

CRASH

By Alex Rosenzweig

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9311.10:

The Avenger is in the Ohkirot Star System, near the Federation border. Our mission is to conduct a general survey, following up on the initial charting run done a few years ago by the scout U.S.S. Shepard. All is quiet on board, although the Sciences staff are collecting virtually reams of new data. Ohkirot is a Type K yellow-orange star, with seven planets and two asteroid belts. The second planet is Class M, but possesses no intelligent life."

Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig sat back in his ready room chair and focused his gaze on his desktop viewer. The screen displayed a dispatch from Star Fleet Command. According to the dispatch, a number of new vessel classes were being proposed. The Bureau of Spacecraft was circulating information on these proposals to various experienced officers around the Fleet for feedback regarding the utility of these designs. Rosenzweig had been a little surprised to be included on that list, despite his study in recent years of various facets of Fleet resource development, strategy and tactics, and deployment concepts. Then he saw the tag at the end of the dispatch.

The tag was from one of the other technical specialists with whom Alex had worked: Commodore Chris Wallace. Wallace was currently working with Star Fleet R & D, and was involved in a number of cutting-edge projects, although many remained highly secret. He'd written: "Don't say I never do anything for you. You're on the list. Let me know what you think." Alex smiled and entered a note to himself to be sure to cc his comments to Wallace.

Looking at the information, the Admiral decided that he wanted some additional opinions. He sent messages to Commanders Padovan and DiMaio, appending copies of the files Star Fleet had sent and asking them for their thoughts, as well.

Just as he completed the information-dump, there was a chime at the ready room door.

"Come," Rosenzweig said. He looked up as the door slid open. Commander Johnson stood in the entryway. Alex waved the exec in. "Hi, Bill. What's up?"

"Just a few reports that need your signature," Johnson announced cheerfully, handing Rosenzweig the padd he was carrying.

"Hmph," responded the Admiral, thinking about the bureaucratism that still awaited his attention. "I see that you've been making good use of your time."

Johnson was unfazed. "I can't be looking over Judi's shoulder all the time," he said. Johnson had once been in the Sciences Division, and still had a great interest in all things scientific. That he spent a great deal of time working with Chief Science Officer DiMaio was no secret, and there seemed little doubt that if Bill hadn't moved onto the Command track as exec, he might yet seek to be a Science Officer. As it was, one of his goals was to meld the two roles as the CO of a science vessel. Rosenzweig knew another officer who had done just that: Stephen Penik had been a good friend back at the Academy, and was now the CO of the U.S.S. Leonov, a Gagarin-class vessel.

"True," Rosenzweig answered. He signed the reports that Johnson had loaded into the padd's memory and handed it back to the Executive Officer. "Done."

"Thank you, sir. I'll see that these are sent right out."

"Thanks, Bill." Johnson smiled and departed. Rosenzweig leaned back in his chair. "Computer," he began, "access music—" He never got the rest out. The intercom chimed. Alex sighed. "Cancel command," he told the computer. Getting an acknowledgment, he reached out and tapped the 'com control. "Rosenzweig here."

"Ensign 1st Class Elkins, sir. There's a transmission for you from Star Fleet Headquarters."

"Thank you, Ensign. I'll take it here. Send it through."

"Aye, sir." A moment later, Rosenzweig's viewer lit with an image of Vice Admiral Wyatt, the Star Fleet Chief of Operations.

"Hello, Alex. How are you?"

"Pretty good, Terry. How are things with yourself?"

"Not bad, not bad. I'm calling with what looks like good news." He leaned forward. "There has been a diplomatic breakthrough in the negotiations with the Daltexi. For the first time, they've agreed to a parley on the subject of expanding relations with the Federation."

"That's excellent news," Rosenzweig said, remembering the harrowing run to Ahlyar earlier in the year.¹

"We're pretty happy with it," Wyatt concurred. "A conference is being put together on Parliament even as we speak to formalize this progress." Parliament had just recently been opened as the Federation's second major neutral/diplomatic planet, joining Babel in that role. "The specific reason that I called, though, is that the Avenger is being called into service to ferry several Federation ambassadors to this conference. You'll be joined in this by the starships Hood, Guardian, and America."

"Four ships?" queried Rosenzweig. "That's one heckuva display of power...and a lot of ambassadors."

"That's true," Wyatt answered, "but we believe, based on our understanding of the Daltexi psyche, that they will respond very well to such a demonstration of the Federation's seriousness in these negotiations." After a pause, Wyatt continued, "Meet me at Starbase 29 in two days. Wyatt out." The image blanked, to be replaced by the Star Fleet insignia and the legend, "TRANSMISSION TERMINATED".

Rosenzweig leaned back again and looked up at the ceiling, just as Wonder popped in and hovered over Alex's head. "Y'know, Wonder," the Vice Admiral told his fire-lizard, "I hate diplomatic missions." Wonder reacted by promptly vanishing. "You do, too, don't you?"

A few moments later, Rosenzweig stepped out of the turbo-lift and onto the bridge. He walked down to the command chair and just looked at it for a moment. Then he looked up. "I'm afraid I've got bad news."

"Uh-oh," said Ensign Rupprecht from the Propulsion station.

¹Ref. "The Gauntlet".

Alex afforded him barely a glance. "I just spoke to Vice Admiral Wyatt at Star Fleet Operations. We have new orders. We are to report to Starbase 29 to pick up several Federation ambassadors. They will be transported to Parliament for a major conference to be held with the Daltexi on the topic of expanding relations with the Federation."

From where he sat at the Sciences station, Commander Maldonado looked up with an expression of frustration. He exchanged glances with Johnson.

The exec spoke. "Admiral, we could lose a great deal of potentially useful information on this system if we simply depart without completing certain observations. The Sciences staff," he added, "won't be happy about this."

"I empathize," Rosenzweig replied, "but Vice Admiral Wyatt's orders did not leave much room for...interpretation. We are expected to be there."

Second Officer Fillmore was seated at the Mission Ops 2 station. He had listened quietly to the exchange. "Pity," he said, "that we can't be in two places at once." Then he paused. "Wait! Maybe we can. Why not leave a team in a shuttlecraft to continue the survey. Then Avenger can play ferryboat all Star Fleet wants us to, without us losing valuable data."

Maldonado enthusiastically seconded the idea. "That's great. Gods know we don't get to use the shuttles that much, and rarely to such good advantage." He grinned. "I'll volunteer to pilot. I assume that we'd be using the Talisman?"

"It is the largest shuttle," Johnson replied, "and really the only one large enough for such a task."

"Agreed," said Rosenzweig. "But I'd better make sure this passes muster with Admiral Wyatt. If we go off half-cocked and he decides this is fouling his conference plans, he won't be happy." He swiveled to the Communications station. "Ensign Elkins, get us back in touch with Vice Admiral Wyatt."

