleared the belt, Christensen and Trask guided it onto a smooth course toward the base. Soon afterward, Cuebas looked up. "Sir, I have a transmission from Starbase Orbital Control."

"On speakers."

"Avenger, this is Control. You are cleared for final approach. We estimate five minutes until transfer-of-control."

"Thank you," Rosenzweig answered. "We'll talk to you in five minutes, then." He swung toward sciences. "Mr. Kekst, any other vessels on sensors?"

The tech double-checked his readouts. "A few, Admiral, but well out of our approach lane."

"Good. Thank you." He turned back to the viewer, watching as a tiny blue-and-white ball appeared and began to grow larger.

As they were passed the outer moon, the base signaled again.

"Avenger, prepare for transfer-of-control."

Ensign Christensen nodded, and the admiral spoke. "Control, this is Rear Admiral Rosenzweig. Control transfer on my mark. 5...4...3...2...1...mark." Christensen hit a switch, and the bridge lights went blue.

"Transfer complete, Avenger. Enjoy the view."

In smooth, unfaltering maneuvers, the ship approached the starbase. The traffic control personnel guided her into a standard orbit not far from several drydock facilities. Spotlights on the docks swung to illuminate the heavy frigate. The Avenger moved up among the docks. To starboard, moored within a model D-46 dock, was an Ascension-class dreadnought. A heavy cruiser floated in the D-40 dock on the other side, with a science scout floating beyond it.

"Increase mag on the dreadnought," Rosenzweig ordered.

Christensen nodded, and the image of the big 3-engined craft expanded. "U.S.S. Tai Shan. It's about to be commissioned."

Christensen turned back to him. "That's the one, right?"

"Yup. That's it."

"Nice ship," the helm specialist commented.

The Avenger swung around and nosed its way toward a position near the docks. The Starbase Control computers guided it into an orbit location that would keep it near the drydock where the Tai Shan was moored. A group of work bees approached the Avenger and hooked mooring lines to hold the ship near the dock. "We're secure," Ensign Sica reported from engineering.

"Thank you."

"Another signal from Control, sir," announced Cuebas. "We should prepare to receive Admiral Ackermann at 0700 ship-time."

"Acknowledge it," Rosenzweig replied. He paused. "That gives us two hours..."

Rosenzweig, Captain Vosseller, Commander Blackman, and Lt. Commander Hoffmann stood in the staging area of Airlock #2. A travel pod finished its final docking checks. The airlock doors slid

open. A moment later, the set of doors on the pod also opened. Admiral Ackermann, attended by an aide, strode from the pod and stopped at the Avenger's doors. Yeoman Gladstone raised the simulated bos'n's whistle and piped him aboard. The admirals exchanged salutes.

"Permission to come aboard?" Ackermann asked formally.

"Permission granted, Admiral," came the reply. "Welcome."

Ackermann stepped through the doors and onto the ship. He and Rosenzweig shook hands.

"How are you, Alex?"

"Pretty good, Bryan. The past few months have been pretty wild."

"I've been reading your reports." He glanced over at the others, who remained at attention. "At ease, gentlemen." Vosseller immediately relaxed, and Blackman and Hoffmann followed suit.

"Why don't we move this to the briefing room?" the Avenger's commander suggested.

"Good idea," said Ackermann.

"This way, please." Rosenzweig led the group into the corridor.

Ackermann touched a switch, and the image of the dreadnought shifted. "The Tai Shan has been fully reconditioned with the newest, top-of-the-line technology. There aren't any structural changes, but her control arrays and her crew-interface components—"

"Consoles, lab equipment..." interjected Rosenzweig. The chief of operations shot a "Don't be a smart-ass" look at him.

"—are of the newest design. If you've seen the newsnet holos of the Enterprise, you should have some idea of what to expect."

"So when do we go over?" asked Hoffmann.

"As soon as possible," Ackermann answered. "The formal ceremony, promotions, and transfer-of-command will be at 1800, but we want you and your people aboard and getting oriented as soon as possible."

"Our things are packed," Blackman told him. "All we need is to shuttle over there."

"Very good. I'll have a shuttle fly over from Tai Shan to pick you up."

"Admiral," Vosseller interjected, "may I ask you something?"

"By all means."

"How long will my group and I have to wait for a ship?"

"Captain," Ackermann said carefully, "I know you're frustrated. We just don't have one ready for you yet. The most likely ship will be the Challenger, but the engineering crews are still testing it. Just do your jobs on Avenger. When things come together, we'll let you know."

"Don't call us; we'll call you," said Bob, his voice tinged with frustration.

"Yes," replied Ackermann. He glanced at his wrist chronometer. "Gentlemen, I hate to cut this short, but I have another meeting. The ceremonies will take place on the concourse of the Tai Shan's drydock."

"Will you be on hand?" Rosenzweig asked.

"I will indeed," the admiral responded. He turned back to Blackman. "You may expect the shuttle in approximately 15 minutes. Have your people ready."

"We'll see to it, sir," Hoffmann assured him.

"I'm sure you will." The operations chief nodded and stepped into the corridor. The doors closed.

"Ron," Rosenzweig said, "you and Glen are relieved of all your Avenger duties. The same goes for your people. If anybody questions that, refer them to me."

"We'll do that, sir," Hoffmann said, nodding.

Twenty minutes later, the bridge crew watched the shuttlecraft pull away from Avenger, carrying Blackman's group to the Tai Shan. Vosseller turned to Rosenzweig.

"Alex, can we authorize shore leave at the starbase?"

"I checked with HQ on that, and we can release the crew for a few hours. Strict orders, though—everybody had better be back by 1800 for the ceremonies and a briefing on our revised assignment docket. By that time, also, our newly-assigned replacements will be on board. Bryan's aide left me a personnel cart so I can review their records."

"Sounds good."

"All we'll need is a skeleton crew on board ship. See if you can get 40 volunteers to stay aboard. Then let everybody else go, but make sure they're back for the ceremonies."

"I will." Vosseller headed for the turbo-lift.

By 1745, Rear Admiral Rosenzweig was in his cabin, affixing full-dress appurtenances to his uniform. As he straightened his ribbon-sash, the door chime sounded.

"Come." The door slid aside, and Captain Lane stepped in. He, too, was in full-dress.

"Ready for the ceremonies?"

"Yeah, Jon, I am." He crossed the room. "I hope everybody else is."

"They will be. It better not drag, though, if I know these crews."

The admiral grinned. "Now that's true. If it goes on too long, I'm sure there'll be some quiet defections." He indicated the corridor. "Shall we go?"

"Let's," Lane replied.

The ceremony actually went quite well. Admirals Ackermann and Hightower were both on hand. They each had some remarks, and Rosenzweig added a few of his own. The list of promotions was announced, the most notable, of course, being Blackman's promotion to captain and Hoffmann's elevation to full commander. The Tai Shan's former CO, Fleet Captain O'Hara, made a few statements as outgoing ship's commander, and command formally passed to Blackman. And with that, the pomp and circumstance were done with, and everyone moved to the reception area.

Later, as the reception drew to a close. Blackman and Hoffmann received the congratulations of the remaining well-wishers, and were left to watch as the crews of Tai Shan and Avenger departed.

"Well," came a voice behind them, "we have a ship." The captain and exec turned. Lt. Commander Leslie Legard, Tai Shan's new chief medical officer, walked up to them. Blackman nodded.

"Yes, we do at that."

"How do you feel?" Now **that**, the captain knew from long experience, was a loaded question, especially from a ship's doctor.

"I feel great," he replied. "Scared, but great."

Legard nodded. She'd gotten what she wanted. Any new captain who wasn't at least a little daunted by the duties of command was a source of concern. But Blackman was smart enough to be nervous. Good.

Her next comment gave no hint of what she'd been fishing for. "I'd like your approval to start scheduling physical and psych exams for the crew. I have the records, but I need current results to compare them to."

"Of course, Leslie. Go ahead."

"No hiding when it's your turn," she teased.

"Me?" Blackman looked astonished. His exec grinned. "Don't be silly."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Legard warned him.

"Hold him to what?" asked Rosenzweig, as he, Lane, and Ackermann came walking toward the group.

"To his claim that he won't hide when his physical and psych exams come up."

"He will," the Avenger's CO said, smiling, "or claim the press of duty."

"No, I won't," protested Blackman.

"Of course you will," Ackermann said lightly. "All ship captains do. I did, too, back on the Valiant."

"It's sort of a tradition," Lane put in.

"And you don't want to buck tradition, do you, Ron?" Hoffmann asked.

"Yes, you do," Legard told him.

"I think I'd better keep quiet," Blackman said.

"Wise choice," Rosenzweig commented.

"I'll be aboard ship," Legard put in. "Your appointment time will be on your com-screen, Captain. See you later, sirs." She headed for the docking tube.

"I sense a good ship's doctor there," Ackermann said.

"Oh, she is," Hoffmann assured him. "She'll keep us in line, sir."

"Good."

"Admiral, when do we get our first orders?" Blackman asked.

Ackermann's gaze also included Rosenzweig as he answered.

"Actually, your orders were delayed by a few hours. We should have them for you by 0200."

"Understood, sir," Rosenzweig replied. "I'll keep the crew on light duty 'til then."

"We'll have enough to do just putting things together," added Blackman.

"I'm sure you will," Ackermann said. "And I'm afraid I must leave you. Duty calls."

"Doesn't it always?" All Rosenzweig got was a tight smile. Ackermann clearly had a great deal on his mind. "Take it easy, Bryan."

"You bet." He and Alex shook hands, and he started for the doors.

"Well, Ron, take care."

"You, too. We'll see you soon?"

"No doubt." Again, handshakes were exchanged, and Blackman and Hoffmann turned and walked toward the docking tube. Rosenzweig's gaze strayed to the wide viewports that looked out into the drydock.

"Alex?" The admiral turned back to Captain Lane.

"What is it, Jon?"

"Should we head back to the ship?"

"Actually, I want to check on a few things first. You go back and give Bob a hand, if he needs one. Like I said to Bryan, the crew should be on light duty."

"Speaking of Bob, he didn't look too thrilled at the ceremony."

"He's frustrated. I don't blame him completely. He and his team want a ship. And the delays are largely bureaucratic. You know Bob's reaction to bureaucracy."

"Yeah, I do. It certainly isn't doing much for morale to have him and Tom and some of the others complaining non-stop, though."

"As long as they do their jobs and don't endanger the ship, I can't ask much more. You can't force somebody to be cheerful."

"You're right." Lane shrugged. "I hope HQ moves things along, though."

"Me too. Jon, if you or Bob need me, check at Starbase Control or in the communications center."

"Okay, Alex. When will you be back on board?"

"An hour or so, I guess."

"I'll let Bob know."

"Thanks. See you later."

The turbo-lift doors opened, and Captain Blackman and Commander Hoffmann stepped onto the bridge of the Tai Shan.

"Welcome, Captain," said Lt. Commander DeVries, the security chief.

"Thank you, Mr. DeVries." He stepped down to the center seat, fingering the arms of the chair. Hoffmann had moved to the engineering console, and was calling up standard checks. Blackman sat down. He touched the log control.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8802.24:

In accordance with Star Fleet orders this stardate, I hereby accept command of the U.S.S. Tai Shan. The crew is getting used to the changes, and we all look forward to getting underway. More later. Out."

Switching off the log, he looked around. Lt. Commander Lebovitz was at communications, while Hoffmann held engineering. Lieutenant Hunnebeck had the helm, with Lt. Commander Ross holding navigation until some permanent navigators were assigned. Lt. Commander Elovitch was at sciences, and Lieutenant J.G. Pajon was at weapons/defense. They were good people, and he looked forward to commanding them. He hoped he was up to it.

Rear Admiral Rosenzweig stepped into the vast communications center of the starbase. It was a huge chamber, as large as a starship rec deck, but filled with consoles, viewers, computer banks, equipment... It could keep track of every Star Fleet vessel in the quadrant, and a few outside it. Glancing around, Rosenzweig took in the data displayed on the viewers, quickly summing up for himself the status of the Fleet in the area.

A commander looked up from the duty officer's station. Seeing a rear admiral in the room, he quickly stood up and walked over to him. They traded salutes.

"Can I help you, Admiral?"

"No, Commander, I don't think so. I'm just...observing. Unofficially. Don't let me distract you from your duties."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

"Of course. I'll try not to get in anyone's way."

"Aye, sir." The duty officer went back to his console, and Rosenzweig focused his attention on the viewers, getting a feel for who was where. NCC-860. There was McAuliffe, surveying UFC-2116. Arcturus was escorting a pair of transport/tugs. Lagrange... was in Quadrant O, as she should be. Since she served as a free-

flying Star Fleet command post, she was always kept deep in Federation space. Where was Konkordium? Oh, there. Out on the edges of UFP space. Suddenly, the blip marked "NCC-2106" on the viewer turned red, and a harsh, attention-getting sound-pulse came from the direct-communications board. The ensign working there adjusted her earpiece receiver.

"Commander Chang! I have a distress call from the U.S.S. Konkordium!"

Chang bolted for the console, even as Rosenzweig arrived from a different direction.

"All right, Ensign Lykken," Chang said. "Give me a report."

"Telemetry partial and cut-off. I have a minimal voice-message."

"Run it," Rosenzweig ordered.

Lykken nodded. The voice that issued from the speakers belonged to Carol Peterson.

"...repeating, we have been attacked. Attacker unidentified. No match in our computers. Captain Levine is hurt. We are disabled. Request assistance."

Rosenzweig reacted immediately. "Commander, patch a signal through to the Avenger. Have them go to yellow alert, and patch through the Konkordium's coordinates."

"With respect, Admiral, something just hacked up a dreadnought. You're going to take a heavy frigate out after it?"

The rear admiral fixed him with a look. "Yes. But you have a point. Order the Tai Shan to yellow alert, as well; they're coming with us." And he left the room at a dead run.

When Rosenzweig bounded from the turbo-lift and onto the Avenger's bridge, he was pleased to see that his crew was ready.

"We're at yellow alert, Alex," Vosseller told him.

"Admiral," said Ensign Shappe, "I have Starbase Control and the Tai Shan lined up to talk to you. Admiral Ackermann is in Control."

"We'd better talk to Control first, then. Patch them through and tie in the Tai Shan."

"Yes, sir."

"Rosenzweig, what are you doing?"

