

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

## BY HONOR BOUND

By Alex Rosenzweig, Based on a Story Idea By James Rennie

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8710.28:

The Avenger is currently on a charting run through Sector 3SH-8-14. Our mission: conduct a mop-up mapping operation. Having been here before, many of Avenger's senior officers can readily understand the reasoning behind this mission...and why we were selected for it. Our previous visit was as officers aboard the now-decommissioned U.S.S. Constitution, under then-Rear Admiral Jason Genser. Morale at that time was so low on that ship that job-performance was noticeably affected. We are now filling the holes left from the mapping done at that time. Performance is much better now."

Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig keyed off the log recorder, thanking the fates once again that he had such a fine crew. Only minutes before, Captain Vosseller had handed him the crew efficiency breakdowns. The report showed "Excellents" across the board. Rosenzweig entered a similar notation for his exec. Damn fine officer, Vosseller was. He didn't always agree with Rosenzweig, but mindless affirmation was never a key characteristic for an exec. Yes-men didn't keep starship crews alive.

Swinging around, the admiral faced the sciences station. "Jon, how's the mapping going?"

Captain Lane looked up. "Boring, Alex. But it's getting done." The sciences intercom beeped. Lane glanced down. "Lane here."

"Captain, it's Ensign Lynch. Mapping is done for subsector 12. We're starting on 13."

"Good, Tim. Thanks. Lane out." The chief science officer glanced back at Rosenzweig. "Like that," he said.

"Okay. Keep it up." As he swiveled forward again, the admiral noticed Ensign Rodriguez by the weapons/defense station. He had an electronic clipboard with him, and was checking things off as he talked to Lt. Commander Hoffmann. When he finished, Rosenzweig motioned him over.

"Sir?"

"Mr. Rodriguez, please deliver this," and he handed Rodriguez the breakdowns, "to Lt. Commander Bell. Have her process them post-haste."

"Aye, sir." The mission support specialist saluted, then headed for the turbo-lift.

"Admiral?" Rosenzweig glanced toward communications, where Lieutenant Gorgas seemed to be listening to something on her earpiece receiver.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Distress call, sir. Weak and distorted, but definite. It's the U.S.S. Auriga. They're under attack."

"Attack?! Did you get the coordinates?"

"Yes, sir."

"Feed them to navigation." Rosenzweig swung his gaze to the chief navigator. "Mr. Ross, plot a direct course for the Auriga." Glancing at the helmsman, he added, "Warp 10, Mr. Dixon."

"Aye, sir," Dixon said quietly. "Warp 10."

"Course set," Ross reported tersely. There was no trace now of the chief navigator's slightly manic demeanor. Though some might argue, Rosenzweig knew Ross had his priorities straight. "Laid in."

"Accelerating to warp factor 10."

"ETA?" Rosenzweig asked.

"About 10 minutes," Ross answered.

The admiral swung toward sciences. "Jon, put data on the Auriga on the viewer. I know that ship. The rest of the crew won't be as familiar with her."

"Okay, Alex." A second later, the main viewer displayed top, side, and front views of the ship, along with technical data. The Auriga was a Coventry-class frigate. Her configuration slightly resembled that of Avenger, although she was an older ship, with older technology. Rosenzweig had served on her once. She'd been his first assignment, and he'd spent his first 5 years of space duty on board her. Captain Kenji had long since been promoted, and at last report few of the officers who'd crewed the ship 18 years ago were still with it. Rosenzweig didn't know the current command crew of the Auriga, but with luck he'd meet them soon.

"Put me on shipwide."

"Yes, sir." Gorgas hit a control. "You're on."

"All hands, this is the captain. We have just received a distress call from the U.S.S. Auriga. If you patch your viewers into the main bridge screen, you will see the ship's visuals and specs. Because the signal was limited, we are not certain of their condition. Stand by." He nodded, and Gorgas switched off the 'com.

The turbo-lift doors parted, and Vosseller came back onto the bridge. He stepped down next to Rosenzweig. "I heard your message, Alex."

"We didn't get much from the Auriga. Just a weak call about being attacked."

"You served aboard her once, didn't you?"

"Yeah. A long time ago..." He glanced at Vosseller. "Have Karen brief you on the message. Meanwhile," and he looked toward Gorgas, "sound general quarters, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir. General quarters." The lighting went red and the klaxons sounded the alert. All around the Avenger, men and women raced to their battle stations.

A couple of minutes later, Vosseller finished talking to Gorgas and straightened up. "All sections report ready," he said.

"Good," replied Rosenzweig. He glanced around the bridge, practiced eyes assessing the displays at the various stations. All showed full readiness. The admiral touched the log control.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental:

Only minutes ago, we received a distress signal from the U.S.S. Auriga. They are under attack. We are proceeding to their location, and now stand at general quarters."

"We're approaching the Auriga's reported position," Ross announced.

"Slow us down," Rosenzweig ordered Dixon.

"Aye, sir. Slowing."

"Shields up, activate all weapons."

"Aye, aye, Admiral," Hoffmann replied. "Shields up, phasers energized, pho-torps armed."

Lane was watching his sensor displays. He glanced up at Vosseller, who was leaning over his shoulder. "There's just the Auriga. No other vessels around."

"Focus on the Auriga," Vosseller said. "What's her condition?"

"Bad," Lane answered a moment later. "One nacelle severed, evidence of hulling in numerous areas, impulse drives destroyed. They're on reserve batteries only."

"Damn," said Rosenzweig, coming over to join them. "Life readings?"

"117 people registering."

"My god," gasped Vosseller. "Over half the crew dead."

Rosenzweig turned to Gorgas. "Secure from general quarters. Maintain yellow alert. Advise Star Fleet Command of our situation and request a tow for the Auriga." The assistant chief of communications nodded, and Rosenzweig added, "Get a medical rescue team and a damage control team to Transporter Rooms 1 and 2."

"Yes, sir."

In sickbay, Commander Cohen paused to listen to Gorgas' filtered voice. When she finished, he put down the report board he'd been studying and looked at the others, who were waiting for orders.

"Okay, let's not just stand here." He turned to Commander Levy, the head nurse. "Judith, I'm gonna need a nursing squad. Laura, get some med-techs ready. The bridge says we have 117 people to get. Prep for triage and condition-assessment. Let me know when you're set. I'm gonna try to get us some more details." He headed back toward his office. Passing his weapons-wall—an unusual feature of Matt Cohen's office, and one of his most unique idiosyncrasies (Rosenzweig had been known to say he had the only gun-toting chief medical officer in Star Fleet.)—Cohen gazed at his genuine 1992-model Uzi submachine-gun. Then he shook his head. There weren't any enemies on that ship, just wounded Star Fleet officers. He went to his desk and pressed his intercom control. "Bridge."

Meanwhile, Lt. Commander Lindemann began putting 2 squads together. "Okay. We need a doctor, 3 techs, and 2 nurses for each. Matt's going to lead a team, I'm sure. Judith, you want to put that M.D. to work?"

"Yes, I would."

"Good," said Lindemann. "Let's see, put Cooper, Legard, and Milelli in Squad 1, and Greene, Linden, and Molinia in Squad 2."

"For our nurses, put Isear and Willment in Squad 1," said Levy, "and Lingard and S'net in Squad 2."

"Okay." Lindemann tapped the intercom control, tied into the shipwide hookup, and announced the team roster. She looked at Levy. "I'll have sickbay ready when you people get back."

"Right," said Levy. She scooped up a medikit and headed for the door.

In engineering, Gorgas' voice echoed through the chamber. Newcome turned to Young. "You want to lead it, Jamie?"

"Sure," Young replied.

"Okay. Take whoever you need."

"Aye, sir." Young strode to the intercom station on the main panel. "Attention, all ship's engineers. The following personnel, report to Transporter Room 2 for damage control duty on the Auriga: McCabe, Ciufo, Knapp, Ambrose, and T'Lieste. I'll meet you in five. Young out." He looked back at Newcome. "Any special orders?"

"Yes. Be careful."

"You bet. See you soon."

"Right." And Young was gone.

On the bridge, shortly thereafter, Gorgas turned to Rosenzweig. "Admiral, we have reports from Ensigns Horn and Moncher. Boarding parties are on the Auriga. First reports are due in 10 minutes."

"Thanks, Karen."

"I'm tracking them now, Alex," Lane reported.

"Stay sharp," Rosenzweig answered.

"Always do."

"Admiral?" Rosenzweig swung back toward communications. "I have a signal from the U.S.S. Clydesdale."

"The startug?"

"Yes, sir. They're on their way. ETA is 25 minutes."

"Very well."

"Alex," said Vosseller, "who do you think attacked them? Klingons? Romulans? Orions, maybe?"

"I wish I knew, Bob. I don't think it was Orions, though. Their ships just wouldn't be powerful enough to do that," and he indicated the main viewer, "to a ship like the Auriga. A Coventry's no match for, say, an Avenger, but it's certainly no sitting duck."

"That writes off just about everybody *but* the Klingons or Romulans. Nobody else is strong enough."

"Unless it's someone—or something—we don't know about."