"Aye, sir," Elkins responded.

As the Comm-Specialist turned to the console, Fillmore looked at Rosenzweig. "What do you think he'll say, sir?"

"Well, I'm generally not a betting man," Alex replied, "but I'd say the odds are pretty good. Terry's not known to be a hard-ass."

It turned out that Alex's guess was right. Wyatt had no problem with the concept, pointing out that the Avenger would only be needed for a week or so, perhaps eight days. This was well within the operating range of the Talisman, and would not pose a difficulty. Wyatt had only one specification. He looked into his viewer pick-up and smiled. "Alex, you cannot assign yourself to the team on the shuttle. **You** are needed here, and so is your exec. Sorry."

Rosenzweig was too pleased that the idea had been accepted to argue with Wyatt. It didn't hurt that he hadn't been planning to put himself on the shuttle to begin with. "I understand, sir," he replied. "Not a difficulty. I do not expect that this should cause any delays in our arrival at the base."

"Good. Best of luck to your shuttle team, then, and I'll see you in a couple of days. Out." The screen blanked, and Alex turned a triumphant grin on the bridge crew. He shook hands with Johnson.

"Okay. Bill, call down to Lieutenant Wilson and have her begin prepping the Talisman for this mission."

"Aye, sir," Johnson replied. He moved quickly to the Mission Ops 1 station and tapped the intercom control.

Upon hearing Johnson's orders and explanation, Wilson acknowledged and promptly volunteered to go herself. Alex glanced at Carlos, who nodded.

"I'll need a pilot to stand opposite shifts with me," he noted.

"Then it's agreed," Alex replied. "Lieutenant, you'll go as second pilot." He paused. "Or...maybe you'll go as first pilot and Carlos will be second pilot."

"I like that much better," was Amy's reply, while Carlos feigned indignation.

Commander DiMaio was brought into the loop to choose the Sciences team. After a brief discussion between herself and Maldonado, the group slowly took shape. Maldonado would be aboard as mission commander and scientist, as well as piloting the Talisman. Lt. Commander Rhonda E. Green was selected as an additional scientist. Ensigns Harris, Hart, and Gauthier—a meteorologist, an astronomer, and a geologist, respectively—would be the specialist team. Lieutenant Wilson would be the designated pilot. Also on board would be Lt. Commander Kris Ragan, both as communications officer and due to her Sciences background. Finally, Ensign Karl Brandt was assigned from Security...just in case.

"Why are we going to need a Security Specialist if we're just going to be flying around the system in the Talisman?" wondered Wilson.

"He'll be there just in case you have need of him, if you do choose to land, or if something unexpected happens," Johnson replied. His own time as a Security Chief had left him with a strong sense of the need for preparedness.

The work on the Talisman progressed very smoothly. Under Wilson's direction, the shuttle was outfitted as a full mobile laboratory, along with providing crew support. She was loaded with enough supplies for a two-week flight, in case the Avenger was delayed in getting back.

The night before the Talisman was scheduled to launch, Rosenzweig and Commander Re'ming'ton threw a small send-off party in the holographic simulation area. Tables and chairs were arranged, and appropriate imagery was produced by the holographic projectors, giving the appearance of a beach at sunset. "One of my finer creations," commented Re'ming'ton.

The party was well-attended, with many of the crew at least stopping in for a brief time. Everyone had good wishes for the crew, and there were not a few expressions of envy for those who would get to stay and explore, rather than play nursemaid to a bunch of ambassadors.

After a few hours, though, the party began to wind down. Finally, there were just a few crewmembers standing around and talking. Rosenzweig stood up from the table where he had been talking to Captain Lane, just before Lane had gone to bed. Surreptitiously stretching, the Vice Admiral looked around. Klufas and Ragan had disappeared. Maldonado and Re'ming'ton were in a corner of the room, paying only minimal attention to either their crewmates or the holograms. Lieutenant Bush was shoosing Lt. Commander Zulkowski and Commander Padovan outside, where their boisterous conversation would be less disturbing. Noticing Alex's gaze, the Head Nurse shrugged slightly. His mouth quirked slightly in response, and he inclined his head in more formal acknowledgment.

Then he saw Lt. Commander Green standing by herself, sipping a yellow-orange drink and watching the holographic sunset. She looked pensive, and maybe just a little disturbed. The mantle of privacy that Green wrapped around herself had become almost legend on the Avenger, even from her earlier tour on the ship as a navigator, and it seemed very much in place now. Even in a room

full of people, Green could seem very much alone when she chose. After watching for a moment, he decided that, mantle of privacy or no, she might...just might...want to talk. He walked over to her.

"Good evening," he said cheerfully.

Rhonda turned to look at him. "Admiral."

"You looked alone."

Green gave him an odd, slightly amused look. She glanced to her left and right. "Yes, I suppose so."

Alex sighed. "Let me try this again. You looked like you have something on your mind. I wondered if you might want to talk about it."

Rhonda looked at him for a moment, as if debating her response, and maybe whether she could get away with refusing to answer. She evidently decided that she couldn't...or wouldn't. "Sir, I'm wondering why I was assigned to this mission. As far as I've been made aware, there's no intelligent life in this system to have a language, so I don't see the point of having a linguist on board the shuttle." She paused for just a moment, then continued. As she went on, a hint of frustration leaked out. "Sir, do you know what I'm going to be on this flight? A record-keeper. If that's what you want, why not send a yeoman?"

Alex thought for a moment. Then he took a deep breath.

"Look," he began, "linguistics may be your specialty, but it's obviously not all you're capable of doing. If you **were** that limited, you'd never have gotten through the Academy. One advantage of Star Fleet service is the broad experience it provides. This is exactly the kind of assignment that will get you that kind of experience. Take it as an opportunity. You're going to be part of what I think will be a superb working group. Don't cut yourself off from that just because the mission isn't quite in your specialty-range." He smiled at her. "Something you might not know: I came up through the ranks in the sciences. I was an astrophysicist, with planetology for a sideline. You wouldn't want to count how many assignments I had that had little or nothing to do with space science. I was expected to use my mind, my ability to think, to be effective. It's the same for you. As the mission proceeds, just use your mind. Contribute your ideas, even if it's a situation not in your specialty." Then he looked sharply at her, his expression almost challenging. "And you can't tell me you're not capable of intelligent speculation. I know much better than that." Pausing, he seemed to stare into mid-air for a moment. Then a smile lit his face. He crooked a finger at her. "Come on."

"Where?" Rhonda asked, a hint of suspicion in her voice.

"Just come," Alex said simply. He headed for the exit, as if he had no doubt that she would follow. Curious, she did.