"Admiral Ackermann, I am taking the Avenger and, with permission, the Tai Shan to help the Konkordium and deal with whatever it is that attacked them. There are no vessels in the area that are not themselves on critical assignments. As our ships are currently free, I am acting on my authority as commander of the 7th Fleet to deploy backups for one of the starships under my command." Rosenzweig had been appointed to the flag post less than two months earlier, and he took the job seriously. Vosseller could attest to that, as he frequently processed the reports that arrived on the Avenger. Ackermann paused.

"Alex, are you sure you know what you're getting into?"

Rosenzweig shook his head. "No. But aside from the dreadnoughts, in terms of combat capability, the Avenger's the best-equipped vessel in the 7th Fleet to handle this." His expression softened. "Please, sir, don't override me on this."

Ackermann took one look at his expression and sighed. "Alex, I hope you're being rational about this."

"Of course, sir."

"All right. You're approved to go and to take the Tai Shan. Don't go getting yourselves killed."

"Don't worry, sir."

"Good. Alex, get off your bridge and onto a discrete channel. You'll be cleared to launch in 20 minutes and I have classified information for you."

"Yes, Admiral. I'll be with you in five minutes."

"Okay." The screen switched to the Tai Shan's bridge.

"Well, Ron, it looks like we may have found you some action for your first mission. Will you be ready?"

"Oh, yes. We will."

"Outstanding. Stand by, then. And be ready for launch when we're cleared."

"Aye, aye, Admiral." As the Tai Shan's bridge was replaced by a view of the docks, Rosenzweig stood up. "Captain Vosseller, you have the con again. Make sure we're ready."

"I will, sir." The admiral nodded and hurried into the turbo-lift.

"E Deck," he told the elevator. The lift started down the shaft.

The admiral walked into his quarters and settled down at his desk. He touched his intercom control. "Com-center, patch me through to Admiral Ackermann, please."

"Aye, sir." That was Lt. Commander Doctors. "Secure channel set, sir."

"Bryan?"

"I have you, Alex. Let's get serious. This is personal for you, isn't it?"

"I thought we'd been over this."

"Answer my question. Is it personal?"

"Possibly somewhat. But I stand by my tactical assessment of the situation. I still believe we're the best-equipped vessels to handle this, and we're only 60 parsecs away."

"I agree with you. I just wanted to hear you admit to the situation. You know, I gather, about some of the rumors."

"Most are wild distortions."

"Of course they are; it's the nature of things. But if you are honest with yourself, you command better."

"Right. Anything else?"

"Yes, and this is more serious. I'm concerned about the Tai Shan."

"Why?"

"This will be their first mission. Blackman is an untried captain. His officers are new to top-level posts. And you're taking them into what could well be a very dangerous situation. Are you sure of your decision?"

"Yes. Ron is good command material; you know that. He would never have been approved to head up a dreadnought crew if he wasn't. His officers are also fully capable. Sure it's a new situation, but I think they can handle it."

"All right. I'll accept your confidence in them. Good luck, Alex."

"Thanks, Bryan. Rosenzweig out."

"Ackermann out." The viewer darkened.

The turbo-lift doors slid open, admitting Rosenzweig onto the bridge. Vosseller stood up to transfer command back to the admiral.

"We're ready, Alex."

"Good." Lt. Commander Bell handed him a report board as he sat down.

"Ops report, sir." Rosenzweig scanned it. Helm, ordnance, navigation, mission support all showed high marks.

"Looks good, Commander." He initialed the board and handed it back to her. Then, glancing at the engineering station, he inquired, "Power status, Mr. Ambrose?"

"We're at full capability, Admiral."

"Thank you." He turned to communications. "Ensign Lubar, signal Starbase Orbital Control. Advise them we request clearance for departure. Then double-check with Tai Shan on their status."

Lubar nodded, her hands flitting across the console. Several minutes later, she looked up. "Tai Shan reports ready, as well. Starbase says, 'Stand by.'" A second later, she added, "We're cleared for departure, sir."

Rosenzweig turned toward navigation. "Ensign Abbott, straight line out on course. Mr. Hunt, one-quarter maneuvering thrusters."

"Aye, Admiral," both men replied.

Glancing to his right, the admiral addressed the science officer. "Captain, are your sensors up to speed?"

"Yes," Lane replied.

"When we get out there, we're gonna be looking for...something. Be ready."

"You better believe it."

"We're leaving orbit," called Abbott. The planet was slowly sliding away below them.

"We're clear," reported Lane.

"Mr. Abbott, you have the Konkordium's coordinates."

"Course already plotted and laid in."

"Very good. Mr. Hunt, impulse power to terminal range, then warp factor 11."

"Yes, sir. Engaging impulse power."

"Tai Shan's clear," Lane announced. "Moving up just behind us."

Both ships leaped into warp drive. "Hold course," Rosenzweig ordered. "Alert me about any problems. Bob, you have the con." Vosseller nodded, and Rosenzweig left the bridge.

"What's with him?" asked Ensign 1st Class Toussaint from the weapons station.

"Take a good guess," Ambrose replied.

In his cabin, the rear admiral finished listening to the distress call from the Konkordium for the third time. Peterson was upset, but seemed to be holding together. But what had **happened**? Dreadnoughts were large, powerful vessels. Only the Ingram, the Excelsior, and the Ariel-class were larger. And something had attacked with sufficient power to seriously damage the Konk. And what had happened to Levine??

Rosenzweig put his head in his hands, trying to keep his worry under control. He hadn't been totally honest with Bryan. The whole thing was more than "possibly somewhat" personal to him. The various events surrounding his appointment as 7th Fleet Commander had thrown him into contact with Levine and the Konkordium a number of times in the past few months, and they'd been communicating frequently by subspace. This contact had brought home to him just how much he'd come to care for Levine and Peterson, and to a lesser extent the entire ship's crew. Though he was completely aware of the dangers inherent in space duty, the thought of anything happening to them was highly painful to him, particularly when he could do something about it. Of course, this did not change the fact that the Avenger and Tai Shan were the best-equipped ships in the 7th Fleet to handle this. That he had told the truth about.

The door chime sounded. Rosenzweig looked up, then keyed the lock-release. "Come."

With a soft hiss, the door slid aside. Lane stepped through the doorway, walking over to where the admiral sat and putting a hand on his shoulder.

"How're you holding up?"

"I'll be fine, Jon. I've been—"

"—trying to deal with the situation in your head. Believe me, I understand."

"I know you do." Alex smiled slightly. "I think Bryan does, too. I'm not sure he believes me when I tell him that, combat-wise, we're the third most powerful ship in the 7th Fleet, after Konk and Tai Shan."

"But he does trust you, Alex."

"I hope everything's okay out there. I wish I knew what happened."

"Did Carol say anything?"

"Just that they were attacked. They couldn't ID the attacker." He shook his head. "And that Jen's hurt. Gods, Jon, I wish I knew what they were going through out there!"

"We'll find out soon." Lane took a good look at the admiral.

"Alex, it'll work out. Jen's got the luck of...something."

"You're right," Rosenzweig said. He shrugged. "Well, we're not gonna learn anything more down here. Let's get back to the bridge."

Rosenzweig settled back into the command chair. He'd packed Vosseller off to the auxiliary control center with orders to get it ready, in case they got into combat. The admiral keyed on the log re-order.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8802.24:

The Avenger is proceeding at warp factor 11 toward the last known coordinates of the starship Konkordium, in response to its distress call. With us is the U.S.S. Tai Shan, now commanded by Captain Ronald Blackman, in case backup is necessary. The Konk has reportedly been attacked and badly damaged by an unknown vessel. We can only hope that the attacker is not still lurking around, hoping to add more ships to its list of victims."

Switching off the log, the admiral glanced at communications. "Ms. Lubar, any report from Tai Shan?"

"They're at yellow alert, and Captain Blackman says they're ready for whatever comes."

"Good."

"Admiral?" The CO looked toward engineering.

"Yes, Ensign?"

Ambrose took a deep breath. "Sir, we're not going to be able to hold warp 11 much longer, not without running a serious risk of overloading the systems."

"All right. Ensign Lubar, inform the Tai Shan we're slowing down. Mr. Hunt, reduce speed to warp 10."

"Yes, sir. Slowing to warp 10."

"Tai Shan is matching our speed reduction," Lane reported.

"ETA to Konkordium?"

"About one and a half hours."

Rosenzweig touched the intercom switch. "Engineering."

"Newcome here."

"John, can we hold warp 10 for the next 1.5 hours?"

"I believe so."

"Good. Maintain. Bridge out."

As both vessels neared the Konkordium, Rosenzweig ordered the Tai Shan to drop back to provide cover. Avenger dropped out of hyperspace within one million kilometers of the Konk, and Tai Shan appeared five times that distance behind.

"We're within visual range," reported Lane from the sciences station.

"All right, let's have a look."

Lane nodded and put the image on the main viewer. There were gasps on the bridge.

"Scorched starship strategy," muttered the admiral. Large sear-marks could be seen all over the Konk's hull. Several shattered viewports, a gaping hole in the central support pylon, an exploded reaction control thruster-pack, and a cloud of crystals near the hangar section spoke mutely of the damage the ship had taken.

"Ensign Lubar, open a hailing frequency."

"Channel open, sir."

"Konkordium, come in. This is Avenger. Do you read?"

For a moment, there was only static. Then Lubar looked up.

"Visual signal, sir."

The main viewer image switched from the forward view, and was washed in interference. The image cleared to reveal the bridge of the Konkordium. Rosenzweig, almost involuntarily, came to his feet.

"Oh, my gods," said Ambrose.

Hunt remembered watching declassified flight recorder images from the Enterprise's battle with the Reliant, and Admiral Kirk's voice: "Khan, you've got to give us time. The bridge is smashed, the computers inoperative..."

"Avenger," came Peterson's voice through the speakers, "we're reading you, barely." She stood up, mirroring the admiral's pose. "We have only short-range sensors, and they're working only out to about 1,000 kilometers. We don't know where the alien went, or if it's still in the area." She looked straight at Rosenzweig's image on her viewer, and he returned her gaze. "Admiral, if that ship could do what it did to us, the Avenger would be no match for it. Get out of here, for your own sakes." She shifted her weight, and caught the arm of the command chair to balance herself. Rosenzweig realized she was very unsteady, and really stopped to look at her.

The Konkordium's exec looked exhausted. Her face was smoke-stained and sweaty, her hair disheveled. There was blood spattered across her jacket, Human blood, most visible from the spots on her division-band. A very quick once-over convinced the admiral that the blood was not her own, and he released the breath he'd caught.

"Commander," he said, "for gods' sake sit down. The Tai Shan is with us, covering at five million kilometers back."

Lane stood up at the sciences station. "Our sensors show no sign of the alien ship. Unless it's got a really good cloak, it's gone."

Peterson sank back into the center seat. Behind her, Chief of Operations Sara Hagen could be seen assisting several engineering specialists in repairing damaged circuits to the turbo-lift. She, too, looked exhausted.

"What's your ship-status?" Rosenzweig asked.

"We're secure, for the moment. It's pretty bad, though, as you can see from outside."

"Crew casualties?"

"65 dead, many of them from engineering and the flight crews. We took bad hits there. 113 injured, some critical. I'm expecting a report from Doctor Ferrucci any minute now."

"Carol," Rosenzweig said, taking a deep breath, "what happened to Jennifer?"

Peterson closed her eyes for a second. When she opened them, her expression was haunted. "The weapons console...circuits overloaded. Ensign Torgau took the brunt of it. Jennifer leaped out of her chair, and the alien hit us again. The artificial gravity went out, and Jen's momentum took her...into a wall."

"Oh, my gods..." Rosenzweig turned to Lane. "I'm going over there." He looked back at Peterson. "Carol, do you need some extra engineers to help out?"

"We could use them, yes."

"Good. What about medical?"

"I'll let you know when Marcy calls in."

"Okay. Five engineers and I will be over post-haste. We'll see you soon. Avenger out."

"Konkordium out." The screen darkened, then was replaced by the image of the dreadnought.

Rosenzweig touched his intercom switch. "Engineering."

"Engineering. Newcome here."

"John, get Lt. Commander Young and four of your best damage-control people to Transporter Room 1. I'll meet them there."

"Yes, sir."

"Bridge out." The admiral swung around toward Lane. "Jon, you have the con. Have Bob stay in auxiliary control. I want him to stay ready for backup."

"He's not going to like it."

"Those are my orders. As long as he does his job, I'll be happy."

"Admiral, have you got a second?"

"What, Jon?"

"Come on." Lane walked toward the turbo-lift. Rosenzweig glanced over his shoulder. "Commander Hunt, you have the con 'til Captain Lane comes back."

"Aye, sir."

Inside the turbo-lift, Lane said, "Bridge docking port." The lift spun, and the doors opened again. They stepped into the docking port's foyer. Lane turned around and looked straight at the admiral. "Alex, are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Jon." He paused. "I don't have time for this, so—"

"Admiral." It was the first time in months that Lane had used the rank in private, and Rosenzweig stopped short. The science officer went on. "I couldn't see your face from the science station when you talked to Carol, but I didn't have to. You're stretched tight, Alex. Be **careful**."

His friend smiled tightly. "I will. Thanks, Jon. But I have to find out what's going on over there."

"All right."

"Get back onto the bridge. I'm heading for the transporter room." They stepped back into the turbo-lift.

In the transporter room, the assistant chief engineer waited for the admiral. "Where is he?" Lt. Commander Young asked no one in particular. "He's not usually late."

On the platform, Ensign 1st Class Padovan and Ensigns Gruenbaum, T'Lieste, and Witcher looked at one another. Padovan knew the ship's CO best, but could offer no suggestions. Neither could

the transporter specialist, Ensign Wolf. Young poked his head into the operator's booth.

"Mr. Wolf, signal the bridge. Ask them where—"

The doors slid open and Rosenzweig strode into the chamber.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Ready, Mr. Young?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Let's go." He was on the platform a second later, with Young right behind him. Rosenzweig turned to face the booth. "Mr. Wolf, tie us into the Konkordium's pickup signal, then energize."

"Aye, aye, sir," Wolf responded. He touched a series of controls. The six on the platform were enveloped in blue-white light and disappeared.

They rematerialized on the platform in one of Konkordium's transporter rooms. The duty-specialist touched the intercom switch. "Bridge. I have them."

"Very good, Ms. Tremaine," came Peterson's reply. "Bridge out."

Rosenzweig stepped forward. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Permission granted, Admiral."

"Shall my engineers proceed to your engineering section?"

"Yes, sir. Chief Engineer Flanders and Assistant Chief Steward should be in main engineering. Lieutenant Adler is on the impulse deck, I believe."