"There is that," Vosseller acknowledged.

"But why would *anyone* do it?" asked Ross. "They'd have to be crazy to risk war with the Federation."

"Assuming, of course," Vosseller answered him, "that they could be caught, or any accusation proven."

"Well, yeah," Ross admitted.

"But as to why," the admiral interjected, "who can know? At least, until we talk to the survivors." Vosseller nodded.

"I have a signal from Commander Cohen," Gorgas announced.

"On speakers," Rosenzweig ordered.

"Cohen to Avenger. Come in."

The admiral thumbed his communications tie-in. "Avenger here, Matt. Report."

"We're finding the survivors, Alex. Some are in pretty bad shape, but others are only a little banged up. Jamie's down in engineering—or what's left of it—trying to make sure this ship doesn't blow itself up while in tow."

"Matt, have you been to the bridge?"

"Yes. It's a mess. Out of 11 people up there, we pulled out 3 survivors, including the captain. Ensign Ambrose says they were real lucky."

"Okay. When are you going to start sending survivors back?"

"As soon as you can take 'em. We'll need lots of med-support in the transporter rooms."

"Right." Rosenzweig glanced toward Vosseller. "Bob, see to that." The exec nodded and headed for the turbo-lift. Turning his attention back to Cohen, the admiral asked, "Where are you now?"

"D deck."

"Can you get us a picture?"

"Alex, it's not a pretty sight..."

"Can you get a *picture*?"

"Wait." For several minutes there was nothing. Then the image of the Auriga disappeared from the main viewer, to be replaced by an interior view.

"Oh, my gods," muttered Hoffmann.

"See what I mean?" said Cohen.

"Yes," said Rosenzweig, fighting an urge to turn away. A look to his right told him that Lane felt the same. "Okay, Matt, that's enough."

"You asked for it."

"That is *enough*, Dr. Cohen!"

"Aye, sir," Cohen answered. The image vanished and the Auriga came back.

"All right, Matt," said Rosenzweig. "You'd better get back to your team. We'll be standing by for the patients. Avenger out."

"Cohen out."

Soon afterward, Gorgas reported, "Captain Vosseller reports survivors being beamed over. And Lieutenant Young's on from the Auriga."

"Okay on Bob's report, and put Mr. Young on the speakers."

"Yes, Admiral."

"Rosenzweig here, Jamie. Report."

"Admiral, we've secured the engine systems. The impulse drive is a scrap heap, so all we could do in main engineering was seal off the hulled areas. We shut down the electrical feeds from the warp engines so we don't get any overloads from latent voltages."

"Good. How are the batteries holding up?"

"Well, if you don't ask this wreck to do anything else, I think they'll give life-support."

"Okay. Wrap up what you need to and beam back over here. Rosenzweig out."

By the time the Clydesdale arrived, the engineering and medical teams, along with the 117 survivors from the Auriga, were aboard the Avenger. Over 80 of the survivors were in serious or critical condition, seriously overloading the medical facilities. As soon as the startug rendezvoused with the heavy frigate, Cohen beamed over as many of the injured as the tug's sickbay could handle. The medical ship Firenze was also racing toward them to help with the others.

When Cohen reported that the Auriga's captain was conscious, Rosenzweig left Vosseller the con and headed for sickbay.

Striding in, the admiral looked questioningly at Lindemann, who was directing the activities of the medical staff. "He's in the ICU, and Matt's with him," she told him.

"Thank you, Doctor." Rosenzweig said. He headed for the intensive care unit. Entering the room, he spotted Cohen immediately and walked toward him. Hearing the click of his boots on the deck, the doctor looked up.

"Hello, Alex."

"Hi, Matt. How is he?"

"He's pretty shook up, but he's out of shock. He had a few minor lacerations, all of which I patched up. He'll be okay."

"No thanks to those Romulan SOB's!" growled the captain. That got Rosenzweig's attention fast.

"Romulans?" he asked.

"Yes, Admiral. The Vulcans' bastard cousins themselves. Showed up in a Winged Defender-class cruiser. They gave us a signal, and started talkin' sweet as sugar. Suddenly, outa nowhere, they start blastin'. We're holdin' our own, then 2 Birds of Prey

show up. I'm good, and my crew was good, but we couldn't do much 3-on-1. And what you see is what you get."

"Matt, did you or Jamie recover any log tapes?"

"Yeah. Jon should have 'em now."

"Okay. Take care of them." He gestured to the Auriga crewmen in the ICU.

"You bet."

When Rosenzweig returned to the bridge, Vosseller surrendered the center seat. "Give me a report, Bob."

"The Clydesdale has about finished hooking up the Auriga. Commander Delur says they're going to haul it back to Starbase 27. Firenze will follow it there when they pick up the rest of the survivors from us."

"Very good." He started to turn to sciences.

"Admiral?" Rosenzweig instead glanced toward Gorgas.

"Transmission from the Clydesdale, sir."

"Put them on." The main viewer displayed an image of the tug's Efrasian commander.

"Avenger here," said Rosenzweig.

"Hello, Admiral. We're ready to take the Auriga back to base. Anything else you need us for?"

"Negative, Commander. You just worry about getting that ship home. We'll send on the rest of the crew when Firenze gets here. Thanks for the help."

"Of course, Admiral. Smooth sailing. Delur out."

"And to you. Rosenzweig out." The viewer blanked, then returned to its image of the ships. The Clydesdale's impulse ports glowed white, and the ships pulled away from the Avenger. They dwindled rapidly and disappeared. Then, as if on cue, Lane looked up.

"Alex, another ship in sensor range. Intercept course."

"Beacon ID's it as the Firenze," Ross reported.

It was the Firenze. While Avenger held station, the medical ship pulled alongside. Under Cohen's direction, the remaining survivors were moved to the transporter rooms. They were then beamed over.

As the image of the Firenze disappeared from the main viewer, the admiral turned to Gorgas. "Lieutenant, signal Star Fleet Command. Then secure from yellow alert. I think it's safe to say," he added, glancing at Vosseller, "that if anyone was hanging around with inimical intent, they would have done something by now."

"You're right, Alex. We can't keep the crew on alert forever."

"Exactly."

"Sir, I have Admiral Hightower on," Gorgas reported.

"On viewer." The main screen lit with the features of Admiral Hightower. She nodded as the Avenger's bridge appeared on her viewer.

"I'm reading you, Avenger. What is it, Alex?"

"Admiral, a short time ago, we received a distress call from the U.S.S. Auriga. We proceeded to her location and found her a battered mess. She had 117 survivors, but the ship was in bad shape. We got a tug and a medical ship to help us with the Auriga, and they've taken the ship and the survivors to Starbase 27. The captain of the Auriga reports that they were victims of a surprise attack by a Romulan Winged Defender-class heavy cruiser, as well as 2 Birds-of-Prey."

"That's a pretty substantial attack group."

"I agree, and I suspect this may be a prelude to something more."

"And...?"

"I'd like to request permission to patrol the Neutral Zone. The mapping-run we were on isn't that high a priority, and we may be needed there."

"Command does want that mapping done," Hightower said.

"What about the Konkordium?" Rosenzweig suggested.

"They're on stand-down at Starbase 7. Captain Levine sent me a stargram the other day, and she says the crew are all itching for something to do."

"Well, we can't have them going stir-crazy, can we? Okay. Go. I'll cut orders for Konkordium to replace you."

"Thank you, Admiral."

"Alex," Hightower added, leaning forward, "stay in touch. No disappearing acts."

"Absolutely not, ma'am. Regular status reports guaranteed."

"Good. Star Fleet out." The screen blanked, then switched back to the starscape. Rosenzweig turned to Vosseller.

"Well, Bob, I guess we go."

"Yep."

"I'm going to leave the status reports to you."

"No problem, Alex."

"Good." Rosenzweig swung forward. "Mr. Ross, plot a course for the Romulan Neutral Zone. Mr. Dixon, warp factor 6."

Both Ross and Dixon nodded. Ross keyed the course into the nav-computer and patched it through to the helm. Dixon hit switches, and the Avenger turned and accelerated. A second later, the stars streaked into spectra as the ship entered warp. The screen went blank. Then the computer substituted its artificial starfield. Rosenzweig nodded.

"Okay. Steady as she goes."

The trip to the Neutral Zone took slightly less than a day. As the Avenger approached the Zone, the long-range tracking sensors were activated. Given the heightened tensions between the Federation and the Romulan Star Empire in the wake of the whole Genesis Affair, the fact that a Romulan squadron had attacked a Star Fleet vessel was very disquieting. Speculation ran rampant: It was a mistake. No, it was a prelude to an all-out attack. That's crazy; it's a renegade squadron and the Praetorate would deny any connection to official Empire policy.

The ship was on yellow alert. Lane kept his attention glued to the sensors. But there was nothing there.

"Ensign Miller," Rosenzweig said to the helmsman, "slow us down. Warp 2." To the navigator, he added, "Lieutenant McManus, plot us a patrol course. Don't approach any closer than 5 light-years to the edge of the Zone."