The Vice Admiral led Green out of the holo simulation area and around the upper level of Main Rec. At the forward viewports, he stopped. Hitting the control to open the port, he waited for the cover to slide open, then pointed out. Green let her gaze follow the direction of his finger.

"There's just stars," she said.

"Just stars," Alex echoed. He looked at her, then returned his gaze outside. "Commander, whatever else goes on in all this universe, remember that that—" and he emphasized the stars shining outside the ship, "—is what's important. All of us together, we're part of the greatest adventure in Human history. We've all got a role to play, and sometimes we get to play it in unexpected ways."

He stopped speaking, and for a few long moments they just stood and looked at the stars. Finally, Rhonda spoke.

"I suppose we should go back."

Alex shrugged slightly, though what that shrug connoted Rhonda wasn't sure. She had resolved not to get caught up in the "gosh-wow" aspects of Alex's speech, and if there were in fact elements of it that she could take to heart, it was almost a game not to let him know it. Someone had to stay pragmatic.

Then Rosenzweig acquiesced, gesturing for Green to precede him back to the party. As she started back, she noticed him take one more long look at the stars before the port cover slid closed.

It was late. The party was essentially over. Rosenzweig ordered the shuttle crew off to bed to get some sleep prior to the scheduled launch in a few hours. Re'ming'ton left Lieutenant Hennings in charge of cleaning up, with several of the Recreation med techs helping, and departed with Maldonado. As the last of the "guests" left, Alex headed for the door. Bidding the rec crew good night, he departed, bound for his own cabin.

By the beginning of Alpha Shift, the Talisman was fully prepped and loaded. With all personnel on board, Maldonado and Wilson ran through the final preflight check-sequence. Finally, Lieutenant J.G. Hijiruch, up in the Flight Control room, announced, "You're almost obnoxiously ready. I'm clearing you for departure."

Gracefully, the Talisman lifted from the deck of the portside hangar bay, as Jay brought down the gravity and Carlos powered up the thrusters. With just a light touch on the engine controls, he guided the shuttle out of the bay.

Once they were clear, Wilson reported that all systems were continuing to function well. The course was set for the nearest planet, and the shuttlecraft accelerated away from the Avenger.

As the shuttle image shrank on the main viewer, Rosenzweig sat back in the command chair. "View forward, please," he requested. The viewer image switched, and Rosenzweig glanced down slightly at the helmsman and navigator. "Mr. Smith, set course for Starbase 29. Mr. Wells, take us to terminal range, then go to warp factor five."

"Warp five, aye," Wells responded.

The hum of the impulse drives increased, and the Avenger accelerated away from Ohkirot.

As the Avenger receded into the distance, the crew of the Talisman turned their attention to their task. They set a course for the nearest of Ohkirot's planets, a gas giant that looked very similar to Neptune in the Sol System. Reaching it, they established a standard orbit and began atmospheric analysis. In this case, the planet's atmosphere was more purple than Neptune's, but it seemed that the constituents were much the same. Unlike Neptune, Ohkirot VI did not have even a ring fragment.

The study of Ohkirot VI was relatively straightforward, and did not take long. What the crew found was a world that was almost textbook in its form and structure. There were no anomalies to speak of, and the only variations were in a few percentages of gases in the atmospheric mix. Within a couple of hours, Ensigns Harris and Gauthier both reported that they were ready to move on.

The next target was Ohkirot VII, a smaller planet comparable to Sol's Mercury. It had two very small asteroidal moons, and looked like it might at least be more interesting than VI. Maldonado suggested that they not rush too quickly through their investigations. "After all," he pointed out, "we're going to be out here for at least the next week, whether or not we have anything to do, so let's not rush things." He quirked a grin. "I don't know about you,

but I don't want us to be stuck with all our studies done and developing a bad case of cabin fever while the Avenger is still two or three days away."

"Anyway," Wilson put in, "if we fly a little slower, we can use our fuel and energy more efficiently."

"Then let's go a little slower, then," Green agreed. The others echoed their assent.

The Avenger made good time, and reached Starbase 29 just over two hours ahead of schedule. As the ship pulled into orbit, they were directed to take a position near the Hood. The other ships had not yet arrived. Alex asked Ensign 1st Class Rhea to contact the Hood and give his compliments to Captain Ryan. She had served on the Avenger herself a few years back. Just after Ryan's acknowledgment was received, Rhea reported that Vice Admiral Wyatt was hailing both ships.

"Put him on viewer," Alex told Rhea.

"On, sir," she replied. The viewer lit with Admiral Wyatt's visage. He smiled at them.

"Welcome, Avenger and Hood. Both ships made very good time, I see. The current plan is to hold a briefing on this situation at 1800 hours, base time. By then, the Guardian and America should also have arrived, as well."

"Rosenzweig acknowledging for Avenger," Alex responded. When Wyatt broke the channel, he swiveled back to Rhea. "Hail Commodore Johnson at Base Administration, please."

"Aye, sir." As she turned back to her station, Alex noticed the curious glances of some of the newer crewmembers between the viewer and the exec. The base's commander was no relation to Bill, but the fact of their common last name sometimes led to occasional amusement.

"Reading you, Avenger," came Commodore Johnson's voice, as the main viewer lit to show the Commanding Officer of Starbase 29. Johnson's hair and beard were an iron gray, and his face bore the lines of one who laughed easily and often. On occasion, his cheerful demeanor led those who dealt with him to underestimate the keen mind that lurked behind the merry countenance. Those who underestimated this flag officer often came to regret it later. "How the hell are ya, Alex?"

Rosenzweig grinned at Johnson's typical damn-the-torpedoes-full-speed-ahead approach. "Pretty good, Barry, pretty good. How about yourself?"

"Can't complain," Johnson answered.

"How about the family?" Alex asked.

"Eleanor's well, and the kids are fine. Sal just shipped out on the Hathaway."

"That's good news. Send him my congratulations when you talk to him next. Anyway, what's the news?"

"We've got good contact with all the 7th Fleet vessels. You've been receiving my update-feeds?" Rosenzweig nodded, and Johnson continued. "We've got the Briza and the Valiant in dock here, being prepped for their new missions, and crews are due to be assigned within the next couple of months. There's no word yet, though, on when the Hazard's due to arrive. Oh, and the Tai Shan's reassignment ought to be real in about a month."

"Good deal, Barry. Thanks."

"No worries, Alex. Fly safe. Johnson out."

"Avenger out," Alex replied, and the viewer blanked.

"His son's on the Hathaway? I'll wonder how he'll like it?" wondered Padovan. He'd been intrigued ever since Star Fleet had announced the innovative four-engined cruisers in the mid-2280's.

"I'll try to put him in touch with you," Alex told him. "Meanwhile, let's stand down. We've got a couple of hours."