"Thank you. Mr. Young, you'll take your orders from Mr. Flanders."

"Aye, aye, sir." Young glanced at the other engineers. "Let's go." They moved into the corridor. Rosenzweig followed them out, but headed in a different direction.

Reaching the sickbay, the admiral found controlled chaos. With over a third of the crew dead or injured, the Konkordium's medical staff had their hands full. Trying to stay out of the way, Rosenzweig found himself nearly rammed by Ensign Beliveau, who quickly apologized and introduced himself.

"Don't let me keep you, Ensign," the admiral told him. "One question, though: Where's Captain Levine?"

"Intensive care, sir."

"Thank you." Rosenzweig started for the wardroom.

The door slid aside as he approached it, and he found himself staring at three long, very sharp, knifelike extensions. He glanced to his right. Standing inside the doorway was Ensign Ricardo Enricia Snaegthas, more commonly known to the crew as "Snake". The admiral himself had assigned Ensign Snake to serve as both an intelligence operative and Captain Levine's guard. His position in the security section made that job eminently doable, although Security Chief Macchio reportedly found him somewhat hard to take. Alex could understand her position.

Snake stared back at him, sheathing the blades as he realized who it was. He motioned into the room with his head. "Carry on, Admiral."

"Thank you. Where's the captain?"

"There." Snake indicated the bed where Levine lay.

Rosenzweig nodded, focusing on that bed and the woman lying in it. He walked to Levine's bedside. He saw the faint blue aura of a sterile field around her, and realized how significant her injuries must have been. He looked down at her, noting the equipment at the ready in case anything happened. He touched her hand, knowing the field would protect her from any contaminants he might inadvertently be carrying, but there was no reaction to his

touch. The readouts showed that she lived, but her vitals were low, and she barely **appeared** alive at all.

"Jen... Oh, gods..." he said, his voice nearly breaking. "Why?" he whispered softly, reaching over to brush a strand of hair off of her face. He allowed himself a rush of anger at an unknown alien for hurting this captain. He glanced around, but there was no way to sit at her side. He took her hand. Bending over, he said softly, "If you can sense me, I'm on board. Hang in there. Don't die; I'm with you." He leaned in and kissed her softly on the forehead. Standing up, he kept his eyes riveted to her face. There was still no reaction.

Behind Rosenzweig, Doctor Ferrucci entered the ICU. Snake greeted her with, "The admiral has arrived."

"Thank you, Ensign," Ferrucci replied. She started toward Rosenzweig, pausing as he bent over the captain, then approaching when he straightened. "Admiral?"

He turned. "Doctor. How is she?"

The chief medical officer joined him at Levine's bedside. "She's stable. She's still critical, but out of immediate danger. She was very lucky."

Rosenzweig nodded, but his expression was still tight. "Thank you, Doctor. Your prognosis?"

"She should be fine, but she's going to have to follow medical orders."

Rosenzweig finally smiled. "We'll see to it that she does. Why's there no response to stimuli?"

Ferrucci nodded to herself. Good. The admiral was slipping back into patterns she knew were typical for him. "I've got her on heavy sedation. My...repair-work will heal better if she stays asleep."

"That's a deep sleep. I was...worried about her."

The doctor smiled at him. "You're a good friend."

"Doctor, do you need additional personnel support? With so many injuries, your division must be running ragged."

"We could use the help," Ferrucci acknowledged.

"Okay. When I get up to the bridge, I'll call across and have Doctor Levy send some people over."

"Thanks."

"Actually, speaking of the bridge, I'd better get up there."

"Very well, sir. See you later."

Rosenzweig reached a turbo-lift and, once inside, slumped against the wall. He realized the need to pull himself together. If he reacted on the bridge as he had in sickbay, he could annihilate his credibility and any faith either crew would place in him. Worse, he could hurt Peterson's ability to command, and until Levine was back in operation, the exec would need all the reinforcement she could get. The admiral took a deep breath.

"Ready as I'll ever be," he muttered. Then, louder, "Bridge." The lift started up the shaft, but soon slowed and stopped. A glance at the position-indicator panel told Rosenzweig that the elevator was only on B Deck. At first he was confused. Then he remembered. Lt. Commander Hagen had been helping to repair turbo-lift circuits! He stepped out of the lift. Flagging down a lieutenant, he asked, "Which way to the bridge access ladder?"

The lieutenant pointed toward a cross-corridor. "That way, then left."

"Thank you." He found the ladder and started up. Pushing up the hatch, he climbed through and got to his feet in front of the

helm-navigation console. He nodded to Lieutenants Kindle and Lisle, who—even with the situation as critical as it was—couldn't help but stop short as a rear admiral suddenly stood up in front of them. Rosenzweig walked around the console and came to a halt a meter from the center seat. Peterson finished reading the report board she was holding and handed it to the waiting yeoman.

"Thank you, Ensign," she told him. As the yeoman left, Peterson looked up to see Rosenzweig standing there. She started to come to her feet.

"Relax, Commander," the admiral said quickly. Peterson sat back down, the corners of her mouth quirking upward with a hint of a grateful smile. Rosenzweig covered the meter in two steps, to stand beside the chair. "Hello, Carol," he said softly. "How are you doing?"

"I'm holding on, Alex," the Konkordium's exec replied. "We all are."

"I know."

"Have you been to sickbay?"

"Yes."

"Then you've seen Jen."

Alex nodded. "I talked to the doctor. She told me Jen'll be okay. When I first got to the ICU and saw her lying so still..." Carol looked straight at him, and he caught himself.

"I understand, Alex." For once, Rosenzweig reacted instinctively. He reached out and touched her hand.

"I know you do." He paused. "Carol, I offered the services of some of our medical people, and Doctor Ferrucci accepted. Can I make use of your communications station?"

"Please." Peterson indicated the station, where Lieutenant (1st Class) Karen Gorgas was monitoring the intraship com-net.

Rosenzweig stepped over to the station. "Good to see you again, Lieutenant, though I do wish the circumstances could be happier."

"Yes, sir," Gorgas replied. "Me, too." She had transferred a couple of months earlier to the Konkordium from the Avenger, and appeared to have settled in well on the dreadnought.

"Patch me through to Avenger, please."

"Aye, Admiral." The communications officer turned her attention to the console. A moment later, she glanced up at Rosenzweig. "Go ahead, sir."

"Thank you. Avenger, do you read?"

"Yes, Admiral," came Lane's reply. "What is it?"

"Tie me in to sickbay."

"Yes, sir. Hold on."

"Switching now," Ensign Lubar reported.

"Sickbay. Levy here."

"Rosenzweig here, Doctor. Can you get a team together to help out on the Konkordium? Their med-staff are really swamped."

"Do you want me to send people across, or should we transfer patients to the Avenger?"

"Stand by." Rosenzweig turned toward Peterson. "Carol?"

"Let's send patients over. This way, we'll lessen the burden on the equipment, too."

"Good enough," the admiral said. "Doctor, we'll send the patients over. Have the transporter rooms get ready."

"Yes, sir. We'll let you know when we're ready to receive."

"Outstanding, Doc. Rosenzweig out."

"Engineering to bridge," came a new voice from the intercom.

Alex paced back to the command chair as Peterson pressed the control.

"Flanders here, Commander. We've got minimal warp power back on the outboard engines. The center one's gonna take a dry-dock to fix. Thank the Avenger for the team they sent over. They're helping a lot."

The admiral smiled as Peterson looked up at him and pointed at the 'com. He leaned over. "Rear Admiral Rosenzweig here, Mr. Flanders. You're welcome."

"Umm... Yes, sir. Thanks again, sir, and good to talk to you again."

"Same here, Commander. I'll check in later. Rosenzweig out." Peterson deactivated the intercom. While Alex had spoken, she'd kept her mouth clamped shut over the giggle that threatened to break free at Flanders' discomfiture. Now it did burst out, and Alex joined her. After a moment, they caught their breath, the smiles still on their faces.

"That felt good," Carol said.

"I can believe it," Alex answered. He took a breath. "Carol, what **was** it that attacked you? The signals that made it back to Starbase 32 had almost nothing."

Peterson swiveled toward the sciences station, where Lieutenants Chernesky and Horowitz were working on damaged computer systems. "Vin? How together are those computers?"

"We've got them mostly back," Chernesky reported. Horowitz nodded.

"Good," said the exec. "I need you to put up what we have on the alien that attacked."

"Yes, ma'am," replied the acting science officer. He turned to his console. "I'm patching to the main viewer." Both Peterson and Rosenzweig glanced forward again as the viewer shimmered, then displayed an image of a space vehicle.

It was...alien. The ship was like nothing the admiral had ever seen before...and his hobby was collecting replicas of, and data on, spacecraft. At what Chernesky marked as the forward end, eight spinelike structures extended out from the ship's center at an angle 30 degrees back from perpendicular to the ship's center. Each spine bent at a joint about 120 meters out from the center and angled backward. Between the spines was strung a lacy, filigree-like array of wires and nodes. The ship's center was a 60-meter thick, trunk-like structure. The spines joined at the front end of this "trunk", which extended back for 700 meters. At the aft end of the ship, the trunk split into an array of tentacle-like structures trailing back. The oddest thing, to Rosenzweig, was that the ship had a crystalline hull-composition. Crystalline hulls weren't unheard of, but they weren't common, either.

The image dissolved into a 3-view of the ship. Dimensions and technical specifics—at least, those the Konkordium could obtain—popped in around the diagrams. There wasn't much beyond the base-dimensions: mass, energy-weapon power, turning radius.

The admiral glanced at Peterson, then turned to Chernesky. "Lieutenant, dump this data to both Avenger and Tai Shan."

"Yes, sir." Chernesky looked at Gorgas, who nodded. Both turned to their stations.

"Captain?" Blackman swung toward the comm-station, where Lebowitz had turned to face him. "We just got a data transmission from the Konk. I've patched it through to sciences."

Blackman glanced toward sciences. Elovitch nodded. "I have it, sir."

"Good." Swinging back to Lebowitz, he said, "Open a channel to the Konkordium."

"Yes, sir." A moment later, "Channel open." The Konk's bridge appeared on the main viewer. The captain blinked, then smiled. Rosenzweig was standing next to the command chair, one hand on the chair back. Peterson was sitting in the chair.

"We're reading you, Tai Shan," she said. "Go ahead."

"I wanted to see what was happening," Blackman replied.

"We're on standby out here. We haven't picked up anything on the sensors, and everything seems quiet. How are you doing there?"

"We're patching things back together, at least enough to get back to a starbase. Our chief engineer reports we have minimal warp power back, but there's a lot of repair-work left."

"Ron," said Rosenzweig, "we're going to have this ship stable, then we should get it back to base. Since the chief engineer here can't smoothly bring the Konk up to warp 5 or 6, but he can at least hold a warp field, we'll tow the ship. We'll be in touch when it's time to deal with that. Keep your sensors peeled for any hostile ships. You might want to secure from yellow alert; that's up to you."

"Aye, Admiral. Anything more we can do at the moment?"

"I don't think so," answered Peterson.

"Stay sharp, Captain," Rosenzweig added.

"I will. Let us know when you need us. Tai Shan out."

"Konkordium out." The image faded. Blackman glanced at Hoffmann.

"What do you think, Glen?"

"Well, Captain, I'd say that the admiral has the Avenger doing most of the close-in stuff."

"Yes. I guess so." He glanced at Lebowitz. "Cancel yellow alert."

"Aye. Captain."

As the image of the Tai Shan's bridge faded from the viewer and was replaced by the fore view, Rosenzweig felt something brush his fingers. He glanced down. The exec had leaned her head back against the chair, and a few strands of her hair had trailed across his fingers.

"Carol, you're exhausted." She looked up at him. "How long have you been on duty?"

"Umm... About ten hours. The attack was five hours into the shift, and I've been in charge since Jen got hurt."

"Who's next in line?"

"Sara Hagen, but I sent her down for some rest an hour ago."

"Okay. And Mr. Flanders, Dr. Ferrucci, and Security Chief Macchio are tied up. Any other candidates?"

Peterson thought for a minute. "Commander Greenberg should be free. He doesn't have any command training, though. His specialty is security. He's on board as an advisor."

"He won't need that much. Get him up here. And for gods' sake, get some replacements for anyone else who's been on since the attack."

Peterson nodded. She saw some of the others watching the both of them. True, the admiral had seemed a bit overbearing, but she realized that she was very tired. They'd all been under a lot of stress, and Alex was correct, anyway. She activated the intercom and called relief personnel to the bridge.

When the replacement personnel arrived, Peterson stood up. Greenberg strode over to the center seat. "Reporting as ordered, ma'am."

"Take the con, Mr. Greenberg."

"Aye, aye, Commander."

The admiral walked back from where he'd been talking to Ensign Meyers. "Turbo-lift's working to the bridge again."

"Oh. Good," Carol replied. She turned back to Greenberg. "If there are any problems, call me immediately."

"I will." Peterson started for the lift. Rosenzweig joined her. They stepped into the elevator.

"E Deck," the executive officer told the lift. Then she looked at the fleet commander next to her. "Where're you headed?"

"After seeing you to your cabin? Engineering, then sickbay."

"Alex, you don't have to...um...escort me home."

Rosenzweig looked at her, a thoughtful expression on his face. "No...but I would like to." His lips quirked in a slight smile.

Peterson sighed. What was she going to do with him? "All right. If it'll make you feel better."

"Yes." The turbo-lift came to a stop and the disembark light flashed on. Carol led the way into the corridor. Arriving at her cabin, they stepped inside. The exec stopped. She turned to the admiral, whose attention had been caught by something in the work area. As the lights had come up, Rosenzweig had seen a spark of reflection on the floor. Holding up a hand, he went into the work area. Kneeling down, he gathered the pieces of a small, crystal miniature of a cat into his hands.

"Oh, no." Peterson had come up behind him. She looked toward her corner nook, which she had had configured as a display alcove. Ceramic and crystal miniatures of various types adorned the wall-cases. "Great," she muttered. "I stopped to look at this one before I went on duty. I must've forgotten to slide the door closed."

"And in the attack, it must've fallen out. I'm sorry, Carol."

"It's okay, Alex," she sighed. "It's not like I don't have others." Peterson took the pieces from him and set them on her table.

"Carol, I'd better get out of here and let you get some sleep." They walked back to the entry foyer. "I'll see you later on."

"All right. 'Bye."

"Sleep well." Alex stepped through the doors. Carol keyed the lock and pulled off her jacket. She hung it on the hook near the door. Walking back into the sleeping area, she dropped onto the bed and stretched out. Moments later, she was asleep.