"Okay, sir. Patrol course is on the board."

"Thanks, Lill." The admiral directed his attention toward engineering. "Mr. Van Natta, what's our power situation?"

"We're at full readiness, Admiral. If you need it, we can get it for you."

"Outstanding, Ensign. Stand by."

Lane looked up from sciences as the turbo-lift doors opened and Vosseller stepped onto the bridge, followed by Security Chief Wilson. The science officer glanced at them, then turned toward Rosenzweig.

"Alex, there's nothing out there at all. It's total-ly peaceful."

Rosenzweig swiveled to face him. "Nothing?"

"Nothing."

"Is there any possibility the Romulans have improved their cloaking device again?"

Wilson broke in before Lane could answer. "No way, Alex. At least, not unless Intelligence has screwed up."

"Lill," Rosenzweig said, "put a tactical display of our course on the viewer."

"Yes, sir," McManus replied. The starfield was re-placed with a graphic.

"There," said Rosenzweig, pointing.

"What?" Vosseller asked.

"Lill has us passing close to Outpost 4. We'll be able to check with them as we pass by."

"Right," said Lane. "If anything's up, they should know about it."

"Unless," Wilson commented, "the Romulans have done it again."

Again... Over 20 years ago, a lone Romulan Bird-of-Prey had slipped across the Neutral Zone. Using the then-revolutionary cloaking device, it had surprised and destroyed 4 of the outpost stations. The Enterprise, under Captain Kirk, had intercepted and defeated the Romulan ship, which self-destructed. Since then, the Romulans had involved themselves much more extensively in galactic affairs. And now this...

McManus and Miller guided the Avenger onto the patrol course. For several hours, the ship cruised quietly. The only traffic Lane picked up on the sensors was a trio of Federation merchant vessels, operating well inside Federation space. There were no Romulans.

As Outpost 4 came into communication range, Rosenzweig glanced over at Lt. Commander Centor. The communications officer was intently scanning up and down the subspace spectrum, evidently not picking up anything. The admiral smiled slightly. Centor was a good officer, perhaps one of Avenger's best. She'd been with the ship since they'd launched, and on the Constitution before that. Now, though, she'd expressed a desire to leave Star Fleet. She'd had enough of space, she said. She wanted a family, a more secure life. Rosenzweig wondered how much longer she'd stay. He would miss her.

"Devorah?" Centor looked up. "Open a channel to Outpost 4, please."

"Aye, sir," she said. She turned to the console, shifting her earpiece receiver to hear any signal better. After a minute, she said, "There's no reply, Alex. Repeating signal." Then, "Still nothing."

"Nothing?" Centor shook her head. "Damn." Rosenzweig glanced toward the ordnance specialist. "Shields up, Mr. Palmieri."

"Aye, aye, sir," the ensign replied.

"Lill, change course. I want to rendezvous with Outpost 4."

"Plotting new course." A second later, Miller nodded.

"I have it," she said. "Coming about."

"Very good."

"Alex, I have something," Centor said. "Patching to speakers."

"U.S.S. Avenger, this is Outpost 4. Greetings. Glad to know we still merit a 'Hi, there.' when ships come by."

"Return frequency," ordered Rosenzweig. At Centor's nod, he went on. "Hello, Outpost 4. We always make a point of keeping in touch with the UFP's guardians. With that in mind, is there anything you need? Any new library or entertainment tapes?" It was a stock question. Outposts *always* needed entertainment tapes. With so little to do outside of watching the Neutral Zone, their crews were always going through the base libraries every 2 months.

"Not a thing, Avenger. Thanks."

"Really?"

"Oh, it's been wonderful out here lately. Completely rosy."

"Okay," responded Rosenzweig uncertainly.

"Avenger, can we get back to you?"

"Something up?"

"Just here on the outpost. Nothing for you guys to worry about."

"If you say so."

"Thanks. Outpost 4 out." The line broke.

"Now that's...weird," said Vosseller.

"Yeah. These outposts need new tapes all the time," Centor remarked. "This is the first time I can ever recall one *not* asking for them."

"She's right," said Lane.

"I know," the admiral replied. "Lieutenant Mc-Manus, Ensign Miller, put us into orbit around that asteroid. I want to find out what's happening over there. Jon, what do the sensors show?"

"The outpost looks normal. The only part I can't read into is the deep shelter. That's to be expect-ed. The extra shielding down there tends to block the sensor scans anyway."

"What about life-forms?"

"That looks normal, too. Wait... No, I can't tell."

"What?" Wilson asked him.

"For a second, I got something that looked wrong, but it vanished before I could lock onto it."

"Great," muttered the security chief.

"Well, if the sensors aren't going to tell us what we need to know, we'll have to send a landing party." Rosenzweig leaned forward. "I'm leading it. Jon, I want you with me. Tom, have 4 security people meet us in the transporter room." The admiral stood up and faced Vosseller. "Bob, you have the con." He headed for the turbo-lift.

Lane activated his intercom. "Lieutenant Mercer to the bridge." He followed Rosenzweig.

The 2 officers entered Transporter Room 1 several minutes later. Ensign Horn, in the operator's booth, looked up from the console. Ensign Goldschmidt handed out the equipment. As he finished, 4 security officers hurried in. Lt. Commander McHenry headed the team, which included Ensigns O'Rourke, Brugmans, and Bartynski. All 4 carried phaser II's. They wore full armor and looked completely combat-ready.

"Security team reporting," announced McHenry.

"You people look ready for just about anything," the admiral commented.

"Let's just hope we're all overreacting," Lane added.

"Well, in case we're not," McHenry replied, "we're ready."

"Good," said Rosenzweig. "Places, everyone." He hopped up onto the platform, standing on one of the 6 pads. The others arranged themselves on the glowing disks. "Mr. Horn, are you ready?"

"Yes, sir. Outpost shields are down. Should I put you into the main corridor?"

"You're not getting a transporter pick-up signal?" Such a signal allowed transportees from one unit—ship or base—to lock into a second unit's transporter system, arriving in its transporter chamber. It added to efficiency and safety.

"No, sir. But if they weren't expecting company, they wouldn't have it on."

"True. Okay. The main corridor's fine."

"Aye, aye, Admiral."

"Energize."

Horn engaged the system. The 6 on the platform were transformed into glowing columns of light, faded, and vanished.

They rematerialized in the outpost's main corridor. It was deserted. The lighting was dimmed, and Lane realized that the outpost was in the "night" phase of its diurnal cycle.

"Life-form readings?" Rosenzweig asked. Lane unlimbered his tricorder. He held it out and turned around in a full circle.

"Not completely clear. These outposts—especially the newer replacements—have so much internal shielding to back up the main screens that only the base security systems can track everything that goes on. From what I can tell, it looks okay. I read Humans, some Andorians, a couple of Deltans, and assorted representatives of other UFP races."

"Which way is the control center on this thing?" Rosenzweig asked.

"Down here." McHenry pointed.

"Lead on, Commander," Rosenzweig said. The Avenger party moved down the corridor. McHenry, who knew outpost layout from her security training, acted as guide. She pointed out, as they approached the control room, that there should've been at least a *few* outpost personnel in the corridors.

"Put phasers on stun," Rosenzweig ordered. "Don't draw them, but be ready."

"Aye, sir," Bartynski replied.

"Those doors lead to the control room," McHenry advised.

"Okay," the admiral said. "Let's go pay our friends a visit." They headed for the doors.

The doors slid open, and the 6 Avenger personnel entered the control center. At the command station, an officer wearing lieutenant commander's insignia looked up. He started to turn back to his work, then did a double-take as he realized that 2 of them were a rear admiral and a captain.

Another officer looked at them from the scan station. "Are you from the Avenger?" he asked.

Before any of the Avenger group could open their mouths, the commander snapped, "Lieutenant! That tears it. If you're from Avenger, then get out of here. This outpost is filled with Roms."

"We didn't see anyone," said Lane.

"You will soon enough, if you don't get out of here. And you can't beam from the control center. It's transporter-shielded. For...security purposes. Didn't work out so well."

"We have to get back to the corridors," McHenry said.

"And *hurry!*" said the commander. The Avenger group fled.

"That corner," McHenry said, and they raced around it. But down the corridor stood a phalanx of helmeted Rihannsu soldiers.

"Back!" yelled Lane.

"Split up," gasped Rosenzweig, as the Romulans pounded after them. "Look for a place where you can hide long enough to get beamed up."

"Okay," said McHenry. "Break!" They split into 2 groups at the next junction, followed by the soldiers. McHenry and Lane dove into a service alcove and crouched behind the screen as several Romulans raced past. McHenry had her phaser out, while Lane drew out his communicator.

"Avenger, come in! Emergency!" It was only a whisper, but to McHenry, it sounded like the science officer was shouting. She prayed the Roms wouldn't hear.

"Vosseller here. What is it, Jon?"

"Emergency beam-up. Now!"

"Right. Hang on."

On the Avenger's bridge, Vosseller sprang into action. He swung to Centor. "Deborah, patch those signal coordinates to the transporter room. Tell Mr. Horn to energize immediately."