The mission briefing was held in a medium-sized conference room on the base. Wyatt, Commodore Johnson, a representative from the Diplomatic Corps, and the four starship COs sat around the table.

"Let me start," Wyatt began, "with what must be one of your main questions. Why are the Daltexi willing to talk now, when they've seemed so hostile in the past? Well, two events of earlier this year seem to have changed their outlook on things. First, it seems that certain senior officers in the Daltexi military hierarchy were very favorably impressed by the Avenger's dealings with the Klingons during the Ahlyar aid mission." He sketched a brief salute to Rosenzweig. "You might recall the reports on that from updates received approximately stardate 9306." A couple of the COs nodded. "It seems that one ship **can** make a difference. Well, with the unexpected and happy advent of the Federation-Klingon détente added into the mix, the Daltexi seem to have concluded that the time had come to take a more active role in galactic affairs."

"That's a big change from such emphatic hostility and reclusiveness," said Captain Kamper of the America.

"Star Fleet wondered that, as well," Wyatt replied. "Our xenopsychologists feel that the Daltexi hostility may well have had more to do with fear than xenophobia. If that's the case, and we can make them feel welcome in their dealings with the Federation, then they may see the benefits of increased involvement and our interactions could be even more positive. Another issue is their uncertain cosmographic position between the Federation and the Empire. Had hostilities broken out, they could be caught in the middle of a war zone. If they had established an alliance with one side or the other, they might be perceived as targets."

"So they wanted to stay out of it," summed up Captain Herdt, the Guardian's CO.

"Yes," Wyatt replied. "But they've now witnessed a Federation starship open the hand of friendship to a Klingon crew, even before the détente existed. They seem to feel that the situation has truly changed for the better. That's also why the Avenger's presence, at least at the opening ceremonies, is deemed important. It is a recognition of the positive events that have occurred."

"Interesting," commented Ryan.

The Diplomatic Corps representative handed out data carts. "These are the rosters of ambassadors that will be attending the conference," he explained, "and Vice Admiral Wyatt's orders with regard to vessel assignments for the ambassadors."

Alex took the cart that he was handed and slipped it into the padd he had brought with him. Examining the roster, he noted that the Avenger had been assigned to ferry the ambassadors from Vulcan, Andor, and Betazed. To Alex's disappointment, the Vulcan ambassador was not Sarek. He queried Wyatt about that.

"Sorry, Alex. Ambassador Sarek is in the midst of a new round of negotiations with the Legarans."

"He's been at that since '70," Alex commented. "Is he making progress?"

"He seems to think so," Wyatt replied, "at least according to the diplomatic authorities on Vulcan."

The presence of the starships would serve as a visible representation of the Federation's seriousness in the negotiations, not unlike the approach taken in the Altair System over 25 years ago. The Hood and the America would remain throughout the duration of the conference. The Guardian and Avenger would be released to their regular duties following the conclusion of the opening ceremonies.

After Wyatt had finished outlining the vessel assignments, Ryan leaned over to Rosenzweig. "Well, it looks like you get lucky... sir."

Alex smiled at Leslie. "Having crewmembers on a mission in the Ohkirot System doesn't hurt," he replied.

Wyatt spoke again, drawing their attention back. "The opening ceremonies will most likely occupy the first day of the conference. The working meetings will pick up on the second day." Alex did some rapid mental calculations. Parliament was two days away at warp 4, the recommended cruising speed for the journey. Adding on the travel time from Parliament to Ohkirot, he estimated that it would be a week before they could get back to pick up the Talisman.

There were several more questions and answers, and then Wyatt called a halt to the meeting. "Prepare your ships," he told the captains. "I'd like to be ready to go within the next few hours. All right. Dismissed."

Rosenzweig returned to the Avenger. Once back aboard, he called Commander Johnson into his ready room and gave him a quick briefing on what the ambassadors would need.

"A Vulcan, Andorian, and Betazoid," Bill summed up. "Well, it could be a lot more complicated. Fortunately, for such a short trip, this won't be too difficult."

"You can see to it, then?" Alex asked.

"Yes, sir," Bill replied. "I'll get right on it."

"Good. Thanks, Bill." Johnson nodded and left the ready room. He proceeded to his office, where he contacted Commanders Bell and Re'ming'ton. Working with them, he set up the needed plans, and then instructed them to get the appropriate personnel on the task.

"Don't worry, Commander," Bell assured him. "We'll get it done."

The ambassadors and their staffs arrived at 1330 hours. Rosenzweig, Johnson, Bell, Fillmore, and Re'ming'ton met them in Transporter Room Two. After Alex had introduced his officers, the ambassadors—T'Parra of Vulcan, Themet of Andor, and Krenmer of Betazed—introduced their staffs.

With the introductions complete, Re'ming'ton stepped forward to announce that a formal dinner would be held that evening in the Officers' Mess. The senior staff and ambassadors were all invited.

Bell then called in several of the Mission Support staff to assist the ambassadors to their quarters. The three diplomats bowed to Rosenzweig.

"We appreciate the attention," Ambassador Krenmer said. "I hope we will be worthy of it."

"Yes," echoed T'Parra. "Your service honors us."

"I thank you," the Vice Admiral said, bowing in response to the formal language. "I hope that we will have more time to talk during this trip. If you need anything, let us know. Meanwhile, I think we'll let our Mission Support staff earn their keep." He gestured to the

waiting crewmembers, who stepped smartly forward. Turning back to the ambassadors, Alex nodded again. "Good afternoon."

With the ambassadors in good hands, Rosenzweig returned to the bridge to oversee the final preparations for departure. All systems were reading properly. Rosenzweig took his seat. Johnson walked up and handed him a padd. "Ship's systems report, Admiral." Alex took the padd, quickly read over the information, then signed it. "Thank you."

"We're ready on this end," Bell reported from her position at Mission Ops 1. "All divisions and departments report on-line."

"Excellent," said Rosenzweig. He turned to Communications. "Ms. Rhea, send the following to the other COs. 'Safe journey; See you at Parliament.' Signed, me."

"Aye, sir," said Rhea, wondering at the Admiral's consistent informality. Once she had sent that message, she looked back at him.

"Okay, then. Let's put this show on the road. Ensign, signal Starbase Traffic Control and request departure clearance."

The clearance was quickly secured, and Lieutenant J.G. Toland took the Avenger out of orbit. Once they were clear of the planet's gravity well, Rosenzweig ordered the ship to warp factor four, and the engines were engaged, sending the ship into hyperspace on its way to Parliament.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental:

The Avenger is en route to Parliament, maintaining the recommended cruising speed of warp four. All is well on board.