Rosenzweig walked down the corridor. He'd found a similarity between himself and Peterson. They both had chosen display alcoves for their quarters. In his, however, the wall-cases held miniatures of starships. Okay, so the similarity wasn't that close. But still... He reached the turbo-lift and went in. "Engineering."

The lift deposited him near the main engineering deck. Striding in, he glanced around. The chamber was a mess, but it was the chaos of a massive repair job. The admiral noted that the intermix shafts remained undamaged. That was good—damage to the shafts could be potentially catastrophic. But the huge isolation-walls were still lowered, and many of the engineers wore—not merely anti-radiation suits—but full environment suits. That indicated that not all the hulling had been fixed yet.

"Admiral?" Rosenzweig turned to face a slender, dark-haired woman. It was Assistant Chief Engineer Steward.

"Hello, Ms. Steward. What's your situation?"

"Holding things together, sir. You were on the bridge when Mr. Flanders called, right?" Her slight smile as she asked the question told Rosenzweig that she knew the answer perfectly well. Smart person, Jennie Steward was.

"Yes, I was. Where is he?"

"In the dorsal." She pointed to where the shaft headed upward past the ceiling. "Your people are scattered through the section. Lt. Commander Young is outstanding at damage control."

"He is indeed. That's why I brought him."

"Of course. Sorry, sir. We're all just very tired."

"I understand, believe me."

"Ms. Steward?" The call came from Ensign Dexter across the chamber. "Could you come over here, ma'am?"

"No rest for the weary," Steward said. "Excuse me, Admiral."

"Of course. Don't let me hold you up." Jennie nodded and hurried off. Rosenzweig turned back toward the entry foyer, realizing that he was only getting in the way. Before he reached the door, though, he heard a shout behind him.

"Admiral!" Turning back, he saw the Konkordium's chief engineer hurrying after him.

"Mr. Flanders! How are you?"

"Exhausted," Flanders said. "We'll have your people back to you shortly. They've done very well."

"Thank you. I'm glad they were able to help. How is everything?"

"We're back up to about 27% capability with the warp drive. We could handle about warp 2."

"If you can hold a warp field, Avenger and Tai Shan will get you back to starbase. Worry about shipboard power and saving lives, John. Let impressive speeds and combat capability come later."

"Of course, sir."

"Sorry. Shouldn't be telling you your job." Flanders nodded.

"Speaking of which, I'd better let you get back to it."

"All right."

"Is there anything more you need?"

"We'll be okay. You helped when it counted most. I'll send your people to you as soon as I can."

"Fine. We'll talk later, then." Rosenzweig nodded to Flanders and left the chamber.

Lieutenant Ward swung to face Commander Greenberg. "Sir? I have a call from the Avenger. They say they're set to receive any patients we want to send over."

"Good," Greenberg replied. "Inform Dr. Ferrucci and have her move patients to the medical transporter. Tell Avenger we'll be beaming in about 5-10 minutes."

"Aye, sir."

On the Avenger's bridge, Ensign Lubar passed the report to Captain Lane. "Thank you, Ensign," the science officer said. "Make sure Mr. Vosseller knows, too."

"Yes, sir." A few moments later, Lane's intercom beeped.

"Lane here."

"Jon, why isn't anyone telling me what's happening?! I'm sitting down here, covering auxiliary as ordered, and I'm getting nothing!"

Lane sighed. "Bob, until just now, nothing was happening. The first major change since Alex and the engineers beamed over to the Konk is the advisory on the patients. Nobody is leaving you out."

"All right," the executive officer replied. "Keep me informed of what goes on."

"I will, Bob. Stop worrying."

The circuit broke and Vosseller shook his head. He looked toward the communications station in the forward section of aux-

iliary control, where Ensign 1st Class Bixler had turned to watch him.

"Is there anything else on the intraship network?"

"No, Captain," Bixler told him. "Just normal traffic."

"Okay. Thanks."

"Yes, sir."

Rosenzweig walked back into sickbay and headed for the ICU. As the doors slid aside, he said, "Flag officer coming through," to alert Ensign Snake. He thus managed to avoid a faceful of blade claws.

"Admiral," Snake said softly. "The captain is better. She is off deep-sedation, but the doctor says she needs more rest."

"Thank you, Ensign. Where is Dr. Ferrucci?"

"She is supervising patient-transfers to your ship. Lieutenant Sears is on duty in the main office. Ensign Hassan is here." He pointed toward the nurse's station, where a young woman studied readouts at the desk.

"Thank you. I'll be quiet."

"Very well, sir."

Rosenzweig padded past Snake and walked to Levine's bedside. The slight shifting of her eyes beneath her closed lids gave testimony to what Snake had said. Hands behind his back, Alex watched at the captain. Her repose was clearly that of sleep, not the virtual coma she'd been in during his earlier visit.

Hearing a sound behind him, he turned. Lt. Commander Sara Hagen had come in and had also approached the captain's bed. The softness of her approach told the admiral that she, too, had been briefed on Jennifer's condition.

"Hello, Admiral," she said, her voice just above a whisper.

"Hi, Sara. I thought you were resting." Rosenzweig pitched his voice low, too.

"I'd gone down to my quarters, but I was too keyed up to sleep. I came down to look in on Jennifer."

"She's sleeping. Snake filled me in."

"I got the rundown from Ms. Sears." Hagen nodded toward the captain. "At least she'll be okay."

"Yeah." Alex nodded. "Gods, Sara, **why** were you attacked? Could it have been anything the Konkordium did?"

"They just started firing. None of us could understand it. Jennifer was furious, especially after they ignored our linguacode transmissions."

Rosenzweig shook his head. "Damn. Lieutenant Chernesky ran the sensor data for me on the bridge. I've never seen anything like that ship before."

"None of us had," Hagen said. She paused. "Speaking of the bridge, is Carol still up there?"

The admiral shook his head. "No. She was dead on her feet, and most of the bridge crew was exhausted, so I had her call up some replacements. Then I walked her to her cabin."

"She let you?" Hagen seemed surprised.

"I sort of talked her into it. She's really very...special."

That **didn't** surprise the chief of operations. Instead, Sara smiled at him. "Yes, she is." She paused again. "This has been hard on her. She and Jen are very close. Between dealing with what's happened and trying to hold things together, she's had a lot to grapple with."

"She's doing okay. And she has us all to help her, at least 'til Jen recovers."

"Us all..." Sara's glance at the admiral clearly suggested something percolating in her mind.

"Sara, what are you thinking?"

"Never mind. Carol'd tell me I'm out of line, anyway."

Rosenzweig would have pressed her on it, curious as he was about what she hinted, but a rustling from the bed distracted them. Levine had rolled from her side onto her back. She shifted slightly again...and opened her eyes. She immediately started to sit up.

"Attack? Fire!"

"Jennifer, lie back." Alex caught her shoulders and guided her back into a supine position. "The battle's over."

"Battle?" Levine's eyes began to focus. "Alex, what are you doing here?"

"I was at Starbase 32 when the distress call came in." He smiled. "Avenger and Tai Shan came out to help."

"I remember Ensign Torgau getting hurt, and me getting up..."

"Never mind that. You were hurt, too. Now lie still. Dr. Ferrucci says you need to rest if you're going to heal properly." Glancing to his left, he saw Hagen by the nurse's station. The operations chief was speaking into the intercom, and Ensign Hassan was watching the admiral and the captain.

Levine followed Rosenzweig's glance. "Sara's here. Alex, who's in command?"

"Commander Greenberg."

"Josh! Where's Carol? Alex, is Carol okay?"

"She's fine. I left her in her cabin. She was exhausted. She'd held the con for five hours after you were hurt. That made ten on duty, and she needed the rest."

"You left her in her cabin?" Jennifer had one of **those** expressions on her face. Alex sighed.

"Gods, Jen, you're incorrigible." Levine smiled. Abruptly, her smile faded and she sagged back on the bed.

"My head," she muttered.

"You're pushing too hard, Captain," Hagen said, returning to the bedside. She glanced at Rosenzweig. "I told Carol Jen's awake. She's on her way."

"Okay. But no long visits. Jen needs more rest, and Carol does, too."

"Carol's coming?" Levine asked.

"Yes," said Hagen.

"Now rest 'til she gets here," Rosenzweig said.

"Yes, Doctor," Levine replied. A faint smile played across her lips.

Peterson arrived a few minutes later. The admiral could see her blinking sleep from her eyes, but the word that Jennifer was awake had brought her to full alertness. She gave Alex a nod, then turned her attention to the captain.

"Jen? How are you doing?"

"My head hurts. At least I can think straight now."

"Well, you had us all very worried." Carol smiled. "Dr. Ferrucci says you'll be okay, but you have to rest."

"Where is Marcy?"

"Transferring patients to Avenger," Rosenzweig told her.

"How bad's our situation?"

The exec looked at Hagen, who nodded. "We lost 65 people. 113 more are injured."

"Oh, my god..." Levine started to get up again, and both Rosenzweig and Peterson pushed her back down.

"Jen, if you won't stay still, we'll have Ensign Hassan sedate you again," the exec warned.

"What about my engines?"

"It could've been much worse," Hagen said. "Mr. Flanders and his engineers have jury-rigged repairs."

"He may be holding things together with baling-wire and spit," Rosenzweig added, "but he **is** holding things together."

"We're going to need serious dock-time, though." Peterson looked at the admiral, then back to Levine. "The Avenger and Tai Shan will tow us to Starbase..." She glanced questioningly back to Rosenzweig.

"29's the closest."

"29, then."

Levine nodded. She closed her eyes, then opened them again. "Okay."

"Jen, are you all right?" Alex's voice softened immediately.

"I feel lousy again, all of a sudden."

"Rest," said Sara. "We'll take care of things."

"Let's leave her alone," suggested Carol.

"I'll be with you in a second," Alex said.

"Okay." Carol patted Jen's shoulder, and she and Sara started for the door. The admiral turned back to Levine.

"Jennifer, will you let your officers deal with things and give yourself time to build up your strength? You know, you've got a lot of people pulling for you...including me. I'd hate it if you made yourself worse. I care about you, you know."

"Alex, you're sweet."

"But will you rest? You've got a helluva good exec—"

"You're noticing that, huh?"

"Carol's a...pretty special person."

"Yes..." Rosenzweig flushed under her gaze.

"Jen..." He shook his head. "Damn. And you've got a good command staff, too. Trust them." He took her hand. "I have to go back to Avenger, so we can rig the tractors and get you back to the base. If needed, I can be back here in five minutes flat. And you know I will if you yell."

"Yeah, I do. Thanks, Alex."

"You're welcome, Captain." He squeezed her hand and let go.

"See you soon." He turned and strode toward the door. Passing Snake, he said, "Watch over her, Ensign."

Snake nodded. "I will, Admiral."

"I know. Take care."

In the corridor, Alex caught up with Carol and Sara. "If we're going to get things going here, I'd better head back to the Avenger. Are you going to leave Mr. Greenberg in command?"

"Well—" Carol began.

"**You**," said the admiral, "are going back to your cabin and getting some rest." He glanced at Sara. "You should try again, too. I'm sure Commander Greenberg can handle things. I'll be in touch with him during the hook-up procedure, so I'll keep an eye on things."

"All right, already," the exec said. "You win. I'll rest."

"Good. I'll see you later." He hurried off toward the transporter complex.

Materializing aboard the Avenger, Rosenzweig nodded to Ensign Goldschmidt. "Any word from the engineering party?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Very well. Please inform the bridge of my arrival."

"Aye, aye, sir." As Goldschmidt activated the intercom, the admiral headed for the door.

The turbo-lift deposited Rosenzweig on A Deck, and he stepped onto the bridge. Lane turned in the command chair.

"Welcome back, Alex."

"Thanks, Jon. All okay here?"

"Yes. Bob's worried that we're not telling him things, but everything else is fine."

"Good." Rosenzweig took the center seat, as Lane stood up and moved back to the sciences station, relieving Ensign Liszewski. Settling into the chair, the admiral turned to the helm. "Mr. Hunt, bring us in to port of the Konk and at a 60 degree angle from its forward centerline."

"Aye, sir," Hunt replied.

"Ms. Lubar, patch me through to the Tai Shan."

"Yes, Admiral."

"Captain, we've got a hail from the Avenger."

"Hmm..." said Blackman. "On screen, Mr. Lebowitz." The chief of communications nodded, and the main viewer glowed with an image of Avenger's bridge.

"We're reading you, Admiral."

"Hello, Captain. We're going to get things moving here. Bring the Tai Shan to starboard of the Konkordium, at a 60 degree angle off forward centerline. I'm moving the Avenger to the port side. Then we can rig for towing."

"Will do." Blackman glanced at the helm and navigation stations. "Lieutenant Hunnebeck, bring us in."

"Yes, Captain." Hunnebeck tapped a series of commands into her console, and the Tai Shan approached the Konkordium. It eased into position, paralleling Avenger's location on the dreadnought's other side.

"They're in position, Admiral," Lane reported from the sciences station.

"Thanks, Captain." Rosenzweig turned toward communications. "Ensign Lubar, set up a telemetry-link between us and the Tai Shan. Do the same with the Konkordium." Swinging back toward sciences, he asked, "Jon, can you program ideal tractor-links for us?"

"I'll try, Admiral. Hold on."

"Admiral?" It was Commander Hoffmann from the Tai Shan.

"Yes, Commander?"

"I have a hookup program for you."

Rosenzweig tapped his forehead. He hadn't thought of that... and should've. Hoffmann was, after all, the Tai Shan's chief engineer as well as its exec. He was rather more qualified than Lane to come up with that program.

"Great!" Alex glanced at Jon, who smiled and nodded. "Can you download it to us?"

"Here it comes," Hoffmann said. A moment later, Ambrose looked up.

"I have it, sir."

"Good." Turning to Lubar, the admiral added, "Tie me in to the Konkordium, please."

"Yes, sir," said the comm-specialist. Then, "You're on, Admiral."

"Avenger to Konkordium. Come in."

The screen lit to show the dreadnought's bridge. Greenberg looked up. "Reading you, Avenger. The captain is still in sickbay, and Commander Peterson is in her quarters."

"As they should be, Mr. Greenberg. Are you ready for hookup?"

Greenberg glanced toward the engineering station. Ensign Smith nodded. "Yes," the commander replied.

"Good. Once we have the beams on you, energize the main engines so you can hold a balancing warp field. Avenger and Tai Shan will do most of the work."