"Patching through," Centor acknowledged. She hit her intercom switch. "Bridge to Transporter Room 1. Emergency beam-up, these coordinates."

"Energizing," came Horn's reply.

The service alcove was filled with a hum, and Lane and McHenry vanished in a shimmering glow. A moment later, a young Rihanssu poked his head into the alcove. Finding nothing, he shook his head. He'd been certain he'd heard something there. Then the sound of shouts down the corridor distracted him. A Rihanssu cry of victory sent him racing down the passageway.

Lane and McHenry rematerialized on the transporter platform. As soon as the effect released them, they jumped forward.

"Chris, go let Tom know what's going on." The science officer ran to the door of the operator's booth. "Good work, Mr. Horn. Have you yanked the admiral and the others back yet?"

"No, Captain. We've had no signal from them yet."

"Damn. Keep tied in to the bridge. It could come through at any time. Be ready."

"Yes, sir." Lane nodded and headed for the door. Racing down the corridor, he could only hope that Rosenzweig would be all right. There was a turbo-lift ahead of him. He ran for it. The doors split and Lane bounded in.

"Bridge." The lift started up the shaft. It reached the bridge after what seemed like an eternity. Just as Lane stepped onto the bridge, Centor was turning toward the center seat. She acknowledged his arrival with a nod, then focused on Vosseller.

"Bob, I'm receiving a signal from the outpost."

"The base commander?"

"Uh...not exactly. He ID's himself as Rihanssu."

Vosseller paused. "Put him on," he said. "Use the main screen." Centor nodded and turned back to her console. The asteroid view on the main viewer was re-placed with a portrait of a stern-faced Romulan. He wore commander's insignia.

"Is this the U.S.S. Avenger?" he asked.

"Yes. This is Captain Robert Vosseller, first officer of Avenger."

"Good. Now listen carefully, Captain. I am Commander Hvaed tr'Lemaln of the Rihanssu Star Empire. I have captured your admiral and the remainder of your party, and unless you comply with the demands I will lay out, each will be killed before your eyes." The visual pick-up pulled back to show Rosenzweig and the 3 security specialists, their wrists bound, in a line in the outpost's control center.

"You're risking war with the Federation," growled Vosseller.

"Really? Your Federation would go to war over a paltry 4 lives? You can't be serious. On the other hand, I am serious. *Deadly* serious. And I will prove how serious I am." He turned toward the line and pointed at Bartynski. 2 Romulan soldiers pulled the

guard out of the line. tr'Lemaln glanced back at the pickup. "And for that proof, I will kill this prisoner." He held up a phaser. From Bartynski's look of consternation, Vosseller realized it was the guard's own weapon. Setting it on "kill", tr'Lemaln leveled it at the helpless ensign. Then Bartynski's captors released him. Before he could move, though, tr'Lemaln fired the phaser. Bartynski stiffened, then spilled to the floor.

"Damn you," growled Rosenzweig. tr'Lemaln ignored him.

"So, now you see," the Romulan commander said to Vosseller, "my degree of seriousness."

"All right," Vosseller said, "what are your demands?" Lane was leaning on the rail behind him, and a glance back let the executive officer see that the science officer's knuckles were white with the force of his grip.

"They are actually quite simple," tr'Lemaln said. "18 years ago, in a pitched battle with your frigate U.S.S. Auriga near a black hole, the captain of that ship was able to both damage the ship I was on, then evade us in such a way that my commander at the time was completely humiliated. He was unable to self-destruct, and had to be towed back to ch'Rihan in disgrace. I want that captain, so that we may duel and I may avenge my commander's humiliation with honor. When that is done, you will transmit the recordings of the duel to Star Fleet, so that they will see the price of deceit and trickery against us."

Lane bent down and whispered to Vosseller, "Close the channel."

"What?"

"Close the channel, damnit. This is important."

Vosseller nodded, then turned back to tr'Lemaln. "And then you will return our people to us?"

"Yes," said the Romulan. "Exactly so."

"I will have to...discuss this with my fellow officers."

"Very well. But make no mistake. You will have, in your time measurements, 1 hour and 45 minutes to comply with these demands. And if you do not, these men *will* die." The screen went dark.

"Close frequency," Vosseller told Centor. Then, turning to Lane, he asked, "What *is* it, Jon?"

"Not here. In the briefing room." With an exasperated shrug, the executive officer stood up. He touched his chair-arm intercom switch.

"Vosseller to Cook. Get up here and take the con." He switched off the 'com. "Deborah, the con's yours 'til Nick gets here." Centor nodded, and Vosseller followed Lane into the turbo-lift.

When they got to the briefing room, Lane went to the computer station at the table. He looked at Vosseller. "Bob, how much have you and Alex talked about his early Star Fleet career? Before the Constitution?"

"Not much," Vosseller answered.

"We have," Lane said. "Look." He touched a series of controls. On the wall viewer, Rosenzweig's open file appeared. "Okay. Look at this." Lane highlighted a section.

"During a battle with a Romulan vessel," Vosseller read, "'used knowledge of gravity effects of nearby black hole to recommend an evasive course to elude the Romulans.' Oh, my god."

"Exactly," said Lane.

"It wasn't the Auriga's captain that defeated the Romulan commander. It was Alex!"

"Which is why I didn't want to talk about it on the bridge. If tr'Lemaln learns the truth, Alex is dead."

The intercom chimed. Vosseller pressed the switch. "Yes?"

"Mercer here, Captain. Sensors are picking up a Winged Defender-class heavy cruiser and a Stormbird-class battle cruiser, on direct course for Outpost 4."

"Go to red alert. Shields up. We're on our way." The exec was out of his chair and heading for the door. As Lane followed, the lights went red and the klaxons began.

The turbo-lift doors opened and Vosseller and Lane stepped onto the bridge. Mercer surrendered the sciences station to Lane as Vosseller replaced Cook in the command chair.

"Report," ordered the executive officer.

Cook turned to him. "The 2 new ships are apparently here as backups for tr'Lemaln and his crew. They've advised him of their arrival, and he's acknowledged."

"One thing's for sure," Lane said. "We can't take them both, as well as tr'Lemaln's ship, by ourselves."

"We need our own backups," said Vosseller. He turned to Centor. "What's the closest ship to us?"

"Konkordium," Centor told him.

"Good. Patch a coded emergency distress signal to them. Include our present situation and emphasize that Alex's life is at stake. Send it in a compressed, microsecond burst, with a signal to alert their systems to the message."

"Okay. Setting it up." A few minutes later, she added, "Message away."

"All right." Vosseller turned toward weapons/de-fense. "Mr. Palmieri, put phasers on stand-by, in case things get nasty."

As Vosseller had faded from the control center viewer, tr'Lemaln had directed that the prisoners be put into a row of chairs on one side of the room. Lane's action had not surprised Rosenzweig. It had taken whatever acting talent he had not to express a gasp of shocked recognition as the Romulan commander had recounted the battle with the Auriga. The evasion that Auriga had used at the time was not a brainstorm of Captain Kenji's; it had been Rosenzweig's idea. tr'Lemaln's mention of the event had called up memories of a young ensign realizing just what the ship's computer was telling him and running through red-lit corridors to reach the turbo-lift to the bridge; of the stern Oriental captain startled at seeing the blue-shirted man bound onto the bridge; of Kenji's look of surprise, then pleasure, as Rosenzweig sketched out what needed to be done; and of the exhilaration as the maneuver worked almost perfectly, crippling but not destroying the Romulan vessel.

The admiral realized that the situation placed him in grave danger. If tr'Lemaln learned that it was *he* who'd played the key role in defeating the Romulan vessel, he was a dead man. But he had to try to defuse the situation...somehow.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8710.29:

The Konkordium has taken over Avenger's mapping-mission. It's a quiet, almost boring, task, but after 6 weeks of stand-down, almost anything is a relief. Mr. Chernesky reports that everything's going smoothly, and no problems are expected."

Captain Jennifer Levine turned off the log-recorder. Glancing at the science station, she said, "Report, Mr. Chernesky."

"As you were saying, ma'am, no problems."

"Good." Lieutenant Chernesky was only the acting chief of sciences, and Levine was assessing his performance before formally recommending him for the top spot. His performance had been too uneven thus far for her to commit to a recommendation, but she was putting him through enough drills that she was sure she'd soon know what to do. Once a course of action was clear, she was certain that Star Fleet Command would approve her choice.

Abruptly, an alarm tone sounded at the communications station. Commander Carol Peterson, Konkordium's chief of communications and executive officer, whirled to face her console, programming a trace on the alarm. It took only seconds.

"Jennifer, I'm receiving a distress signal." She slipped her receiver into her ear. "Coded and compressed. I'm having the computer process it now."

Levine shot a glance at navigation, where, fortunately, Lieutenant Lisle did not see fit to begin a lecture on computer capabilities. "Who's it from?"

"Avenger." Peterson had uttered only the ship-name, but it was enough for Levine to jerk forward in the center seat. Alex Rosenzweig was on that ship; he was its commander. And, oh, gods, Jon Lane, too! It had been over a decade since their relationship while they were at the Academy, but Levine still harbored some remaining feelings for the Avenger's science officer.