I find it intriguing that the actions of the Avenger during the Ahlyar crisis might have truly played some role in bringing the Daltexi to the negotiating table. At the time, Commander Johnson's idea seemed mostly a way to respond to all the trouble the Klingons had been causing. That it was viewed with such significance by the Daltexi is not what we'd expected, although it is quite gratifying. I can only hope that, in the limited time available to us, we can acquit ourselves as well in this instance.

Meanwhile, telemetry continues to be received from the Talisman. All seems well on the shuttlecraft. For myself, I look forward to the reunion with our shipmates."

The Talisman maintained a wide, sweeping course through the outer portion of the Ohkirot Star System. All systems were running smoothly, and the mission had been relatively uneventful. They had just completed the study of the outer asteroid belt. Ohkirot V was on the far side of the star, and swinging all way around just for the thrill of exploring the planets in order didn't strike Maldonado as particularly bright. This left several alternatives available, and Carlos sat quietly in the pilot's seat, mulling them.

He felt a tap on his shoulder, and looked up to find Lieutenant Wilson standing there. She smiled at him. "Okay, Commander, you've been at that console for the last six hours. It's time for a break."

Carlos stood up and stretched. Then he gestured Amy to the pilot's seat. As she slipped gracefully into the chair, she looked back up at him. "What were you thinking about?"

"I was contemplating our next move," he replied. "Which planet do we go study next?"

"Oh." Wilson thought for a moment, then said, "Why not go into the inner system? We've gotten a lot of data on the outermost planets. It's time for a change."

"Yes!" "I agree." The emphatic agreements came from Ensigns Harris and Gauthier. Harris continued, "It's been interesting out here, but staring at either dead balls of ice or cloud-tops is starting to get boring."

Maldonado looked back at the group. By now, the others were listening, too. A gleam came to his eye. "You just want to check out the Class M planet, don't you?"

Green said nothing. She just nodded and smiled.

Ragan replied, "It's got to be more interesting than what's out here."

"Maybe, maybe not," put in Hart, "but it's got one important characteristic."

"What's that?" asked Ragan.

"We've been out here, and we *haven't* been in there yet."

"Well, there is that," Carlos said.

After a bit more discussion, it was decided that they would head through the inner asteroid belt, doing a broad resources scan on the way, then make for the second planet. They would do a quick flyby of the fourth planet on the way to the second, with a more detailed follow-up later. The first and third planets would also wait.

With the decisions made, Wilson set the course. "Go get some rest, Carlos," she said. "I'll get us there just fine."

Carlos agreed. Calmly, he walked back through the cabin and settled into his recliner near the aft section. He closed his eyes and was soon asleep.

The shuttlecraft made its way through the belt without incident. As they flew through, Ensigns Hart and Gauthier found themselves working overtime, cataloging the structure and composition of various asteroids. There was a fairly typical mix for this stellar type: nickel-iron, carbonaceous, rocky, icy, etc. On a couple of occasions, they logged some very interesting readings. They carefully noted the location of the most intriguing asteroids, in case there was time to take another look later.

Meanwhile, Green had found herself a spot at the station being used to monitor the stellar wind. She had begun watching the readings as they came in. As she watched, she noticed a pattern that she recognized from an astronomy course she'd taken at the Academy. She couldn't quite remember all the details, but it bothered her nonetheless. She padded forward to the pilot's console.

"Lieutenant," she began, "I think we might have a problem."

She described what she'd observed to Wilson, who then had her transfer the readout to one of the forward displays. Wilson recognized it immediately. What Green had observed was a marked increase in the number of energetic particles that were being emitted by Ohkirot.

"Will that cause any problems for the shuttle?" asked Green.

"I'm not sure," Wilson replied, her voice tinged with concern.

"If the particle counts don't keep going up from their current level, we should be safe. But if they intensify, there could be problems." She pulled her gaze away from the viewer and turned to look at Rhonda. "Do me a favor. Keep monitoring the stellar wind. If there are any major changes, let me know."

Rhonda nodded. "All right." She moved back to her seat.

Amy watched as the linguist sat back down. Then she shifted her gaze back to Carlos' seat in the back of the cabin. He was

asleep. Amy decided that she wasn't going to wake him up just yet. If things got worse, then maybe...but not now.

The Talisman passed out of the asteroid belt and headed for Ohkirot IV for its flyby. A careful watch was being kept on Ohkirot, with Green and Ragan switching off at the monitor. So far, there was no significant change in the particle-counts, which had stabilized at a high but still safe level. But, as Ragan pointed out, it would be imprudent not to keep an eye on the star, just in case.

Ohkirot IV steadily grew on the shuttle's main viewer. The planet resembled a somewhat large version of Mars, although—unlike Mars—it lacked any evidence of ancient water. It also appeared, based on the initial sensor readings, to be rather more geologically stable. The planet had three moons, ranging in diameter from fifteen to 3,500 kilometers. Both Ensigns Hart and Gauthier were considerably intrigued by the initial readings on the gravitational interactions between the planet and the moons. As the shuttle made its closest approach, they became fully engrossed in the local environment.

While the physical sciences techs were watching the planet, Green and a now fully awake Maldonado were watching the sun. For the moment, at least, it seemed to be stable.

Once the shuttlecraft had passed Ohkirot IV, Maldonado switched with Wilson and took over the pilot's seat. The course for Ohkirot II was laid in, and they accelerated toward it. On the viewer, they observed the now rapidly shrinking image of Ohkirot IV, receding behind them.

Sitting at a console slightly aft of the pilot's console, Ragan sent out the routine telemetry-dump to the Avenger.

The dinner had gone very well, and the evening had grown quiet as the ambassadors retired to their quarters for the night. Rosenzweig had gone to bed himself somewhere around 0030, but couldn't get to sleep. Getting up, he saw that Wonder was not suffering from that particular problem. His fire-lizard was curled up in his box, looking quite comfortable. Alex shrugged, pulled on a Class B jumpsuit, and left his quarters.

As was his habit on occasion, he wound up prowling the ship. He stopped in Engineering, the hangar bays, the physics lab, and the arboretum before finally arriving at the Rec Deck.

Entering, he rode the lift to the upper level. As he stepped out, he saw Commander Re'ming'ton standing at one of the forward viewports, gazing out at the stars. He went over to her.

"Room enough for two to look out at hyperspace?" he asked.

Chaym looked over at him. "Evening, Admiral."

Alex glanced at his wrist chrono. "More like high night, I think. Having trouble sleeping?"

Chaym nodded. "I'm not used to sleeping alone." She paused, then gestured at the viewport. "Carlos is out there, somewhere. I miss him."

Alex looked around. Spying an unoccupied couch, he led Chaym over to it, and they sat down. "I understand how you feel. In a lot of ways, I envy Carlos the freedom to be out on a real exploratory mission, instead of trapped back here being nice to the diplomats. It was that sort of thing that brought me into space, and I only occasionally still get to do it. Sometimes," he confided, "flag rank can be a real drag."