"Aye, sir," Greenberg acknowledged.

"Tai Shan, are you ready?"

"Yes," replied Blackman.

Looking toward Ensign Ambrose, Rosenzweig ordered, "Engage tractor beams." The Konkordium was caught in the two pale blue beams of light.

"We're locked on," Hoffmann reported.

Rosenzweig swung forward. "Mr. Abbott, plot a course for Starbase 29. Patch it through to Tai Shan and Konkordium."

"Aye, aye, suh." A few minutes later, he added, "Patched through, Admiral."

"Very good. Mr. Hunt, Lieutenant Hunnebeck, are you ready?"

"Aye, sir." "Yes, Admiral," came the replies.

"Well, then," ordered Rosenzweig, "engage. Warp factor 5."

The three vessels accelerated, the stars on their viewers stretching into Doppler-shifted streaks as they approached the light barrier. The streaks vanished as they penetrated hyperspace, to be replaced by the computer-generated starfields.

"We're on course," Abbott reported.

"Maintain," Rosenzweig replied.

It took about six hours to reach Starbase 29. Somewhere in the midst of the largely uneventful trip, Lt. Commander Hagen took command back from Greenberg. According to Hagen, this would relieve Levine a great deal. Rosenzweig himself took a few hours' rest during the trip, so he could be back on the bridge during the next shift, when the ships reached the base.

Soon after receiving word that they were approaching the base, Rosenzweig entered the bridge. Replacing Commander Cook in the center seat, the admiral looked over at the navigator.

"ETA to Starbase 29, Mr. Trask?"

"Assuming the expected deceleration and approach parameters, about one hour."

"Thank you." He swung toward the sciences and communications stations. "Anything unusual on sensors, Mr. DeLong?" The scientist shook his head. "Ensign Delit, is all okay on the other ships?"

"No reports of any problems, sir."

"Good. Ensign Clyne," he told the helm specialist, "take us in."

"Aye, sir." The three ships slid into the system, decelerating and angling toward the planet upon which the base had been built. As they closed in, Delit turned from his station.

"Sir, we're being hailed."

"On speakers."

"Avenger, this is Starbase 29 Orbital Control. We are tracking you and Tai Shan towing the Konkordium, per your earlier advisories. You are directed to enter standard orbit and proceed to the dockyards. A drydock is being prepared to receive the Konkordium. Please acknowledge."

Rosenzweig pressed the tie-in control. "Starbase 29, this is Rear Admiral Rosenzweig. We've received and understood your transmission. You can patch any other approach instructions through to our navigation computers."

"Thank you, Admiral. Control out."

A moment later, Trask turned toward Rosenzweig. "Sir, I have approach data feeding into the nav-banks."

"Good. I'm sure Tai Shan and Konk are receiving the same. Take us to the dockyards."

"Aye, sir."

The vessels closed on the starbase yards. Ahead of them, lights blinking, was a large, boxlike structure, a rectangular cage into which a vessel could fit. Near the dock, a group of service vehicles stood by. As the ships approached the dock, the Avenger and Tai Shan slowed the Konkordium and released the tractor beams. The service vessels guided the dreadnought into the dock.

"Konkordium is secure," came the signal from Dock Control.

Rosenzweig turned to Delit. "Ensign, please advise the base that both we and the Konk have injured personnel to transfer to the starbase hospital."

"Yes, sir." Several minutes later, he turned back. "They've alerted the hospital. We can beam when ready. Medical shuttles are getting patients from the Konkordium."

"Very good. Inform Doctor Levy of the situation."

"Aye, aye, Admiral."

"Commander Hagen?" Hagen turned toward Lieutenant Ward at communications. "Dock Control says they're ready for us to transfer to their power-units."

"Tell Dock Control we'll be ready in a few minutes." She keyed her intercom switch. "Engineering."

After releasing the Konkordium to the care of the drydock's crew, the Avenger and Tai Shan proceeded to standard parking orbits around the starbase. As Commander Levy directed the beam-down of the Konk's patients to the hospital complex, the base commander requested a full briefing. Rosenzweig and Blackman reported to his office to comply with the request.

"Welcome, Admiral," said Commodore Johnson, as the two CO's were ushered into his office, "and to you, Captain." Both men shook hands with him, and he indicated two chairs.

"Thank you, Commodore," replied Blackman, as he and Rosenzweig sat down.

"Gentlemen," Johnson went on, "I need to know just what happened. And is it something I should be worrying about here at the base?"

"As for the first part of that," Rosenzweig told him, "the Konkordium was attacked by an alien vessel of unknown design. The attack was not provoked. As for the second part, I don't think so, but I won't stake anything on that opinion."

"The alien didn't turn up while we were there," Blackman ventured. "We tracked a trail of disrupted matter leading away from Federation space." Rosenzweig nodded. Both vessels had detected the trail just before they warped out of the sector with the Konk. It had been the element that had decided the rear admiral on his course of action. He handed Johnson a computer cart.

"This has all the data that Konkordium was able to get."

"Do you have a plan in mind?"

"Yes. We're going after it. We have to find out if it's a real danger to the Federation or not. If possible, I want to know why it attacked the Konk."

"Avenger and Tai Shan are both going?"

"Yes, Commodore. If this thing proves to be nasty, we'll need the extra firepower."

"All right, Admiral. I'll keep the base on standby, just in case."

"Very good," the fleet commander said. He and Blackman rose. "We'll keep in touch."

"Good luck," Johnson told them. The Tai Shan's CO grinned.

"So," Blackman said, as he and Rosenzweig walked down the corridor, "you want us to go after it."

"Yes." Alex glanced at him, reminding himself once again that Ron was no longer an officer under his direct command. "Any objections?"

Ronald shook his head. "No. Concerns, maybe."

"I understand. Okay. There'll be a briefing in 90 minutes in Avenger's main briefing room. Bring Glen and Lee. We'll discuss things then."

"All right. Meanwhile?"

"I have a friend in the hospital. I'm going to visit her."

A smile crooked the corners of Ronald's mouth. "Ah. Of course. Tell Jennifer that Tai Shan's crew sends their best."

"I will."

Upon reaching the hospital, Rosenzweig glanced around, looking for the way to the ICU area.

"Can I help you, sir?" A young man in Fleet medical whites stood next to him.

"I hope so. I'm trying to see Captain Levine of the Konkordium. She should've been brought in a short while ago."

"Have you checked at reception?"

Alex stopped short. "Damn it, I've been in space too long. Thank you, Ensign." He strode over to the large desk, where a bored-looking receptionist sat watching a viewer. "Excuse me. Could you tell me where to find Captain Jennifer Levine? She should've been admitted by now."

The receptionist looked up, her eyes widening as she saw that she was being addressed by a Star Fleet rear admiral. "Yes, sir. I'll check her file for you." She turned to her console. "Admiral, Captain Levine is in the South Wing, room 53. It's a private room, and visitors are allowed. In fact," she added, after another glance at the viewer, "she has one right now."

"Then record a second," Alex told her. He paused. "How do I get there?"

A slight smile crossed the receptionist's face. She handed the admiral a visitor's badge. "It's coded with the room number. Just go up to a directions-module, let the scanner read your badge, and the viewer will show you a path at least as far as the next module, and usually farther. Follow the paths, and you'll get to the room. Okay?"

"Okay. And thanks."

It took Rosenzweig two stops at directions-modules, but he did reach the room. Knocking on the door, he was greeted by a "Come in," from Levine. She lay on the bed, under the "watchful eyes" of the med-scanners. Peterson sat in a chair near the window. The admiral gave Carol a smile, then turned his attention to Levine. Jennifer sat up in the bed, adjusting her hospital gown (still the bane of a patient's existence after hundreds of years).

"Hi, Jen," Alex said. How're you doing?"

"Better. They won't let me out for a few days, though."

"Jen, you're going to need the rest. That wasn't a walk in the park you people took out there." A glance at Peterson told the admiral that this discussion was not a new one. Levine shook her head, abruptly deciding to change the subject. Apparently, the previous incarnations of this discussion hadn't been to her liking, either. The exec smothered a grin.

"Alex," she asked, "have you been to see the base commander?"

Rosenzweig glanced back toward the window. Yes. He thought he'd noticed another chair next to Carol. He walked over and settled into it. "Yes," he said. "Ron and I gave Commodore Johnson our reports. We also gave him a copy of all the data we've got."

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going after the alien."

"You are?" Carol asked. Alex looked at her.

"Yes, Carol. Unless you've got a better idea."

"Not really. But why go at all? Isn't it an undue risk?"

Rosenzweig focused on the exec's blue eyes. He shook his head. "We have to find out why it attacked you...and if it's a danger to the Federation. These attacks don't just come from out of the blue. There has to be a reason."

"You're taking the Tai Shan?" Levine asked.

"Yes."

"What about Konk?"

"The Konk isn't going anywhere for at least a week," Peterson said, her tone broaching no argument. Rosenzweig wasn't going to give her one.

"That's exactly right," he said. He turned to Jennifer. "And you stay put 'til they release you. We don't want you to hurt yourself more."

"Okay, Alex, okay."

"Carol," Alex said, "she's in your hands." He stood up, glancing at his wrist chrono. "I need to go prepare for a pre-mission briefing. I'll see you when we get back." He strode toward the door. Peterson followed him. Reaching the door, he glanced back, then stopped short as he saw the exec behind him. She also stopped short, to avoid crashing into him.

"Don't **do** that, Alex!" she exclaimed. Rosenzweig grinned, noticing Levine smothering laughter in the background. Then he sobered.

"What is it, Carol?"

"Are you sure about this?"

"Yes." There was no doubt in his voice.

"Then...good luck, Alex."

"Thanks." He held out his hand. Peterson shook it. Then the admiral was out the door.

"Okay," the rear admiral said, once the six men had settled into chairs around the briefing room table. "You all know what we're going to try to do. I want your comments, questions, thoughts, etc. Talk to me now, because I doubt there'll be time once we're on our way."

"If only the Challenger was ready," Vosseller said.

"But it isn't," Rosenzweig said. "We have our two ships, and I'm going to need everyone doing his or her best."

"You'll have it," Vosseller said, stung by the subtle warning in Rosenzweig's voice.

"Good." The admiral turned back to Blackman. "What about you, Ron? You mentioned concerns earlier."

"Yes." The Tai Shan's captain paused. Then, "Assuming we actually do catch up with this ship, then what do we do? What precisely is our mission?"

"Contact, if possible," Rosenzweig answered. "We find out why the Konkordium was attacked. If there was misunderstanding, we clear it up. Failing that—"

"Military response," Vosseller said.

"Yes," the admiral agreed. "With two ships, we stand a fair chance of doing sufficient damage to act as a deterrent against this vessel—or others like it—attacking Federation shipping."

"Begging the admiral's pardon," interjected Commander Hoffmann, "but are we really sure of that? I've been studying the Konk's sensor readings on this thing, and the power-ranges it showed bothered me." He glanced at Lane. "Jon, if you could put that graphic up?"

"Okay. Coming up." The science officer keyed controls, and the viewer glowed with an image of the alien vessel, upon which blocks of data were superimposed.

"Thanks, Jon. Now," Hoffmann pointed to the screen, "look at those energy figures. The power in that thing's weapons is incredible. We saw what it did to the Konkordium. They were damn lucky that that ship broke off the attack on its own; otherwise, Konk would've been cut up into scrap."

"Agreed," Lane put in, "but Konk did not get enough good data on the alien's defenses."

"By the time Jennifer had to fire back, in self defense," Rosenzweig said, "their sensors were already damaged."

"So," added Avenger's science officer, "we don't know how much Konk may have hurt the alien."

"That's reasonable enough," commented Lt. Commander Elovitch. Both Blackman and Hoffmann turned to the Tai Shan's science officer. "But," he cautioned, "it's an assumption that we'd better be ready to revise if the situation dictates."

"Oh, certainly," Rosenzweig agreed. "Tactically, even if our base assumption is wrong, our having two ships still gives us an advantage. I wouldn't want to send in a single ship, but two can do it, I think."

"Makes sense," Elovitch said.

"All right." Rosenzweig looked at each of them. "Any other comments?" There were none. "We'll leave in one hour, then. Have everything ready." They all stood up.

"Admiral." Rosenzweig turned to face Blackman. "I hope this is a good idea."

"So do I, Ron, so do I."

The group from the Tai Shan filed out. Vosseller paused, then turned to Rosenzweig.

"Alex, what if you're wrong?"

"Then we'll have another problem to solve. One thing at a time, Bob. Just get Avenger ready."

"I'll have a report when you get to the bridge."

"Thanks." Vosseller nodded, then strode through the doors.

"Alex," Jon said, when the doors had slid shut, "be careful with Bob. He's still angry over the delays with Challenger."

Rosenzweig turned to look at him, and Lane was surprised to see a weariness in his visage. "I know, but what can I do?"

"Use a light touch with him. Trust me. It will avoid problems."

"No doubt you're right, but he's got to remember that the center seat isn't his yet. When it is, he'll have more of these wor-

ries than he'll ever want." Alex turned back toward the doors.  
"Let's go."

The turbo-lift doors opened and Rosenzweig stepped onto the bridge. The first thing he heard was Vosseller's voice.

"Brenda, **why** can't you ever hand in a simple, general report? Why do you always have to put in so many extra details?"

"Captain," Lt. Commander Bell said evenly, "to do my job correctly seems to me to require those so-called 'details'. You and Admiral Rosenzweig may need them to make proper decisions."

"I doubt it," Vosseller replied.

Stepping down next to the command chair, Rosenzweig said, "I'm not so sure. Bob, you'd be surprised at how a detail might save your life sometime." Replacing Vosseller in the chair, he went on, "And your report?"

The executive officer proceeded to give him a complete run-down on Avenger's readiness, one which the rear admiral was silently amused to note contained quite a few details itself. The upshot of the whole thing was that the ship was ready.

"Thanks, Bob." Rosenzweig turned toward communications.

"Mr. DeMono, hail the Tai Shan."

"Yes, sir." After a moment, he added, "Channel open." The main viewer switched to a view of the dreadnought's bridge.

"Blackman here, Admiral. We're ready. Just give the order."

"Keep the channel open, Captain. When the base gives us clearance, we're on our way." Glancing back at DeMono, he added, "Ask for clearance from Starbase Traffic Control." The communications officer turned to his station, and a few moments later a new voice came over the speakers.

"Orbital Traffic Control to Avenger and Tai Shan." Rosenzweig nodded to the captain on the viewer, who was also listening.