"Any details?" the captain asked.

"Yes. Bob Vosseller's in command. After they reached the Neutral Zone, they found Outpost 4 taken over by Romulans. Alex was captured, along with 3 security guards. One guard has been executed in a show of resolve by the Romulans. They threaten to kill more prisoners unless certain demands are met. The tape of their communication is included."

"And?" Levine pressed.

"The Romulan commander wants a former captain of the Auriga delivered to him so he can avenge *his* ex-commander's honor. It seems Auriga defeated that commander's ship in battle at one time, and this ex-commander was humiliated in the defeat."

"Marvelous," muttered Levine angrily.

"There's more. Avenger is by itself against 2 Romulan Stormbirds and a Winged Defender. If push comes to shove, it's out-matched."

Levine swung forward. "Mr. Lisle, plot a course for Outpost 4."

"No problem, Captain. Our advanced computers shouldn't have any trouble with that. As you know, they—"

"Yes, Brian, I *do* know. Just plot the course."

"Aye, Cap'." Lisle seemed slightly miffed, but Levine was in no mood for his speeches. She turned back to Peterson.

"Carol, alert Star Fleet about the situation and our change in course. Then sound yellow alert." Peterson nodded. Moments later, klaxons sounded through the dreadnought.

"Star Fleet acknowledges," came the exec's report. "They ask if you need any more backup."

"See if they can scramble us up a couple of destroyers."

"Right." With a nod, Peterson turned back to her station. Levine turned toward the helm station, where Lieutenant Kindle sat tensely.

"Joe, dearheart, have you got the course?"

"Coming through now, Captain."

"When you've got it, give me warp 14." Kindle nodded. A mo-

ment later, the Konk surged forward. Levine's intercom beeped. "Levine here."

It was Chief Engineer Flanders. "There better be a good reason for doing this to my engines," he warned.

"There is, John, there is." Levine glanced at Lieutenant Steward. Motioning toward the intercom, then pointing at the assistant chief engineer, she said, "Ms. Steward will fill you in. Bridge out."

"Stable at warp 14," Kindle reported.

"Maintain."

Rosenzweig shifted uncomfortably in his chair. His wrist-bindings made it difficult to get into any sort of decent position. Adding that to worrying about imminent death, and the admiral was left in a bad way. Still, discomfort or not, he had to do something. He cleared his throat.

"Commander." tr'Lemaln turned to gaze at him. "Why are you doing this? What purpose can it serve?"

"To ask that, Admiral, you must have little understanding of Rihannsu honor. My former commander's honor was destroyed by his loss to the Auriga. He was one to whom I had sworn *mnhei'sahe*, the Ruling Passion of Rihannsu honor. But he enjoined me not to leave the service of the Empire, even though he was not at fault for his defeat and was wrongly accused."

"I understand," said Rosenzweig quietly.

"How could you?" tr'Lemaln's voice was sharp.

"I know of the battle." At the Romulan's look, the admiral continued. "Even then, as a young man, I studied starship strategy and tactics. I learned the details that were available on many battles. This one I know very well. The key maneuver was planned to do just what it did: eliminate the capability for combat without allowing self-destruction." Rosenzweig felt like a braggart, but realized the Romulan would have no way of knowing the maneuver was his, short of a forced mind-meld. "It succeeded brilliantly."

"Yes, I'm sure the captain enjoyed his success. But that very success is why I must challenge him, for in the challenge and the combat, the dishonor will be expunged from his name." Apparently seeing frustration in Rosenzweig's eyes, he added, "Admiral, I have no personal quarrel with you. You are a tool, nothing more. But if I am to succeed in this, I must use every tool at my command."

"Commander?" tr'Lemaln turned to the communications station.

"What is it, Sub-Centurion?"

"Sir, sensor operators on the Rihan Glory have detected a Federation starship entering the area. It's still at extreme range, but they're pretty sure it's a large one. Closing fast."

"Have our ships deploy to defensive formation, weapons active but on standby. And get me more information on that ship when you have it."

"Yes, sir."

"And further, contact the Avenger again."

"Yes, Commander."

O'Rourke leaned over to Rosenzweig. "What ship could it be? And what's it doing here?"

"I wish I knew, Ensign. Depending on Captain Vosseller's and Star Fleet's response, it could be anything from a rescue vessel to the delivery of Vice Admiral Kenji for a duel."

"He'd have no chance."

"I know."

"Outpost 4 on long-range sensors," Chernesky reported.

"We're picking up considerable ship-activity around the asteroid."

"Federation?"

The acting science officer shook his head. "Uh- uh. Rom defense-pattern."

"Go to red alert," Levine ordered immediately. She glanced to weapons/defense. "Ensign Robinson, energize phasers. Arm photorps. Raise shields." Robinson nodded, her hands dancing across the console. The rapidly-flashing displays were, seconds later, counterpointed by the red alert klaxons.

"Joe, reduce speed to warp 3 as we close in. Then dump to sublight at critical range."

Kindle nodded. "Right, Captain."

Vosseller gazed levelly at the main viewer. "Commander tr'Lemaln," he said with just a trace of exasperation, "I cannot get the whole galaxy to move on command. Star Fleet has not yet responded to my urgent requests. I'm trying to meet your demands, but some things are just beyond my control."

"And the ship now approaching you?"

"It hasn't hailed us yet. When it does, I'll know what's happening."

"Captain, you have 1 hour and 15 minutes remaining."

"I don't know where the Auriga's ex-CO is! What if he's on the other side of the Federation?"

"In that case," tr'Lemaln said, "a transmission from him telling of his intent to be here will be sufficient."

"But—"

"Enough! We will speak again when we can discuss important matters." And the screen blanked. Vosseller uttered the vilest Klingon expletive he knew, drawing a shocked look from McManus. The exec shrugged.

"Bob, we're getting 2 signals. One is from Star Fleet, and the other is from the ship coming toward us. Both are coded."

"Run Star Fleet's first, then the ship's." Vosseller turned his gaze back to the main viewer. Centor hit controls, and an image of Rear Admiral Esswein appeared.

"Avenger, Star Fleet acknowledges your signal. Be advised: Vice Admiral Kenji has been alerted to the situation. He has volunteered to rendezvous with you to speak with the Romulans. The scout Phoenix, with Admiral Kenji aboard, is on its way. Also, Konkordium has reported receiving your message to them. They are on their way to you. At Captain Levine's request, the destroyers Saladin and Imbrium have been diverted to your location. If necessary, this should give you an effective combat force. Good luck. Star Fleet out."

"The sensors do show that ship as Konkordium," Lane commented from sciences.

"Good. At least, if we have to, we can kick some Rom-ass."

There was a predatory gleam in Vosseller's eye. Then he glanced at Centor. "Devorah, patch the Konk through."

"They're on, Bob." This time, it was the bridge of the Konkordium on the viewer. The pickup was aimed toward the command chair.

"Jen, thank goodness it's you," Vosseller said.

Levine nodded. "We got your message. What's your situation?"

"Not good. Alex and 2 security guards are hostages. If we don't get the Auriga's former captain here right quick, this Romulan is gonna kill them. He swore...however you pronounce it, that oath

of binding loyalty to *his* former commander, the one who lost that battle with the Auriga. He thinks that death-dueling with Kenji will restore his commander's honor."

"Well, we've practically got a battle squadron to back us up," Levine noted. "Let's try to talk to this Romulan again." She glanced at Peterson. "Carol, hail Outpost 4. Tie the Avenger into our signal."

"Aye, Captain."

"Commander, the dreadnought is hailing." tr'Lemaln turned toward the sub-centurion.

"Let us see what more there is to say," he said. "Open communication channel."

The control center viewer glowed into life, then splitscreened into dual images of Levine and Vosseller. Rosenzweig barely choked down a smile. Levine was one of the best captains around. Of course, you didn't get to be a dreadnought CO without being outstanding. If there was anyone who could get him and the security team out, it was Levine and Vosseller acting as a team.

"Romulan commander, this is Captain Jennifer Levine of the Federation starship Konkordium. We have just arrived in the area, and we bring news."

"This is Commander Hvaed tr'Lemaln. State your news."

"Admiral Kenji is on his way."

Rosenzweig jerked forward. That wasn't what he'd expected. Only a flick of Levine's glance toward him indicated her awareness of his shock.

"However," she went on, "he will not be dueling, but only speaking to you."

"You may also wish to know," added Vosseller, "that, in addition to the scout carrying Admiral Kenji, there are 2 destroyers proceeding to this location. Your previous suggestion that the Federation places little importance on the lives of your hostages is obviously wrong. Perhaps we should talk about a peaceful solution to all of this."

"Captain Vosseller is right. We now have a force substantially greater than yours," Levine commented. "You can't win a full-out battle, and where would your honor be then?"