Chaym looked curiously at him, then remembered the old slang phrase. She smiled. "Well, how much exploration does a Chief of Recreation get to do?" She shrugged. "Don't get me wrong,

Alex, I love my job. I just wish it was the kind of thing that would let me get off-ship more, too."

Alex nodded. "I understand. And it's okay to miss Carlos. I'd be surprised beyond words if you didn't. But remember that he's doing some-thing he loves." He paused for just a fraction of an instant, then continued. "And I think we all miss the crew on the Talisman."

The pause had been very brief, but of course, Chaym caught it. She looked at Alex with a gleam in her eye. "Hmm... Really? Might there be anyone in *particular* that you're missing?" Her voice lilted with impish curiosity, quite a startling sound from a lu-po-felinoid.

Alex smiled, but would not be drawn in by that bait. "Maybe, and maybe not. It really doesn't matter, does it? Anyway, we both have many friends still here aboard the Avenger, and we have our duties, to keep us from missing the shuttle crew *too* much. Don't worry; we'll see them soon. And I bet they'll have lots to tell us."

Chaym smiled in response to Alex's statement and rested her head on his shoulder, her tail around his waist. There really wasn't a further need to talk, and they didn't. They just sat there and watched a group of four fire-lizards doing aerobatics in the center of Main Rec, enjoying the antics of the endlessly-creative little creatures.

While Alex and Chaym were sitting in Main Recreation, Lt. Commander Klufas was in his quarters. He, too, wasn't asleep. Unlike the Vice Admiral, it usually wasn't his style to wander the ship. Instead, Mike was staring at his bedside reader, trying to lose himself in the "pages" of a potboiler novel from the late 21st Century. It wasn't working, though. His gaze kept leaving the words shining on the viewer and drifting to the holo of Lt. Commander Ragan that sat on his wainscote cabinet. Catching the drift in his attention for the fourth time, he sighed and flopped onto his back. "We'll be there soon, Kris Tina," he said softly. He reached out and switched off the viewer. Then, "Computer, lights off." The cabin's illumination extinguished itself.

The Talisman flew toward Ohkirot II. As they approached the planet, the Sciences personnel were becoming increasingly excited about the preliminary readings that were coming in on this world. It wasn't idyllic or anything like that. Idyllic would be tiresome. What it was, however, was an excellent geological and environmental study, especially without a civilization to muck up the planet's natural processes. That, in and of itself, was a fairly rare occurrence. Life was tenacious. It tended to take hold wherever it could, and that was true of intelligent life as much as any other kind.

Only Lt. Commander Green was not excited. She was still monitoring the sun. And she was worried.

Ragan noticed Green's expression. Her eyebrows knitted, and she quietly pulled herself away from the group studying the Ohkirot II readings and walked across the cabin to where Rhonda sat.

"You look very concerned," she said by way of announcing her presence. Rhonda glanced up at her.

"That's because I *am* concerned," she replied. She showed Kris the readings that she'd been studying. Kris needed only one look.

"Uh-oh," she said.

"Bad, huh?"

"Yes. Excuse me." Quickly, Kris went forward to talk to Carlos and Amy. Hearing her footsteps, they looked up as she approached. "I think we've got a problem." She tersely described the

readings that Rhonda had shown her. "If that pattern holds, it suggests that a major flare is building up. And if that's the case, we should not be out in open space. I'd strongly recommend that we get to ground as quickly as possible."

"We're talking about a flare that could get through our shields?" asked Carlos.

"Quite possibly," Kris answered. "It's not a trifling thing we're looking at." Carlos nodded, remembering that Kris had spent some time being Chief Science Officer of the Sovereign before returning to the Avenger. She certainly had the experience to know what she was talking about.

"Amy, can we get some more speed out of this bird?" he asked. She nodded and tapped a series of commands into the console.

Meanwhile, Ensign Hart had begun to notice interference in his sensor readings. It fit the pattern of a stellar disturbance. He looked up from his console. "Commander Green?" Rhonda turned to look at him. "I'm getting interference patterns that match stellar flare buildups. Are you still monitoring Ohkirot?"

The linguist nodded. "Yes. If I'm reading this right, the flare looks imminent."

"Damn," Hart muttered. "Are we equipped to deal with that?" Rhonda shrugged.

Then they all heard the hum of the shuttle's engines increase. Gauthier looked forward to where Maldonado, Wilson, and Ragan were focused on the control readouts. "It looks like they're worried," she said.

Ragan detached herself from the group at the front of the cabin and walked back to join the others. "The flare could be nasty," she told them. "We're trying to reach either Ohkirot II itself or one of its moons, whichever we can get to first."

"What then?" asked Harris.

"We'll try to land on the hemisphere opposite the sun. That should protect us until the flare is over."

"And if we don't make it?" queried Brandt.

"Then we'll have to hope the shields are good enough," Kris said straightforwardly. The Security Specialist nodded.

When the flare actually arrived, it did so with almost preternatural suddenness. At the console focused on Ohkirot, the readings of radiation and fast particle counts shot up. Graphs on every viewer showed them climbing steadily toward the lurid red danger lines.

Wilson turned back from the pilot's console. "Power drain on the shields is way up. It's nearly quadrupled in just the last few minutes."

"Can the shields hold 'til we reach the planet?" asked Ragan.

"I don't know," Wilson replied, her voice tinged with concern. She turned back to the console.

The shuttlecraft raced toward Ohkirot II. Even as they approached the planet, though, system breakdowns were starting to manifest.

"The damned radiation is getting through," Amy growled. Soon, it was a challenge just to hold the vehicle on course.

Carlos glanced at Kris. At his nod, she enabled her console and began sending a general mayday signal. Looking back at Carlos, she warned, "You realize that the radiation might prevent the signal from getting out of the system."

"Do the best you can," Carlos told her.

Once she had locked the console into a repeating cycle, she leaned back. "Okay. Let's hope somebody hears us."

Its systems failing, the Talisman hurtled toward Ohkirot II. Wilson looked over at Maldonado. "I think I can still make a controlled reentry." A few moments, and three more warning lights, later, she added, "Landing, on the other hand..."

Maldonado swiveled to face the other crewmembers. "All right. Everyone strap in and activate your pressor fields. Hold on tight. We're doing the best we can here, but..." He trailed off as a new problem demanded his attention.

The shuttle entered a low orbit around the planet. Wilson was wrestling with the controls, trying to hold the shuttle in a stable enough orbit so they could "hide" behind the planet from the radiation. Unfortunately, she was losing. Finally, yet another red light flashed into being. Amy looked at Carlos. "Impulse drives are starting to go."

"That's it," he said. "Go for broke. Get us down."