"Stand by for clearance to depart. Good luck."

"Thank you, Starbase. Give our best to the Konkordium. Avenger out." To DeMono, he added, "Inform me as soon as the clearance comes through."

"Yes, sir."

The word came in a short time later, and Rosenzweig turned to the helm-navigation console. "Ensign Bourdeau, you have the course?"

"Yes, sir. Plotted, laid in, and in the computer."

"Good. Mr. Christensen, take us out. Warp factor 6."

"Aye, sir." The Avenger slid out of orbit, the Tai Shan close behind. Once the two ships were far enough from the planet, they leaped into warp drive.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8802.25:

The Avenger and the Tai Shan are proceeding back to the sector where the Konkordium was attacked. From there, we shall look for the alien ship that had attacked her. Finding it isn't the biggest problem, though. The real question: **Why** did the alien attack? And can we avoid further hostilities?"

Rosenzweig switched off the log. "ETA to coordinates of last alien sighting?"

"Four hours," Bourdeau reported.

"Maintain course and speed." Standing up, the admiral turned to Vosseller. "Bob, you have the con again."

"Where will you be?"

"I don't know. If you need me, track my locator signal." Alex tapped his buckle. Then he stepped into the turbo-lift.

As the doors closed, Vosseller glanced toward the sciences station, where Lane sat. Stepping over to the station, he leaned across the side console.

"What's with Alex?"

Lane looked back at him. "I think he's just wound up tight by this whole thing."

The ships' arrival at the attack-point found Rosenzweig back in the center seat. As the Tai Shan dropped out of warp, Lt. Commander Lebowitz swung to face Captain Blackman.

"Avenger's hailing, sir."

"Put them on." The main viewer switched to a shot of Avenger's bridge.

"Look sharp, everybody," Rear Admiral Rosenzweig announced. "Phase I—Find that disruption trail." A glance at the sciences station told Blackman that Lt. Commander Elovitch was already hard at work. The readouts flashing across the displays indicated that nothing had been detected as yet.

"Search course?" queried Ensign Friedman from navigation.

Blackman shook his head. "No. Hold our position while we do the sensor sweep."

"Aye, sir."

After over an hour of intensive searching, Lane looked up from the Avenger's sciences station. "Admiral, I've got it."

"Are you sure?"

"Unmistakable," the science officer answered.

From across the open channel, Elovitch asked, "What coordinates?"

"38 mark 55, relative plot." There was a brief pause, as the Tai Shan's science officer compensated for the difference in direction between the two ships.

"Okay, I have it."

"Straight-line projection?" Rosenzweig asked.

"As far as I can tell," Lane replied.

"Then that's our course." The admiral called off instructions to the Avenger's helmsman and navigator. Both Friedman and Ensign Rodriguez turned to look at Blackman.

"Same for us. Parallel the Avenger," ordered the captain.

"Yes, sir," Friedman acknowledged. "Course plotted and laid in."

"Speed, Admiral?" Blackman asked into the 'com.

"Warp 2," came Rosenzweig's reply.

"Aye, aye, sir," both Rodriguez and Ensign Christensen responded. The two vessels accelerated.

Over the next three days, the ships journeyed outward. The science staffs on both the Avenger and Tai Shan kept watch on the sensor readouts, waiting for a pattern that might indicate the presence of the alien vessel. They studied the data from the Konkordium, running the recordings over and over, trying to glean from them every possible scrap of information. The engineering crews ran dynamics simulations, analyzing the expected responses of the unknown vessel to various situations. The helm and weapons teams tested tactics, hoping to minimize the danger to the Federation ships should combat be forced on them.

Finally, during the third day of the search, Lieutenant Colon looked up from the sciences station on the Tai Shan's bridge. Turn-

ing to Lieutenant Sirota, who held the center seat during the third shift, he said, "I have it."

Sirota reacted with impressive speed. "Yellow alert," he ordered. Hitting the intercom switch, he added, "Captain Blackman to the bridge."

Colon glanced toward the communications station and hit a data-transfer switch. "Mr. Hager, patch this information to the Avenger." Hager nodded.

The turbo-lift doors opened and Blackman hurried out. "Status?"

Sirota, surrendering the center seat, reported, "We have the alien vessel on the sensors."

"Good. Is it close enough for visual pickup?"

"Not yet, sir," Colon answered. "About 5 minutes to visual."

Blackman nodded. "Shields on standby." At weapons/defense, Ensign Shren hit switches.

"Shields on standby, sir."

Aboard the Avenger, Ensign 1st Class Hill swiveled from the com-station. "I'm getting a signal from the Tai Shan. They've picked up the alien. I'm patching data to sciences."

"I've got the data," responded Ensign Farber a moment later.

"Scanning coordinates. There! Got it." He studied the readings.

"That sucker's big!"

In the command chair, Commander Cumbo considered. Then he summoned Rosenzweig, Vosseller, and Lane to the bridge.

As the rear admiral stepped off the elevator, Cumbo began his report. By the time he was done, the ship's three top officers were in their usual places.

"Thank you, Mr. Cumbo," Rosenzweig said. "Back us up at the damage and repair station. Ensign Farber, get down to the physics lab and get all the information you can on that ship." Swinging round, he fired off orders. "Ensign Hill, sound yellow alert. Then hail the Tai Shan. Mr. Martinez, slow us down so that we don't come up on it too fast. Drop to warp one. Ensign Toussaint, ready the shields but do **not** raise them as yet."

"Admiral," interjected Hill, when Rosenzweig paused, "I have the Tai Shan."

"Splitscreen on main viewer," instructed the rear admiral, "forward view and Tai Shan bridge."

"Yes, sir." Seconds later, the screen displayed two horizontal images. On the top half, the alien ship appeared, seemingly tiny but growing. Below it, Captain Blackman turned to face his viewer pickup.

"Do you have it?" he asked.

"Yes, we do," Rosenzweig answered. He glanced at Commander Trask, then back to the viewer. "Let's try this: Put some distance between us, so Avenger comes up on that ship from aft and to port, and Tai Shan comes up from aft and to starboard. Our courses should parallel each other and the alien's."

"Aye, Admiral." Blackman looked toward the navigator. "Mr. Kadex?" The Edoan nodded.

"Executing, Captain."

Trask also acknowledged, as did Ensign Martinez and Lieutenant Hunnebeck. Soon, both ships were adjusting position.

"Next question," said Lane. "What's their sensor range?" Colon shrugged.

Rosenzweig turned to Hill. "When we're in communications range, transmit linguacode friendship message." He glanced at Vosseller. "Hopefully, we can avoid whatever got the aliens angry at the Konk."

"Did they use linguacode?"

"Apparently not. The alien ship seems to have raced into the sector and started firing, for reasons yet unknown."

"Do you think linguacode'll help, then?"

"I don't know. I hope so." Vosseller nodded agreement.

On the Tai Shan, Blackman ordered Hager to prepare linguacode, as well. Within minutes, the two Federation ships closed to communications range of the alien vessel, and both initiated the transmissions.

After several minutes, the admiral glanced at Hill. She shook her head. "Still no response, sir."

"No change in their apparent status," Lane reported.

"Maintain transmission."

"Admiral," Vosseller said, "I suggest we put up the shields."

"That could be taken as a threatening move."

"Perhaps, but so could failing to answer a basic hail."

Alex considered. In his mind's eye, he saw the Konkordium under attack. He saw the ordnance specialist spasm as electricity poured through him, saw Jennifer leap up, just as the gravity failed, saw the sick horror on Carol's face as she ran to Jennifer's crumpled form... "All right. Shields up." Toussaint nodded. On the viewer, Shren also turned to his panel. Was that a look of approval on Blackman's face? Rosenzweig hoped they weren't all getting too bloodthirsty. The risks that entailed were very high.

On board the Extended-Range Explorer Rhentax of the Ahrman'yak Transstellar League, Captain Amitarel gazed at his bridge's viewplates. The two vessels that had appeared behind them were still closing in. He turned toward his science officer.

"Your report?"

"They bear a striking resemblance to the ship we attacked earlier, and all three could easily be new designs of Jinimar warships. It has been long since we were near the combat zones, and our last reports suggest the Jinimar were pursuing design-concepts like these."

"Captain," interrupted Communications Officer Nachesem, gesturing a limb toward a viewplate, "they transmit a signal toward us."

"What kind?" As Amitarel asked the question, Science Officer Zhurisar had turned her attention back to the sensors.

"It is a general hail, I believe. It is coded according to mathematical and physical constants."

"Language-equivalent?"

"None in this message."

"Captain, if I may?" It was Defense Officer Mokoped. Amitarel crossed his lower arms in front of him, the Ahrman'yak equivalent of "Go on." Mokoped focused his amber eye-spheres on the captain. "We must attack, as we did before. You know the Jinimar. This must be of their doing."

"This far away from our space?"

"If we can get out here, surely they can. They have proven equal to us in most other capabilities. Further, if this is a scouting group—with the earlier ship on 'point' for these two—and we destroy them, we may cast doubt in the minds of the Jinimar planners."

"And doubt for them," interjected Helmsman Larioben, "can be turned to advantage for **us**."

"One other thing, Captain." Amitarel turned back to Zhurisar, lower arms again crossing. "You know the viciousness of the Jini-

mar. Assuming these are in fact advanced Jinimar vessels, we dare not let them strike the first blow."

"But," countered the captain, "what if they are not Jinimar? Can we afford to make more enemies simply due to fear?"

"Captain," Mokoped answered, "can we afford to let ourselves be destroyed due to uncertainty?"

Amitarel considered. He knew his defense officer was correct; the Jinimar attacked with great ferocity, and if they could trick an opponent into a weaker position before striking, they invariably would. And the Rhentas was already outnumbered.

"Captain!" It was another call from Zhurisar. "They have activated energy-shields around their ships!" That made the decision for Amitarel.

"We will attack. Activate weapons. Fire as soon as they come into range."

On board the Avenger, Captain Lane looked up from the sciences station. "Admiral, I'm detecting an energy build-up on the alien ship. It's focusing at several points on the outer hull."

"Weapons systems!" said Vosseller.

Rosenzweig had to agree. "Mr. Martinez, angle us outward to put some extra distance between us and that ship." He looked up at the viewer. "Captain..."

On the screen, Blackman could be seen ordering Hunnebeck and Kadex to mirror Avenger's move on the other side. He glanced back at his pickup and nodded. Rosenzweig flashed him a "thumbs-up" sign, then swung to the communications station.

"Ensign Hill, is there any response to our linguacode signals?"

"None, sir."

"Keep trying. If we can make them listen, avoid combat..."

"They weren't exactly trying to avoid combat when they attacked the Konk," Vosseller observed.

"I know that, Bob, but until I have some idea why that attack occurred, I'm not going to automatically attribute negative motives." The admiral swung toward sciences. "Jon, anything else on that energy?"

Lane looked up from his scanners. "The energy-generators are shielded, so I can't tell you how they're getting it. What I can tell you is that there's a lot of it cycling through those focus-points. I'd say we're looking at some pretty powerful weapons."

Rosenzweig nodded. Turning then toward engineering, he queried, "What's our power situation?"

Ensign T'Lieste studied a graphic for a moment. "According to my instruments, we are at 98.074% of rated full power. Equipment efficiency is at 99.06% of rated potential. Commander Cook is assisting Lieutenant McCabre in locating the cause of the lowering of efficiency from 100%."

"Just as long as everything's on-line."

"Affirmative, Admiral. All systems are fully operational."

"Good."

"Admiral," reported Martinez, "our maneuver is completed. The alien has not changed course."

"Hold on our revised parallel course." Rosenzweig glanced back at Lane. "Any idea of their weapons range?"

"None at all," Lane answered. "The energy-curve doesn't really give us much clue, and the Konk's data wasn't enough. They were attacked from close range."

"Do you think they could cripple us with one blow at this distance?"

Lane shrugged. "I doubt it."

"We'll let them shoot first, then. Ensign Hill, enhance linguacode with Universal Peace overlay. If that doesn't convince them we're non-hostile, nothing will." To Toussaint, he ordered, "Just in case, bring all weapons to stand-by status."

"Aye, sir."

Both Avenger and Tai Shan continued to parallel the alien vessel, slowly drawing forward to flank it, port and starboard. For several minutes, the three ships paced each other. Then it happened.

"Captain!" exclaimed Colon. "I'm detecting an energy surge from the power foci on the alien vessel."

"Reinforce shields," Blackman ordered. Shren nodded.

"Aye, sir." Seconds later, an energy beam lanced out to strike the Tai Shan amidships.

On Avenger, Rosenzweig acted immediately. "Both vessels, return fire! Then back off. Double our distance from the alien ship. Stand by for red alert, if necessary."

Phaser beams from side banks on both the Tai Shan and Avenger struck the alien craft. Immediately afterward, both ships eased away from the alien.

"Fire again?" Shren asked.

"Negative," Rosenzweig answered over the open channel.

"We've shown we'll defend ourselves and hopefully indicated reluctance to engage in combat. Let them have the next move."

"And if they attack again?" asked Vosseller.

"Then we'll counter again."

But the alien vessel did not fire again. It maintained its heading, but was quiescent.

On the bridge of the Rhentas, Captain Amitarel stared at a viewplate. On it, a computer-graphic displayed the positions of both the Ahrman'yak explorer and the two aliens.

"I don't understand," said Larioben. "Why did they stop?"

Amitarel was confused, as well. This move was definitely **not** in the Jinimar Tactics Manual. Once engaged, the Jinimar generally refused to disengage. Their attacks were intense, vicious, and complete.

"It's a trick," said Zhurisar from the sciences unit. "We should attack again. We must not give **them** the opportunity to strike again."

"How much damage was there?"

Mokoped looked back toward the captain. "Damage is appreciable, but minor. Militarily, the biggest risk is the 2-to-1 situation. However, I do not agree with Zhurisar. The chance that these are not Jinimar ships has increased."

"This from you, Mokoped?" asked Zhurisar. "The similarities are so close to known Jinimar ships. These are also metal-hulled, machined vessels. Sensor readings have suggested an oxygen atmosphere, like ours and that of the Jinimar, but the life-forms are predominantly Jinimoid in form, to the limits of sensor resolution. If it looks like a Jinimar—" She stopped as Amitarel described a figure-eight with an upper arm. The captain refocused on the communications officer.

"Nachesem, have you decoded their message?"

"Yes. As I suspected, it was general. It declares friendship, suggests a point of origin for those ships, and asks for a reply."

"Perhaps we should give them one."