Rosenzweig had watched as tr'Lemaln's expression changed from one of triumph and elation to anger. "Commander," he suggested, "why don't you talk to Kenji when he gets here? Honor won't be served if you single-handedly embroil the Empire in a major incident with the Federation. Remember, you've not only taken hostages, you've also violated Federation space and assaulted a Star Fleet outpost. Hostility now can only make matters worse."

tr'Lemaln gazed at him, then looked back at the screen. He nodded. "Very well. I will speak to Kenji. There *is* the possibility that he will not choose a coward's path."

"Let me remind you, Commander," Vosseller put in, "that cowardice is sometimes in the eye of the beholder."

"We'll advise you," Levine said, "when Admiral Kenji arrives. Konkordium—"

"—and Avenger—"

"—out." The screen darkened.

As the image faded and was replaced by an external view, Levine turned toward communications, where Peterson watched her with a concerned expression.

"I hope it'll be enough."

The exec nodded. "Alex is having an influence on him, though. tr'Lemaln looked like he was really listening to what Alex was telling him."

"Maybe, maybe not." Levine stood up. "But, gods, I hope you're right, Carol." The captain paced toward sciences. "Vin, can you pinpoint where the Federation hostages are on that outpost?"

"Other than the 3 in the control center?"

Levine glanced at Peterson with a look of 'Give me strength'. "Obviously," she deadpanned.

"Hold on a second." Chernesky bent to the scanners. "Yes. They're in a cargo bay on Underground Level 2. Several Romulan guards are watching them."

"You're sure those aren't Vulcans?"

"Yes. Unless last week's information uplink from the starbase was out of date already, there aren't any Vulcans assigned here."

"All right. Could we isolate those prisoners and beam them, but not the guards, out?"

"I suppose, but we can't beam through the outpost's shields."

"But if they—and we—*dropped* shields?"

"We'd have to use an emergency transporter, but it could be done."

"Okay." Levine thought for a moment. "What about dropping a strike team *in* to get Alex and those guards out?"

"The drawback to that," interjected Peterson, "is that they couldn't get into the control center fast enough to prevent the Romulans from executing the prisoners if they were so inclined."

"That's right," Levine muttered. "The control center's transporter-shielded. If we could surprise them enough..."

"Risky," said the exec.

"I know, but could it be worth it?"

Peterson shrugged.

Vosseller turned to Lane. "Jon, what's the Phoenix's ETA?"

"About 20 minutes."

"Devorah, see if you can't talk them into hustling a bit more. We need Kenji here."

"I'll try, Bob."

"Can't ask for more than that," Vosseller replied, as Centor put in her earpiece receiver and hailed the scout.

The elevator doors slid open and Commander Wilson strode onto the bridge. He stepped down next to the command chair.

"Still a standoff?"

"Uh-huh," Vosseller replied, nodding. "We're hoping that Kenji can break it when he gets here."

"Bob, what about sending in an assault team? Beam in, get Alex and the others out—"

"Their shields are still up," Lane pointed out. A tone sounded at his console, and he turned back to the scanners. "Saladin and Imbrium are arriving."

McManus turned from navigation. "One of the Stormbirds is moving."

"Commander!" A young officer turned from the sensor station. "The Predator is moving toward the 2 new Federation ships..." She paused. "Her guns are hot."

"No," muttered tr'Lemaln. He whirled to communications.

"Sub-Centurion, tell the Predator's commander to come back. Do not attack those ships!"

The sub-centurion nodded. A moment later, "No reply, sir."

"Damn."

"Sound red alert," ordered Vosseller. Palmieri keyed in the command and the klaxons went off.

"Konkordium is hailing," reported Centor. "I'm putting them on." The main viewer showed the Konk's bridge.

"Bob, this one's mine," Levine said.

"We're with you," Vosseller replied. "Let's go."

"All right," Levine acknowledged. "Keep a voice-channel open to us."

"I will, Captain," Centor responded. The screen shifted to the forward view, but the sounds of the dreadnought's bridge could still be heard.

"Captain!" Chernesky called from sciences. "The Rom is firing on the Imbrium!"

"Let's get after them," ordered Levine. "Joe, get us out there." She could hear Vosseller over the speaker, giving similar orders to Avenger's helmsman, Ensign Miller.

"Here we go," Kindle reported. There was a low hum as the impulse drives cut in, and the Konkordium was moving.

"Ms. Robinson, when we're in range, fire at will. Fire to disable, not to destroy."

"Aye, Captain."

"Paralleling Konkordium," came McManus' voice from the speakers.

"Good," Vosseller's voice replied.

"Predator is bracketed," the sensor operator told tr'Lemaln. "Destroyers ahead, Konkordium and Avenger behind."

"The fool," tr'Lemaln growled angrily. "If he'd done what he was told..."

"The Stormbird is dead ahead," Lane reported. "It's firing on Saladin now."

"Hold a straight-in course, Lill."

"Like an arrow."

"Konkordium is veering," the science officer suddenly said, incredulity coloring his tone. "Jen," he shouted at the 'com, "what are you doing?!"

"Let me see a tactical," Wilson said, leaning over a side-console. Lane put up the display on a small viewer.

Noticing that Levine hadn't answered him, Lane shouted again, "Jen! What the hell are you doing? Answer me!"

"No, wait!" Wilson exclaimed. Lane looked at him. "I see what she's doing. Nice."

"Ha!" came Levine's voice over the speaker. Wilson grinned.

"Now!" Levine ordered. "Starboard, then fire!"

"Aye, Captain."

"Firing!" On the viewer, the Avenger's bridge crew watched the Konkordium swing to the right and rake the battle cruiser's port side with phaser fire.

"Fire torpedoes, same area," commanded Vosseller.

"Firing," said Palmieri. Two photon torpedoes, glowing red from their force-fields, raced out of the Avenger's tubes. Explosions blossomed near the Romulan vessel. A bright flash mutely told of a collapsed deflector.

Then Konkordium was diving below the battle cruiser, topside phasers drilling into the ship's underside. Beyond it, the dreadnought slowed and swung around. The Stormbird drifted.

"That's it," reported Lane. "She's disabled. Nice maneuvers, Jen."

"You shouldn't doubt me so much," Levine's voice answered him.

"We got the self-destruct mechanism, too!" shouted an excited Chernesky. "This baby is *ours*!"

"Move in, Joe," said Levine. "But be *careful*. Ensign Robinson, keep the shields up."

Kindle nodded, and Robinson added, "You bet, Captain."

Levine grinned. Touching her intercom control, she leaned back. "Engineering. John, how's everything down there?"

"Just fine, Captain. Was it my imagination, or did they never lay a glove on us?"

"Not once. We scored all the touches. Get the tractors ready." She looked up. "Bob? You want to flank this bird on the other side so we can bring it back to its friends?"

"You got it," said Vosseller. He glanced toward engineering. "Ready the tractor beam, Mr. Van Natta."

"Aye, sir," the engineer replied.

"Engage." Ghostly, blue beams of light sprang from the Avenger and Konkordium, to envelope the Rihannsu vessel.

"Got it, sir," Van Natta reported.

"Locked tight," came Steward's voice from the dreadnought.

"Good," Levine's voice replied. "Set return course to the out-post."

"Aye, Captain," said Lisle. "It'll be a tricky problem to balance all 3 ships, but the computers'll have—"

"Brian," Levine said, "just plot the course."

"All right, all right."

McManus glanced at Vosseller, who could see she was both checking for his approval to do the same and trying to avoid laughing at the Konk's nav-officer. Vosseller nodded and grinned. McManus turned back to her console.

"They're bringing the Predator back," reported the sensor operator. "It's torn up pretty badly, but only a few casualties." She paused. "Commander tr'Strelhen is not one of them."

"Well, he should be," growled tr'Lemaln. "Damn fool."

Rosenzweig leaned forward. "So what's all this gotten you? *More* unprovoked action against Federation starships, hostilities intensified, *another* commander whose honor is in the waste-recycler... *Your* former commander's honor certainly hasn't been served by any of this. More likely it's been further tarnished. Would he have condoned all this? I don't think so. And if he wouldn't, neither...should...you."

tr'Lemaln stared at him. Clearly, the words had cut deep. He sat down heavily on a nearby chair and turned away from the others. After several long minutes, he looked back at them. "Kenji and I will talk." He turned to the communications station. "Sub-Centurion, hail the scout. I want to talk to Admiral Kenji as soon as can be arranged."

"Yes, Commander."

On the bridge of the Phoenix, the communications officer turned from his console. "Captain, the Romulans are hailing from Outpost 4."

Captain Thuden turned to Vice Admiral Kenji, who stood next to the command chair. "Are you ready to talk to them, sir?"

Kenji nodded. "Very well. But patch in the Avenger and the Konkordium to the signal. They must be aware of the discussions."

Thuden turned to the communications station. "Do it, Lieuten-

ant."

"Aye, sir." Moments later, viewers on 3 starship bridges and the outpost's control center split-screened into triple images.

"Commander tr'Lemaln, this is Vice Admiral Kenji of Star Fleet Command. You seem to have gone to a great deal of trouble to speak to me. Here I am."

"Hello, Admiral Kenji. You commanded the U.S.S. Auriga once, did you not?"