Amy nodded. She angled the nose of the shuttle down, and it slipped into the upper atmosphere. Using a tried-and-true method several centuries old, she skimmed the atmosphere's top layers several times, dipping in and out, as she tried to slow the shuttlecraft down. Finally, she eased the nose down and allowed the craft to fully enter the atmosphere. As they began the descent, they quickly found that the malfunctions were even more widespread. Both the gyros and stabilizers had been affected, and the shuttle began pitching wildly, buffeted by high winds.

"Jet stream!" shouted Harris, barely audible over the sounds of howling winds and tortured metal. Wilson nodded tightly.

It soon became clear that this was not a battle they were going to win. Carlos shouted, "Crash posture!" The crew acknowledged. Turning to Amy, he said more softly, "If you can, at least try to find us some dry land."

Wilson nodded. "I'll do my best." She continued to fight with the controls, keeping her eyes on the tactical display, which was thankfully still working.

The shuttle cleared a mountain range. Beyond it was a rolling plain, punctuated by occasional low hills. It was for the center of that plain that Wilson aimed.

"Here we go," she muttered.

The Talisman hit with a shattering crunch. Still dumping momentum, it slid across the plain, gouging a deep furrow in the soil. Finally, it slowed, then came to a stop, and all was still.

Lt. Commander Klufas was worried. The Talisman had missed its scheduled check-in and data-dump. So far, Kris had been scrupulous about keeping to her schedule. That she had missed a check-in now bothered him.

"Relax, Mike," Alex had responded when the Communications Chief had brought up his concerns. "They probably just found something so interesting that they got busy investigating it." Somehow, Mike wasn't finding the CO's assurances very reassuring. Quietly, he programmed a series of routines to listen for the shuttlecraft.

The Avenger, meanwhile, remained on course for Parliament. All fears aside, it was turning out that the ambassadors were not living up to the stereotype of persons in their line of work. They were neither arrogant nor officious. If there was anything that might be termed a problem, it was that they were so intensely curious about the ship that was their transportation. When they weren't in their quarters, prepping for the conference, they were wandering around the ship asking questions. Fortunately, they

were also being unfailingly polite, and demonstrated great patience with crewmembers more focused on their duties than on diplomatic niceties. Thus far, no one had had cause to complain.

In deference to the ambassadors' curiosity, and out of respect for the courtesy that they had shown the crew, Rosenzweig decided that a tour would be a suitable response. He asked Commanders Bell and Re'mington to arrange it. Both women were able to get the tour set up in bristol fashion, and it commenced less than three hours later.

Rosenzweig had joined the tour on Deck Seven. They were listening to Commander DiMaio describe the ship's Sciences facilities. In mid-description, the intercom chimed, and Klufas' voice came through the ship's speakers. "Vice Admiral Rosenzweig to the bridge, please. Vice Admiral Rosenzweig to the bridge."

Alex sighed. He walked over to a comm-panel and hit the activation key. "Rosenzweig here. I'm on my way." He turned back to the group. "I'm sorry, but duty calls. If you will excuse me...?"

"Admiral," began Ambassador Themet, "is there anything that I could do to be of help?"

"I don't believe so, Mr. Ambassador. I appreciate the offer, but it's probably—"

"Before I entered diplomatic service," Themet went on, "I did serve in Star Fleet for a time. I served aboard two Loknar-class frigates in my time. They were Andorian-designed, you know."

"Yes, I did," Alex replied. "It's a fine starship class. Still, this is probably nothing major. Please continue to enjoy the tour."

Themet accepted this, and Alex made his exit. He headed for Deck One.

Arriving on the bridge, he found tension levels way up, and Klufas looking haunted. Studying the Communications Chief's expression, Alex was impressed that none of it had come through over the intercom.

"I've picked up a signal, Admiral," said Klufas without preamble. "A signal?"

"It's weak, and considerably distorted by interference, but it is distinctive."

"What kind of signal?" Rosenzweig asked. In response, Klufas played back the recording he had. The bridge crew listened. It certainly was distinctive. Rosenzweig and Johnson looked at each other. It was the distress beacon from a Star Fleet shuttlecraft.

"We detected it from the general direction of Ohkirot from here," Klufas reported. "The ID band was garbled, but I'm sure it must be from the Talisman."

"Great. This is just great," Alex muttered. He looked back at Klufas. "Mike, contact Vice Admiral Wyatt."

"Aye, sir!" Klufas. He turned briskly to the task.

"Do you really think he's going to give you permission to break off and search for the Talisman?" Bill asked, sotto voce.

Alex shook his head. "Not a chance." He glanced at Klufas. "But look at him. For his sake, I'll try."

When Wyatt appeared on the main viewer, Rosenzweig advised him of the situation. "Admiral, are there any ships close enough to Ohkirot to investigate?"

Wyatt looked away, apparently checking a terminal. He shook his head. "The closest ship is a scout about eight days from Ohkirot."

"That's longer than it will take us to get back ourselves."

"True," Wyatt responded. "I'm sorry."

Rosenzweig glanced at Johnson, then at Klufas, then back to Wyatt. "Sir, I request permission to break off from our course to Parliament and return to Ohkirot to investigate the signal from our shuttlecraft."

"Request denied," Wyatt responded. "I'm sorry. I empathize with your feelings, but the Avenger's presence is needed for at least the beginning of the conference. We'll let you go as fast as is feasible, but you cannot skip it entirely. There's too much at stake."

"I understand, sir. We'll be there. Avenger out."

"Wyatt out." The Chief of Operations' visage faded from the viewer.

"That's it," said Alex. "Helmsman, maintain course for Parliament."

"Aye, sir," the Helm Specialist replied.

For just a moment, Klufas opened his mouth as if to protest. Then he closed it and turned back to his station. Rosenzweig stood up. "Bill, put appropriate advisories on the senior staff's terminals." Then he turned and left the bridge.

The tour group had reached the observation areas on Deck 9 when Rosenzweig caught up with them. While the ambassadors gazed with fascination out of the circular viewports, Rosenzweig pulled Re'ming'ton aside.

"We've received a distress signal," he told her. "It was from a Star Fleet shuttlecraft, and it came from the direction of Ohkirot. That's all we know. Klufie is certain that it's the Talisman. Also, by direct order from Vice Admiral Wyatt, our current mission takes precedence over a rescue flight. If it is the Talisman, they're going to have to wait 'til we're released from the conference."

"What about another ship?" Chaym asked. Alex shook his head.

"The closest other ship is eight days away from Ohkirot."

"Oh, damn," Chaym growled. "Oh, damn. Oh, elements..."

Alex put his arms around her and gave her a hug. "Chaym, remember that the shuttle is well-equipped with supplies and survival gear, if it's needed. They'll be okay." But Alex's reassurances rang hollow even in his own ears.