"Captain, I still advise against it. I believe this is a Jinimar trick, an attempt to force us into weaker position."

"I don't think so," said Mokoped. "This is just too different from their usual approach. And while they may be progressing technologically, their battle tactics are unlikely to change so radically in so short a time. And why should they need to trick us? They outnumber us, and may well outgun us, and may even overpower us." Zhurisar moved all four of her arms in short, horizontal sweeps, an Ahrman'yak shrug.

"Perhaps to test the capabilities of new ships."

"There is a saying," Mokoped replied. "The simplest answer is the one most likely to be right. I conclude that we have erred and these vessels are not Jinimar."

"Vague philosophies," countered Zhurisar, "are insufficient for me to advise risking this ship. I still recommend attack."

"Enough!" Amitarel stalked back to his command station. "The decision is mine, and I must consider. Zhurisar, Mokoped, please stop arguing and find out whatever else you can about these ships, particularly anything that will help us decide if they are in fact Jinimar."

"Yes, Captain." Mokoped returned to the defense unit.

"Still nothing," Lane reported from sciences.

"What happened?" asked Commander Cumbo. "They start to attack, then...they just stop." He shrugged.

"No changes since the attack?" queried Blackman.

"None," Lane answered. Colon nodded confirmation.

"Stand by," Rosenzweig instructed. To Vosseller, he added, "If they fire again, we'll go to battle stations." The exec nodded.

For several minutes, crews on three starships stared at their viewers.

"Captain, I'm picking up a signal," announced Hager.

"Here, too," added Hill.

"Run it through translators," the admiral ordered. "Let's hope they gave us enough to get it the first time."

"Aye, sir." Both communications officers turned to their task.

"Captain, this is interesting," said Hager. "The signal has a linguistic index tied to it."

Vosseller was over by the communications station on Avenger (not unreasonable—he did double as chief of communications). He turned toward Rosenzweig.

"Mr. Hager's right. They're showing us how to decode their language."

"Interesting."

"They must be used to communicating with other life-forms," Lane commented.

"Perhaps," Blackman mused, "But why didn't they try to talk to the Konkordium?"

"I wish I knew," the admiral answered.

"Sirs," Hager reported, "I think I have it. Dumping translation to Avenger."

Vosseller glanced at Hill, who shrugged. "Their computers are faster than ours." Then she added, "Translation received, Tai Shan."

"Acknowledged," Blackman said.

"Put it on speakers," Rosenzweig ordered.

"Aye, sir." The audio system crackled, then the message came through.

"Alien spacecraft, this is Captain Amitarel of the Extended-Range Explorer Rhentas of the Ahrman'yak Transstellar League.

Please identify yourselves. We also ask the purpose of your presence here."

"An explorer!" said Blackman, startled. "But then why—?"

"Good question." Rosenzweig glanced toward Hill. "Reply frequency, Ensign."

"Aye, sir." At her nod, the admiral leaned forward.

"Captain Amitarel, this is Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig, commanding the Federation starship U.S.S. Avenger. On your other side is the starship U.S.S. Tai Shan, commanded by Captain Ronald Blackman. We are a part of Star Fleet, representing the United Federation of Planets, whose space is relatively near here, on a course back the way we came. We are here to seek information, specifically why you—or a ship identical to yours—attacked another Federation vessel without warning four of our days ago. Can you explain? Please respond. Also, we request a visual channel." He looked back at Hill. "Lock visual into our transmission."

On board the Rhentas, Mokoped looked at Zhurisar. "There." He indicated the communications unit, where message-analysis graphics played across the viewplates. "It is not even on Jinimar com-bands."

"It could still be a deception," the science officer replied.

"Captain, they have added a visual component to their transmission," Nachesem reported.

Amitarel paused. Then he made a decision. "Tie in to primary viewplate. Add visual to our return transmission."

"Yes, sir." The viewplate shimmered, then focused with an image of Avenger's bridge.

"Assuming no falsehood, that is not a Jinimar design, nor are those Jinimar uniforms," Mokoped announced.

"Assuming no falsehood," said Zhurisar. "As you see, they are Jinimoid."

"U.S.S. Avenger," intoned Amitarel, "do you read?"

"We read you," Rosenzweig answered. He exchanged looks with Vosseller and Lane. The aliens—Ahrman'yak, they'd called themselves—were clearly non-Humanoid. A translucent outer membrane served them as skin. They looked about two meters tall, formed as uneven cylinders, with short but powerful-looking legs near the bottom and four arms, in two pairs, sprouting from two-thirds of the way up the cylinder. About 20 centimeters from the top, three amber spheroids protruded, with two slits set side-by-side below them and a third, somewhat larger, slit just below the other two. They were unusual, but to officers used to dealing with races as different from Humanoid norms as Sulamids and Bzzit Khaht, they were not too astonishing.

"Good. We are receiving your visual, and hope you can receive ours."

"We have it. Now, Captain, can you explain the attack on our fellow starship?"

"Admiral?" It was Blackman. "We're sort of out of the loop here."

"Ensign Hill, patch in the Tai Shan."

"Yes, Admiral." The main viewer splitscreened again, between the bridges of the Tai Shan and Rhentas.

"Thanks, Avenger," Blackman replied. "We have you both."

"Good. Now, Captain Amitarel?"

Amitarel exchanged looks with several of his officers. Then he turned back to his visual pickup. "Avenge, Tai Shan, I must apologize for that attack. It was an error."

"An error?!" exclaimed Vosseller.

"Bob," Rosenzweig said warningly. Turning his attention back to the viewer, he went on. "Captain, you mounted a sustained attack against a spacecraft that gave no provocation. As my executive officer has pointed out, that would have to be **some** error."

"You misunderstand me, Admiral. The execution of the attack was not erroneous; the decision to **make** the attack was. We did intend to attack the ship, but realize now that we should not have."

"Pardon me," said Blackman, "but I still don't understand. What are you talking about?"

"To explain further," Amitarel replied, "I must give you some background. The Ahrman'yak Transstellar League lies a substantial distance from here, along this spiral arm of the galaxy. Near our space is a hostile race of beings which are physically much like yourselves. They are called the Jinimar. They and their allies have engaged us—and our allies—in war. Currently, neither we nor they have a decisive advantage in this war, and both sides have become nervous. The Jinimar are vicious fighters. They attack without warning, from the most advantageous position they can attain. They offer no quarter, attacking and destroying with almost manic savagery.

"Our vessel is a long-range exploration unit, hence our distance from home. By our standards and those of the Jinimar, our combat capability is moderate, but hardly overwhelming. In a direct engagement with a single Jinimar combat vessel, our odds of survival are roughly even. Against two such vessels, they are low. "Let me transmit an image of a typical Jinimar starship. This may clarify matters somewhat."

"Very well, Captain," said Rosenzweig. "Go ahead." The main viewer shimmered, and the segment displaying the view from the Rhentas changed to that of a starship. Its lines were vaguely reminiscent of a Federation ship's, with some distinct Romulan influences, and with a dollop of Gorn thrown in.

"This is a typical Jinimar ship of the line," Amitarel's voice came over the channel. "Note the resemblance to your own vessels." The image changed to a computer graphic of another ship. This time, it looked even more Federation-like, though still from a distinctly different design tradition. "This," Amitarel explained, "is from an intelligence report regarding new Jinimar designs." The screen switched back to the Rhentas' bridge.

"Of **course**," said Vosseller. Rosenzweig quickly made a throat-cutting gesture to Hill, then pointed to his ear. The communications specialist killed the audio to the Rhentas.

"Okay, Bob, what've you got?"

"It's so simple it's sad. It's a case of mistaken identity."

"You mean," asked Blackman, "that they thought the Konk was one of those—uh—Jinimar ships?" Vosseller nodded.

"It's not **that** close a resemblance," Rosenzweig said.

"Begging the admiral's pardon," Vosseller replied, "but your own expertise in ship designs would tend to increase the amount of difference you'd see among ships. There are definite similarities."

"Agreed, but—"

"Admiral," Lane answered, "consider the design of the Rhentas. And look at the Ahrman'yak physically. To a race of beings that different, the distinctions we're drawing between ourselves and the Jinimar ship are trivial."

"To an outsider," Cumbo suggested, "how different are we, really, from the Klingons or the Romulans?"

"Oh, I'd say that's a pretty big difference," Vosseller said.

"To us, maybe," answered Rosenzweig thoughtfully, "with our awareness of the socio-political history we've had. But physically, how different are they? Even the Klingon Imperial Race isn't that far off the humanoid norm. And the Rihannsu—not much at all."

"Consider history," Lane suggested. "The late 20th Century superpower conflicts were thought—by the superpowers—to bring out unmistakable differences between them. But would an extra-terrestrial have even noticed?"

Vosseller nodded vigorously. "Even some of the neutral countries couldn't see the differences."

"And here we're dealing with a race," observed Colon, "that is physically, and perhaps culturally, very different from us...and we're similar to their sworn enemies."

"Just so," said Blackman.

"Okay," concluded Rosenzweig, "so the mistaken-identity theory seems sound. Question: Is there any logical reason for them to mislead us with such a story?"

"I don't think so," answered Lane. "What do they have to gain?"

"Militarily, their weapons are powerful, but their defenses are only comparable to ours. Two to one, we'd destroy them." This assessment came from Ensign Shren.

"If I were them, I'd try for an alliance of some sort."

Rosenzweig nodded to his exec. "I agree. Opinions, anyone? Should we make the offer, or accept if they do?"

"Yes," Blackman advised. "We'll be expanding that way eventually, and—strategically—it would be nice to have an ally out there."

"It would seem logical to attempt to pursue such a course," offered T'Lieste.

"All right." Rosenzweig turned back toward communications. "Ensign, if you would?"

"Yes, sir." Hill restored the audio link. The admiral returned his attention to the main viewer.

"Are you still with us, Rhentas?"

"We are indeed," Amitarel responded.

"Good." Rosenzweig stood up. "Captain, we believe that we understand the situation, and we accept your explanation of what happened."

"That is welcome news." On the viewer, several of the Ahrman'yak moved their upper arms in what Rosenzweig took to be the equivalent of smiles. The admiral glanced at Vosseller and Lane, who nodded.

"Captain, your circumstances with the Jinimar seem uncertain at best. Have you tried diplomatic initiatives to resolve the situation?"

"After the talks broke down and the war began, they would accept no further peaceful overtures."

"A third party might have more success," suggested Blackman.

"Do you suggest yourselves?" Mokoped asked.

"Not us personally," Rosenzweig said. "However, the Federation has many fine diplomats who might serve well. One of our more famous ambassadors, a man named Robert Fox, negotiated a successful end to an interplanetary war that had gone on for 500 years."

"Indeed?" Several of the Ahrman'yak seemed impressed. Amitarel, though, asked the obvious question, and one for which the

rear admiral was waiting. "But, if the Jinimar will not see them, what difference could your diplomats make?"

"I submit," Rosenzweig answered, "that if a Federation ambassador were to arrive on the flagship of a Federation battle group, the Jinimar might pay some attention."

"It's an old concept, on many worlds," said Lane. "Peace through strength."

"You would wish to ally yourselves with us?"

"We would of course hear out both sides," the admiral answered. "But if your description of the war's beginning is accurate, you—and not the Jinimar—would be our natural allies."

"I see." Amitarel glanced at his officers. "Rear Admiral Rosenzweig, Captain Blackman, please hold." This time, sound was cut off from the Rhentas.

"Your opinions?" Amitarel asked.

"Yes," said Mokoped. "This Federation would make a powerful ally. I advise accepting their offer." Amitarel nodded and turned to Zhurisar.

"Science Officer?"

"I believe now that there is no falsehood. They are not Jinimar, nor do they match any description of Jinimar allies. Let us go ahead."

Nachesem and Larioben also agreed. Only Engineer Tramlinok remained unsure. He was not opposed, though. Amitarel reopened the channel to the Avenger and Tai Shan.

"Federation vessels, we are most interested in your offer."

"Excellent!" said Rosenzweig. "May I suggest that you accompany us back to a Federation starbase, where we can discuss the plans that must be made."

Amitarel again exchanged looks with his officers. Evidently he hadn't expected that. The response must have been in the affirmative, because the Ahrman'yak captain turned back to his pickup. "Very well."

"Good. We will transmit directional coordinates relative to our present position." The admiral glanced at Commander Trask, then Ensign 1st Class Hill. "Give them directional coordinates to Starbase 29. Then plot a course back for us, as well."

"Aye, sir." "Yes, Admiral."

A few moments later, Captain Amitarel reported, "We have the coordinates."

"We're ready here, too," added Martinez.

"Captain Blackman?"

"Tai Shan is ready."

"All right." Rosenzweig leaned back in his chair. "On course for Starbase 29, warp factor five."

"Warp five, aye," acknowledged Hunnebeck from the Tai Shan. The ships leaped forward, Rhentas easily pacing the Federation ships.

"ETA to Starbase 29, eleven hours," reported Trask.

"Thank you," Rosenzweig replied.

With little to do at that juncture but fly, the comm-channels were shut down. As the main viewer returned to a starfield image, Alex allowed himself a small smile. He keyed the log recorder.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8802.28:

Our search has been successful. We have made contact with the Explorer Rhentas of the Ahrman'yak Transstellar League. Our question has been answered, in a way simpler than any of us would have guessed: the Konkordium was attacked in a case of mistaken identity, clouded by

uncertainty and fear. The Ahrman'yak are at war with a race known as the Jinimar. By coincidence, the Jinimar vessels are superficially similar to Federation craft. As the Ahrman'yak follow a totally different design approach, the differences—so obvious to us—were trivial to them, and they feared that the Konk was a Jinimar ship. An offer of alliance has been made, and the Ahrman'yak are interested. The Rhentas is now accompanying the Avenger and Tai Shan to Starbase 29, where contact will be made with Star Fleet Command representatives to discuss the potential alliance and what should be done next."

Switching off the log, the admiral turned toward Ensign 1st Class Hill. "Ensign, please advise Star Fleet of the situation. Patch in log entries and all the data we have on the Rhentas itself, the Ahrman'yak, and the Jinimar."

"Aye, sir. Transmitting."

With that, Rosenzweig stood up. "Mr. Cumbo, the con is yours. Bob, Jon, we're back on duty in a few hours, anyway. I'd suggest we use the time wisely." He headed for the turbo-lift. Lane and Vosseller followed.

"Admiral, we're on final approach to Starbase 29," reported Ensign Abbott.

"Thank you. Reduce speed to .3c for interplanetary flight, Mr. Toland."