"A long time ago," the admiral replied. Rosenzweig, out of pickup range, watched the images of Kenji and the Phoenix' Andorian captain, Levine, and Vosseller. After 18 years, his former CO's black hair was just beginning to show the first flecks of gray. But the serenity with which Kenji had always faced everything was still there.

"18 years ago," said tr'Lemaln.

"Yes."

"Do you remember a battle with a Romulan vessel? Near a collapsar, what you sometimes call a 'black hole'?"

"Yes, as it happens, I do."

"You will recall that you were victorious in that battle."

"Yes, I was."

"What you may recall was that you made it impossible to self-destruct our damaged vessel."

"Really?" Kenji paused. "'Our'?"

"I was on that ship. Admiral, my former commander was disgraced, his honor destroyed. I had sworn *mnhei'sahe* to him, and asked for you here as part of that."

"Perhaps," said the Oriental, "we should speak face to face."

At that, Rosenzweig jumped up. He knew he was in pickup range, because Kenji—for once—indicated surprise, and Levine, Vosseller, and Lane all gave him expressions of startlement.

"Admiral Kenji, with respect, sir, are you nuts?"

"Well, Mr. Rosenzweig," Kenji replied. "I was wondering where tr'Lemaln had you hidden. Where are your security guards?"

"Here, with me."

"Good. I see you are a rear admiral now. And I've never known you to be insubordinate before."

Rosenzweig flushed, but held Kenji's gaze. "If need be, I can. Sir, I don't think it's a good idea at all for you to beam over here."

"Oh, you don't think I'm coming alone, do you?"

That drew tr'Lemaln's attention back to Kenji.

"Sir?" asked Rosenzweig.

"Commander tr'Lemaln, I am not here to duel with you. I am no fool, and I am not Rihannsu. You should realize I would have no chance." Rosenzweig began to relax. Perhaps Kenji *hadn't* blown a microchip. "I will beam across to discuss the situation with you...in the process of your returning control of this outpost to its proper crew, releasing your hostages—" And he pointed at Rosenzweig. "—and withdrawing your personnel and ships. If you do all that, we may yet prevent this from becoming any bigger an incident than it already is."

tr'Lemaln paused, and Rosenzweig seized the opportunity to drive a point home. "Commander, Vice Admiral Kenji is handing you an *honorable* way out of this. You know that dragging this out isn't helping you. At least you brought him here. He's on that ship right here, not standing in an office back at Headquarters. Take pride in that."

"He's right, Commander," Vosseller said. Levine nodded.

tr'Lemaln looked at Rosenzweig, then the viewer, then each of his crew in turn. Only the sub-centurion moved. He nodded an af-

firmative. The commander slumped, trying not to look defeated.

"Very well. I will accept your offer."

"One thing," said Levine. "There will be other command officers accompanying the admiral."

"In that case," put in Vosseller, "we should have a security squad along."

"Bring one from each ship," said Rosenzweig. He tried again to shift positions, for the binders chafed his wrists. "And Commander," he added to tr'Lemaln, "why not free us from these—" He held up his arms, indicating his binders. "—as a gesture of good faith?" tr'Lemaln nodded, and several of the guards released the admiral, O'Rourke, and Brugmans. "That's better. Thank you."

"I will beam across in 10 minutes," Kenji announced, "assuming you lower the outpost's deflectors." tr'Lemaln nodded again, and the tech at the defense station did so. "Thank you."

"Carol and I will be down with our security team in 10 minutes, then," said Levine.

"I'll join you with ours," Vosseller added.

"No, you won't, Bob," directed Rosenzweig. "I want the exec with the ship, just in case. Send Jon down."

"Okay, Alex." Vosseller looked frustrated, but followed the order.

"I am closing the channel," tr'Lemaln said. "I will see you shortly." The sub-centurion hit a switch and the screen darkened.

Vosseller swung toward Wilson and Lane. "Tom, put a team of 5 together. Jon, you heard the order. On your way."

"I'm going, Bob. Just relax." Lane stood up, and Ensign Conigliaro replaced him at sciences. Then he joined Wilson at the turbo-lift.

Levine glanced at Peterson, who nodded. As she activated her intercom, the captain could hear the exec summoning Lieutenant McDermott to the bridge. She turned her attention to her own call.

"Levine to security."

"Security. Macchio here."

"Ramona, get a security squad to the main transporter room. Carol and I will meet them there."

"Aye, aye, Captain. Macchio out."

"Levine out." She touched the switch twice. "Levine to Ops Chief Hagen."

"Hagen here."

"Sara, Carol and I are beaming over to the outpost. You'll have the con. Get up here."

"Okay, Jen. I'm coming."

"Good." Levine switched off the intercom, then glanced at the helm. "Joe, the bridge is yours 'til Sara gets here." She stood up and headed for the lift. "Come on, Carol."

Peterson fell into step with Levine. The turbo-lift doors slid open, and the captain and exec were off the bridge.

Lane reached the transporter room and stuck his head into the operator's booth, where Ensigns Horn and Goldschmidt were prepping the equipment. "All set?" he asked.

"Just about," Horn replied.

"Commander McHenry and her team are on their way," added Goldschmidt.

The doors slid open. "In fact..." said Horn.

"Here they are," finished Lane. McHenry trooped in, 4 security specialists behind her. The science officer took the phaser, communicator, and tricorder that Goldschmidt handed him and joined the security team on the platform. "Tie me in to the bridge."

Horn nodded. A second later, "Bridge. Vosseller here."

"Bob," asked Lane, "is Admiral Kenji ready?"

After a moment, Vosseller replied, "Phoenix says yes."

"Okay. Thanks." Lane shifted his gaze to Horn. "Ensign, you may energize." The transporter specialist nodded. Both men worked controls, and the landing party was swept up in a mass of glowing light. It soon faded, taking the 6 crewmembers with it.

In the corridor outside the outpost control center, Vice Admiral Kenji and an aide materialized. Seconds later, Levine and the Konkordium team arrived, followed by Lane and the group from the Avenger.

"Admiral Kenji," Levine said, "hello. A pleasure to meet you, sir." Kenji shook hands with both captains. Levine turned to Lane. "It's been a while, Jon."

"How've you been?"

"Okay. You know, your CO's been a real sweetheart, helping me through the bureaucracy with the Konk."

"He's been keeping me up to date."

"Really?"

"Uh-huh."

McHenry came up to them. "Security teams are coordinated, Captains. Should we go in?"

Lane turned to Kenji. "Admiral?"

"Let's go." The vice admiral strode toward the doors. The others followed.

tr'Lemaln turned as the doors slid apart. Through them walked Kenji, Levine, Lane, and the others. McHenry and Ensign Sparrow headed straight for O'Rourke and Brugmans, while Lane, Levine, and Peterson walked across to where Rosenzweig stood. Kenji moved in measured steps to face the Rihanssu, flanked by his aide and the remaining security personnel from Avenger and Konkordium.

An amused Rosenzweig, watching this procession enter the room, abruptly found himself with a warm armful of Levine. After a startled instant, he returned the hug, arms tightening around the captain. Then he released her, as Lane gripped his shoulders. "Alex, I'm glad you're okay," the science officer said. Jon's tone and the look on his face told Alex how his friend felt. Lane let him go, and he gripped Jon's hand. Then he looked beyond Lane, to where Peterson stood nearby.

"Glad you could make it," he said with a smile. Levine's hand caught his, and their fingers briefly interlaced. Rosenzweig gave the captain's hand a squeeze, then looked to where Kenji stood by tr'Lemaln.

"I'd say the hostages are glad to be free," the Romulan said.

"Indeed they are," said Kenji. "Now, what about the outpost's crew?"

"First, though, tell me about the battle."

"You seem to think I saw it as some sort of glorious act of heroism, sullied only by a refusal to honorably destroy you in battle." Kenji shook his head. "It wasn't. For a while, it was questionable whether we would even survive. The maneuver which allowed us to evade your vessel wasn't even my idea. We were, in my view, just plain lucky. I would have preferred to escape without inflicting dam-

age, but your commander made it impossible to do that. I'm sorry for his humiliation, but we had to defend ourselves."

"Then why didn't you let him—and the rest of us—die honorably by destroying us."

"Because we don't believe in destroying a helpless enemy."

Kenji glanced at the body of Ensign Bartynski, which the security squad was carrying out of the control center so the Avenger could recover it. "Now, Commander tr'Lemaln, we would appreciate it if you would release the outpost's crew."

tr'Lemaln nodded. "Very well. Lieutenant," he told a guard, "release the crew of the outpost. Bring the control staff here."

"McHenry," Rosenzweig said to the security officer, "leave 2 guards here. Take everyone else and see to it that the release is handled suitably." McHenry nodded and led the security teams after the Rihanssu. Turning back to tr'Lemaln, the admiral added, "Oh, and I think my team and I would appreciate our equipment back." tr'Lemaln pointed at the equipment case. Peterson pulled out the phasers and communicators and handed them back to Rosenzweig, O'Rourke, and Brugmans.

Soon afterward, the command crew of Outpost 4 walked back into the room. The outpost's commander walked across to Rosenzweig and Kenji.