"Aye, sir."

Rosenzweig swiveled toward the sciences station, where Lane was bent over the sensor panel. "Pre-approach scan?"

"Under way, Admiral."

"Sir?" Vosseller was taking a turn himself at the communications station this shift.

"Yes, Captain?"

"We're receiving a signal from the starbase. The message reads, 'Welcome back. Good work. Assume standard orbit and prepare to receive Admiral Christopher Smith.' They've also included an orbit assignment for ourselves, Tai Shan, and Rhentas."

"Acknowledge the signal and patch the orbit data through to Mr. Abbott."

"Right."

The three vessels settled into a high standard orbit around the planet. Soon afterward, a shuttlecraft approached the Avenger and docked at the command port behind the bridge. Rosenzweig left Lane in command and—accompanied by Captain Vosseller, Commander Wilson, and an honor guard—met the Vice Commanding Admiral at the airlock.

"Permission to come aboard?"

"Permission granted, Admiral," Rosenzweig answered. "Welcome." The rear admiral noticed Wilson fingering the collar of his forest green tunic. "Shall we dispense with the formalities?"

"Yes, let's," Smith replied.

"Officers' Lounge is this way," the Avenger's CO suggested. As he passed Wilson, he glanced at the security chief. "Tom, you and your people are dismissed. Go relax."

"Aye, sir." Wilson led the guards toward the lift.

Sitting in the lounge, Smith described the reaction at HQ when the report had come through. Ackermann, back from Starbase 32, had been very pleased, particularly since he'd had his

doubts about the 7th Fleet commander's mental state when the Avenger and Tai Shan had left the base at high speed. The Federation Council, when informed of the situation, had given Fleet Admiral Smith full discretion to act as he saw fit. The Star Fleet Commander had approved Rosenzweig's proposal, ordered Ackermann to ready a battle group, and sent his Vice Commanding Admiral ("So many Smiths in upper echelons," thought Alex.) out to bring the news.

"The battle group, led by the U.S.S. Corporation and including two cruisers, two frigates, and three destroyers, will be arriving with Ambassador Carlos Rivera in a couple of days," Smith finished. "Alex, you might remember Rivera from that blow-up some years back over at Lorealyn."

"I do, indeed," Rosenzweig said. "He's a good choice for this job."

"We think so, too."

"I wish the Challenger could go, too," Vosseller said softly.

"Captain Vosseller was the first to realize what had actually happened out there with the Konk," the rear admiral explained.

"I checked on Challenger with Bryan before I flew out here. You are slated for that ship, but she isn't going to be ready for at least two months. There are two alternative ships that may be available sooner, but both are scouts. One's a Hermes-class, and the other's a Darwin-class."

Vosseller shook his head. "No, thanks. If that's the case, we'll wait for Challenger." He glanced at Rosenzweig. "I know the others will agree."

"Okay," said Smith. "I'll tell Bryan."

"Admiral, will you want to speak to Captain Amitarel directly?"

"Yes," Chris replied. "I'll talk to them from the Balson. Just have your communications officer dump your universal translator data to us. We'll be taking over the dealings with the Ahrman'yak."

"Will do." Alex glanced at Bob. "Captain, could you see to that?"

"Of course. If you'll excuse me, Admirals?" Both Smith and Rosenzweig nodded, and Vosseller left the lounge.

"So, Chris, how's everything on Lagrange?"

"Pretty good. The crew only wanted us to take the ship out here, instead of putting me on the command ship. Steve wouldn't go for it, though. Polaris and Constellation II are tied up, and he won't sanction us going anywhere beyond Quadrant 0 without at least two heavy cruiser escorts."

"I don't really blame him," Alex said with a smile. "You've got, what, five flag officers on board?"

"Uh-huh. Actually, I don't blame him either, but the crew wouldn't mind some action." Chris shrugged. "Oh, well."

"Chris, while you were out here, have you been over to the Konk?"

"We checked in with them, but that's all there's been time for. The ship's pretty much repaired and they're getting replacement crew assigned."

"How's Jennifer?"

"Pretty good. She's still a little shook up, and her exec and ops chief are watching her like hawks, but she'll be fine."

"I'm glad."

Smith glanced at his wrist chrono. "Damn, Alex, I hate to cut this short, but the Rhentas is waiting."

Rosenzweig nodded. "You're right. Let's get you back to your shuttle."

At the docking port, the two admirals shook hands. "Give my regards to the Lagrange's crew," said the Avenger's CO.

"You bet," Chris replied. "Take it easy."

"You, too." Then Smith was through the door.

Rosenzweig stepped back onto the bridge. Vosseller rose to allow him to retake the center seat.

"Admiral Smith's shuttle is away," Lane reported.

"Very well. Mr. Vosseller, signal the starbase. Request location of the Konkordium and request clearance for us to match orbits with her."

Bob and Jon exchanged "Of course" glances. "Aye, sir," the chief of communications replied. Soon afterward, he had both the Konk's coordinates and the requested clearance. The dreadnought was out of drydock and was in free-orbit at about 900 kilometers altitude. Vosseller patched the coordinates to Abbott, and a look from Rosenzweig set both the navigation and helm specialists to work.

The Avenger dropped down to synchronize her orbit to that of the Konkordium. The Tai Shan remained in high orbit with the Rhentas, and Rosenzweig advised both Blackman and Amitarel of what would be happening.

"Thank you, Admiral," Amitarel replied. "We will await contact from Admiral Smith."

"You're welcome, Captain. Goodbye, and good luck. Avenger out."

"Rhentas out."

Ahead, the image of the Konk grew on the viewer. As Rosenzweig stared at it, he felt a hand on his shoulder. Looking up, he saw Lane standing next to him.

"Remember, Alex," Jon said softly. "Easy."

Alex nodded. To Toland, he ordered, "Bring us alongside and match velocity."

"Yes, sir."

"Bob, open hailing frequencies."

"Frequencies open, Alex."

"Avenger to Konkordium," Alex said. "Come in, please."

"Konkordium. We're receiving you, Avenger."

"This is Rear Admiral Rosenzweig. Where's Captain Levine?"

"She's off the bridge at the moment, sir. Shall I call her for you?"

"Negative on that. I'm beaming over. Please alert your transporter room."

"Yes, sir. I'll inform Commander Peterson."

"Very good. Avenger out." The admiral swiveled toward Vosseller. "Captain, the con is yours."

"How long do you expect to be?"

"Not sure, Bob."

"All right." Bob stood and crossed to the command chair, as Alex headed for the lift.

Arriving in the transporter room, the admiral nodded to Ensign 1st Class Moncher. "Ready?" he asked.

The specialist nodded. "Yes, sir. I'm interlinked with Konkordium's system, and all lights show green."

"Good." Rosenzweig stepped onto the platform and positioned himself on a pad. "You may energize when ready, Mr. Moncher."

"Energizing, sir." And the world went away.

When it came back, the room was the same, but the specialist in the booth was not. "Welcome aboard, Admiral," said Ensign J'det.

"Thank you, Ensign. Is Captain Levine back on the bridge yet?"

"I don't think so, sir. She is still conducting her inspection. Commanders Peterson is on the bridge. I think Captain Levine is in engineering."

Rosenzweig stepped off the platform. "Of course. She would be. Thanks again." He stepped out into the corridor. He paused for a moment, debating his destination. Then, his mind made up, he strode toward the turbo-lift.

As the lift approached A Deck, Rosenzweig took a step toward the doors. When the elevator car stopped and the doors slid apart, he immediately stepped onto the bridge...and was assaulted by the sound of loud voices. Quickly, he glanced around. Lt. Commander Hagen and Lieutenant J.G. Steward were discussing something at engineering. Lieutenants Kindle and Lisle manned helm and navigation. Lieutenant Chernesky was at sciences. Lieutenant McDermott was at communications. And Commander Peterson held the center seat.

As Peterson swiveled toward him, the admiral abruptly realized where the voices were coming from. He cocked an eyebrow at the exec, his gaze flicking to the arm of the chair. Carol gave him a "What am I gonna do with them?" look and pointed at the intercom. Alex stepped down next to the command chair and listened.

"Now, listen, Captain." It was Chief Engineer Flanders. "If you're constantly hovering over me, I don't see how you expect me to keep my engines in top condition."

"Your engines?! Now, listen to me, Commander. When I first took command of this ship, investigating the sabotage that threatened the whole refit program, I went through that whole system. You didn't practically take the engines apart and put them back together again. I did, and I solved the problem, too. They're my engines. Got it?"

"You may have taken 'em apart and put 'em back together, but I have to keep 'em together. And I'd say they're more my engines now than yours."

This was beginning to go too far. Rosenzweig leaned over the intercom pickup and pointed at the activation switch. Peterson tapped it.

"Captain!" the admiral began in a loud voice. "Commander! What is going on here?!" Suddenly, there was dead silence from the intercom speaker.

In engineering, Flanders and Levine stared at one another. "Oh, shit," John mouthed silently.

"It's Alex," Jennifer mouthed back.

"Well?" came the stern voice from the speaker.

"Uh," Levine began, "John and I were—umm—discussing the engines." She glanced toward Ensign Snake, who stood in the shadows near a deck support. Snake gazed at his fingers, as though contemplating his "claws".

"Yes," Alex's voice came back, "I could hear your 'discussion'. Would you care to explain it?"

"Not really, sir," John said.

"I see." Finally, it was too much. Alex broke into laughter. Carol, Jennifer, and John rapidly joined him, followed by the remainder of the bridge crew. Alex extended his hand, still laughing, and Carol shook it.

In the midst of all this, Dr. Ferrucci arrived on the bridge. At the sound of the laughter, a broad smile suffused her expression. Alex saw her, and gave her a salute. Marcy returned it. The laughter continued.

Later, Alex sat with Jennifer, Carol, and John in the captain's cabin. Over dinner, he had explained to them what Avenger and Tai Shan had discovered. When he had finished, Carol looked thoughtful.

"So a war thousands of light-years from here reached across to touch the Federation."

"And nearly destroyed us," John added.

"It came perilously close to embroiling us all," Alex said. "At least we avoided that." He touched Jen's hand. "And I am very glad you're all right."

"Thanks, Alex. I appreciate it." She paused, glancing at John and Carol. "We all do." The admiral smiled in response.

"You are one special crew," he said.

Finally, the time came for Alex to return to the Avenger. New orders for both Avenger and Konkordium were expected within the hour. Leaving Lt. Commander Hagen in command, Levine and Peterson walked the admiral to the transporter room.

"Well, this is it, I guess," Rosenzweig commented.

"For now," Carol replied. Alex glanced at her.

"Indeed, there is the Propulsion Conference in a couple of weeks."

"Right," Jennifer added. "That should be interesting. I hear there's supposed to be a post-mortem on transwarp drive."

"And Montgomery Scott will be there, too. It'll be good to see him again." Rosenzweig looked thoughtful.

"Hello, Captain, Admiral, Commander," J'det greeted them as they entered the transporter room. "All systems are ready."

"Thank you, Ensign," Levine replied.

"I'd better go," said Alex, "before I think of another reason to stay." He hugged Jennifer and clasped hands with Carol. "I'll see you soon." He hopped onto the platform as the two women ducked into the operator's booth. Turning back, he nodded to J'det. "Energize." The beam took him.

Rematerializing aboard the Avenger, Rosenzweig nodded to Moncher. He noted the specialist's answering salute, then headed for the door. As the rear admiral disappeared into the corridor, Moncher keyed the intercom.

"Bridge, this is Moncher in Transporter Room 1."

"Vosseller here."

"Admiral's aboard, Captain. He's probably bridge-bound right now."

"Thank you, Ensign. Vosseller out."

The turbo-lift stopped at A Deck and Rosenzweig stepped onto the bridge. Lt. Commander Bell stood near the auxiliary systems monitor, checking items off on a report board. At her questioning look, Alex said, "Jen's fine." Brenda smiled and nodded. Rosenzweig stepped down next to the command chair.

"Okay, Bob, I'm back."

Vosseller glanced over, then stood, surrendering the chair. As Rosenzweig sat down, the exec gave his report. "Everything's fine

-----AND THE ADVENTURE  
CONTINUES-----

here, Admiral. New orders are due within an hour, and we're running pre-departure systems checks." The rear admiral nodded.

"Thank you." He glanced left as Bell handed him the report board. "Looks good," he commented, as he added his initials to hers.

"Thanks," Bell replied. As she headed toward the lift, Rosenzweig spun toward Captain Lane. The science officer looked up.

"Sensor report, Jon? And you might be interested to know that Jennifer and Carol are fine."

Lane nodded. "Good. And the sensors all check out. Readings are normal for a starbase orbit."

"Thank you."

"Admiral." Rosenzweig stopped his swivel and looked back at the captain. "Are you all right?"

Alex smiled. "I'm fine, too, Jon. Thanks." Jon gave him a thumbs-up sign.

"Sir?" It was Vosseller, who was seated back at communications. "The starbase is hailing. The orders are coming through."

"On viewer."

"They're just text."

"Is it coded?"

"Uh-uh."

"Then run it on the main viewer."

"Aye, Admiral." The forward viewer switched to the text display of the message. When it was finished, Rosenzweig glanced at Abbott. "Ensign, did you get that course?"

"Yes, sir. I'm laying it in now." Then, "Ready. Patched to helm."

"Mr. Toland, take us out of orbit. Warp factor five at my command."

"Aye, sir." The planet fell away on the viewer. Rosenzweig keyed the log recorder.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8802.29:

With the Rhentas now in Admiral Smith's capable hands, and a plan set for assisting the Ahrman'yak, the Avenger is moving on to its next mission. Tai Shan and Konkordium are also proceeding onward, although many representatives from our various vessels will be convening at Lindburgh IV for the Interstellar Propulsion Conference. In the interim, Avenger has been ordered to Kzin space for a little showing of the flag in that area. This will insure that the Kzinti, who have of late been showing some restiveness, are reminded of Star Fleet's continued vigilance.

On a more personal level, I am pleased at how well Captain Levine has bounced back from her injuries, and at the morale aboard the Konkordium. Also, it should be noted that Captain Blackman and the crew of the Tai Shan acquitted themselves well on this first mission under the new command. I see good things ahead for them. Out."

As Rosenzweig finished, Lane looked up from sciences. "Admiral, we're clear of the planetary gravity-well."

"Very good. Mr. Toland, ahead warp factor five."

"Aye, sir. Warp five."

The hum of the engines increased, and the Avenger shot into hyperspace.

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