"Thanks, Admirals. I'm Lt. Commander Garcia, and I can't tell you how grateful I am for what you've done."

"No thanks are necessary," Kenji said.

"We did what any ships and crews would have done," Lane said.

"Well, we appreciate it." Garcia extended his hand, and Rosenzweig shook it.

"And that covers 2 of the conditions I set down," pronounced Kenji, as he turned back to tr'Lemaln. "The third was your withdrawal. Are you prepared?"

"I'll see them off," said Rosenzweig. He accompanied the Rihanssu to the doorway. As they stepped into the hall, he waited within the control center. "Goodbye, Commander. Perhaps we will meet again, under happier circumstances."

"For you, perhaps," the Rihanssu said. "For me, that is doubtful. Goodbye." tr'Lemaln raised his communicator. "Rihan Glory, this is tr'Lemaln. Beam us aboard."

"Affirmative, Commander." And the Rihanssu vanished in showers of sparks.

As Rosenzweig came back to the group, Kenji was talking to the Phoenix. "I will be ready to beam up in a moment. I will signal you at that time." He closed the communicator. "And we seem to have resolved this problem."

"Thanks for coming, Admiral," said Rosenzweig.

"I gather you didn't tell them the truth about that battle."

"Course not."

"The truth?" Levine asked. "What do you mean?"

"Yes," Kenji replied. "You'll recall I told the commander that the maneuver which ensured our victory wasn't my idea." Levine nodded.

"Actually," Rosenzweig explained, "it was mine."

"Oh, gods."

"Yeah. If I had, or anyone else had, told the truth, I would've been a dead man." Rosenzweig's communicator beeped, and he flipped it open. "Rosenzweig here."

"Alex, it's Bob. The Romulan ships just warped out."

"Excellent. Bob, stand by. I'm sending the security team home."

"Okay."

"Ms. McHenry, take our security people back to Avenger."

"Aye, Admiral." She led them out.

"They should be calling in a second, Avenger. Rosenzweig out."

As he closed his communicator, the admiral noted that Levine had done the same with her team.

"Alex," she asked, "why don't you and Jon come aboard the Konk for a while? Have some coffee or something."

"Make it tea and you're on," Rosenzweig replied.

"Done," Levine said.

The starship officers bid farewell to the outpost's crew. As they headed for the door, Garcia walked after them.

"Admiral? Captain?" Rosenzweig and Levine turned. "A request, if I may?"

"Ask away," Rosenzweig replied.

"Do you have some new entertainment tapes you could downlink to us?"

The Avenger's CO laughed. "Sure. Just call our communications officer. She'll take care of you."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome. Goodbye."

Later, in the Konkordium's officers' lounge, Rosenzweig, Lane, Levine, and Peterson sat on couches. Rosenzweig was watching the stars, as Lane and Levine discussed a recent scientific journal. Peterson stood up and stepped over to the large clearsteel ports. The admiral joined her.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he said. She glanced at him.

"Yes, it is."

"There're times when I can just stand on the observation deck on Avenger, watching the stars slip past the ship, and lose myself in the depths of space."

Peterson looked at him. "I read about a term for that once: the 'Thousand Light-Year Stare'."

"I read about it, too. I've been totally captivated by space since I was old enough to understand what it was. It was just natural that I should go into Star Fleet."

"I can understand that."

"You're here, too, right?" They both laughed, understanding their common affinity for space exploration.

"Hey, Alex," said Levine. Both Rosenzweig and Peterson turned toward the captain, and the admiral took a step in her direction.

"What is it, Jen?"

"You know, when you go back to the Avenger, you have to tell your first what a nice job he did with your ship. There was some nice maneuvering going on in that battle out there."

"Well, from what I could see and hear on the outpost, you didn't do half-bad yourself with the Konk. That dive under the Predator was perfect."

"Hmm." Levine looked thoughtful for a second. Then she trained her gaze on Rosenzweig, a suspiciously impish sparkle in her eye. "Maybe we should trade ships for a while."

Rosenzweig didn't always know what to expect from Levine, but for darned certain he didn't expect *that*, even kiddingly. Reacting instinctively, he gave her a raised right eyebrow, Vulcan-style. As he did so, he noticed that Peterson had done the same thing, almost simultaneously. She had also caught the simultaneous reac-

tion, and gave him a smile of understanding. Rosenzweig returned it.

Levine, meanwhile, beat a hasty, if figurative, retreat from the dual-eyebrow onslaught. "Okay, okay, forget I said it."

"Said what?" asked the admiral, his expression all innocence. Lane pantomimed throwing something at him.

Just then, the intercom chimed. Levine reached over and tapped the switch. "Yes?"

"McDermott here, Captain. We received a transmission from Star Fleet. Vice Admiral Kenji has re-reported in and the Phoenix is bringing him back to his post. We're ordered to return to Starbase 7 for re-assignment. The Avenger will return to the mapping-run."

"Very well," Levine replied.

"Captain, we also got a call *from* the Avenger. Captain Vosseller wants to know when Admiral Rosenzweig and Captain Lane are beaming back over."

Rosenzweig threw up his hands and leaned forward. "Lieutenant, this is Rosenzweig. Tell Captain Vosseller we'll be back in 10 minutes."

"Aye, sir."

"Thank you."

"Officers' Lounge out," said Levine. She hit the switch and stood up. "I guess we'd better go."

"I don't want to," Rosenzweig answered, "but you're right." They headed for the door.

In the transporter room, Ensign J'det stood in the operator's booth. The Caitian flicked his tail in irritation. This duty was boring! But somebody had to monitor the equipment.

The doors slid open. J'det glanced up, then came to attention. "Captain Levine!"

"Hello, Ensign. Ready the transporter, please."

"Yes, ma'am. You'rre beaming somewhere?"

"Not exactly," said Peterson. She motioned to Rosenzweig and Lane. "Our guests are going home."

"Oh. Back to Avengerrr, Admirrral?"

"Correct, Ensign."

"Yes, sirrr. No prrrroblem at all."

"Good." The admiral turned back to Levine. "Jen, thanks for the hospitality. As always, it's been fun."

"Shut up and come here," Levine responded. Rosenzweig stepped closer, and she pulled him into a hug. He returned it warmly.

"Next time, you have to come to Avenger," he whispered.

"I will." She let him go and turned to Lane. "And you take it easy, too, Mr. Science Officer." They also shared a quick hug.

The admiral, meanwhile, had turned to Peterson. "Take care, Carol. Don't let Jen do anything crazy."

"Never," the Konk's exec assured him. "Stay safe yourself."

"I will try." They shook hands.

Rosenzweig and Lane mounted the platform and turned back to the others. Levine and Peterson had stepped into the booth.

"Energize when ready," the admiral said.

"Yes, sirrr," acknowledged J'det. "Enerrrgizing."

Lane and Rosenzweig were enveloped in masses of blue-white light and dissolved with it to nothingness.

The turbo-lift doors slid open and Rosenzweig and Lane strode onto the Avenger's bridge. Conigliaro quickly handed control of sciences back to Lane, and Vosseller stood up as Rosenzweig reas-

sumed the center seat. The 2 shook hands.

"It's good to have you back, Alex."

"Thanks, Bob. It's good to *be* back. Status report?"

"Just fine. All systems operational."

"Good."

Centor swung around from communications. "Star Fleet's ordered us back onto the mapping mission. They say, 'Good job. Now relax.'"

"Alex?" Rosenzweig turned.

"What is it, Jon?"

"Konkordium is pulling out."

"Thanks." He swung forward. "Put them on screen, Ensign Miller."

"On viewer, sir." The dreadnought's image shrank as it accelerated away from them. The admiral watched it go. When it had become one with the stars, he glanced at the exec.

"All stations secured for departure?"

"All ready, Alex."

"Outstanding. Lill, plot a course back to 3SH-8-14."

"Already plotted, sir." Rosenzweig grinned at her.

"Even better. Very well, then." He focused on the helmsman.

"Ensign, set warp factor 5."

"Warp 5, aye, sir."

"Engage engines. Take us out."

"Engaging." A hum ran through the ship as the powerful warp engines cut in. Miller worked controls, and the heavy frigate flashed into hyper-space.

"Warp 5, sir."

"Good. Maintain." Rosenzweig leaned back, watching the viewer. He thumbed the log control.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8710.29:

The crisis is over. Commander tr'Lemaln and his compatriots are returning to Rihannsu space, and Outpost 4 is secure. Thanks to impressive teamwork, a major incident has been averted. Now, I look forward to the completion of our mapping assignment, and I wish all of our missions could wrap up so neatly. End entry."

He keyed off the log. "And there we have it." He gazed back into the viewer, watching the stars. The Avenger sped onward.

**...AND THE ADVENTURE CONTINUES...**

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SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS:

I am indebted to Carol Peterson for her editorial assistance and astute insights on how to improve this work.

I am further indebted to Jonathan Lane, who added his own unique brand of editorial critique to this work, and helped me make it even better.

To both Carol and Jon, my thanks.--AR