She looked at him, as if realizing his doubts. But she mustered up a smile. "Thank you, Alex."

The two of them returned to the group of curious ambassadors. Alex stepped over to Brenda, and whispered, "Wait here for a moment." As Re'ming'ton led the ambassadors on, he told her what had happened.

"Oh, no," Brenda responded. "Is there any information beyond the distress signal?"

"No," Alex said. "And we're under strict orders to continue on this mission."

The Chief of Operations nodded understandingly. Then we just have to hope everything is okay enough 'til we can get back there after the opening ceremonies."

"Right." Alex looked up to where Chaym was leading the ambassadors toward the main stairwell. "Let's get back to the tour." Even from where he was, Alex could see that her heart wasn't in it.

When the tour was over, Ambassador Krenmer approached Rosenzweig. "Admiral," he began, "I'm reluctant to bother you at this time, but would it be possible for me to speak to you privately for a few moments?"

For a moment, Alex considered begging off. He just wasn't in the mood to trade niceties with one of the diplomats. But there

was something in the way Krenmer looked at him that told him that this was important.

"All right, Ambassador. "Let's go to my ready room." They went up to Deck One.

Alex motioned Krenmer to a chair. Once the ambassador was seated, he took his own. "What can I do for you?" Alex asked politely.

"Admiral, you are aware of Betazoid empathic capabilities, are you not?"

"Yes, I am. But what does—?" He stopped, beginning to think he knew where this might be going.

"Allow me to speak plainly," Krenmer said. Rosenzweig nodded. "When you returned to the tour, I sensed great concern in you. After you spoke to Commander Re'ming'ton, I sensed great worry and frustration in her, as well. I did not wish to speak of this publicly, but I felt the need to ask what the problem might be, and to offer any assistance that I can."

"I appreciate your kind offer, sir," the Vice Admiral replied. "But I don't think there's much that can be done." He explained what had occurred with the Talisman. Krenmer listened, his own concern evident. When Alex had finished, Krenmer looked straight at him.

"Admiral, I am sure you realize that I, as well as the other two ambassadors, possess considerable influence. If you wish, I can act to relieve the Avenger of its commitment to this conference. I could also ask my compatriots to do the same."

"Thank you, Mr. Ambassador. I do appreciate your concern. But I must decline. I have specific instructions from Vice Admiral Wyatt on this matter, and I am told that the Avenger's presence at the ceremonies may improve the chances of an agreement with the Daltexi. Situations like this one are frustrating, of course, but they are part of life in the Service. We will deal with this because we must, but I cannot help but feel that it would be highly inappropriate for me to trade on your good diplomatic offices simply because I and my crew are worried about our crewmates. I cannot."

"Very well. I do understand, and I applaud you on your devotion to your duty." He stood up. "Thank you for your time."

Rosenzweig stood, as well. "Of course. Thank *you*, sir, for your concern." Krenmer nodded and left the ready room.

The Betazoid ambassador returned to the office that he and the other ambassadors were using to prepare for their roles in the conference. As he walked in, both T'Parra and Themet looked up. Seeing Krenmer's upset look, Themet rose and walked over to him. "What happened up there?" he asked, his soft accent and sibilants pitched and toned to be as comforting as possible.

Krenmer explained the situation. When he was finished, both ambassadors surprised him by looking at him with skeptical expressions. Themet spoke first.

"I understand your concern," he told Krenmer. "But Vice Admiral Rosenzweig *is* acting correctly. He is an officer in Star Fleet, responding to his orders, even when he doesn't like them. Such martial discipline is not to be questioned, merely approved of."

That's what I get from a warrior race, Krenmer thought. The Andorians had a long martial tradition, and they tended to respect such discipline most highly. He turned to T'Parra, hoping to find a friendly ear. He was due to be disappointed.

"I understand the quandary in which Vice Admiral Rosenzweig finds himself. His crewmembers are possibly in trouble, and he can do nothing to help them. But is it our place, truly, to aid him in de-

fying his orders from Star Fleet Command? I believe that it is not. We must accept his decision on this matter, particularly because he did not ask our help."

"If he had," Themet said, "I would not have given it for such a purpose. But he has my respect for not asking."

Krenmer looked from one to the other. "All right," he said. "I surrender. What were we working on...?"

The Talisman lay in the midst of the plain, not far from what was left of a stand of trees. By some miracle, Wilson had maintained enough control that the shuttlecraft had not tumbled upon impact. Its hull structure was still largely intact, although the engines and most of the on-board systems were a total loss. The shuttle would never again fly unaided.

The crew had been knocked unconscious by the stresses of impact. Slowly, they were beginning to awaken. Commander Maldonado opened his eyes and blearily looked around. The cabin was dark and quiet. To his left, Lieutenant Wilson was slumped in her chair, head lolling to one side. Reaching over, he shook her slightly. "Amy, wake up."

Wilson opened her eyes, and looked back at him. "Ohhhh..." she said, slowly regaining her grip on consciousness. Carlos knew exactly how she felt.

A few moments later, finally feeling ready to move, they released their emergency straps. The straps had been a very good idea; the pressor fields had failed with the loss of power, and apparently the backups had gone out, too. Standing up, they surveyed the mess that was the Talisman. Then they headed to check out their crewmates.

The others were also slowly awakening. Lt. Commander Ragan and Ensign Harris had both suffered impact lacerations. Most of the others had only bruises. But Ensign Gauthier was not in her seat. The restraints also looked like they had snapped.

"No one saw Ensign Gauthier get up?" queried Wilson. Everyone shook their heads.

While Wilson and Lt. Commander Green began tending to the injured, Maldonado began looking for Gauthier. It was a short search, and it ended with an expression of pain from Carlos. The others looked up to see him standing in the back corner of the cabin, looking down.

Those who could hurried over to him, and they too beheld his grisly discovery. Gauthier lay pinned under a broken wall panel, which had apparently fallen onto her after she had been thrown into the corner when her straps had broken. It took only a moment before Carlos ceased his frantic attempts to move the panel. He looked up as Green snapped shut the tricorder she was holding and shook her head.

"She's gone," Rhonda said shakily. "Broken spinal column, fractured skull. There's nothing we can do."

Hart produced a blanket from a broken supply cabinet, and Maldonado draped it over Gauthier's body. He looked at the somber faces of the crew.

"All right," he said, taking a deep breath and mustering up some semblance of command. "We need to know what our situation is. Check supplies, check the shuttle. We need to know what we have and what we don't."

The supplies, fortunately, turned out to be largely intact. The vehicle's systems were a total loss, however. Wilson came back from where she had been digging around inside the engine access hatch.

"Well," she said, shrugging and gesturing to the walls, "it'll make a passable shelter. But that's about it."

"Uh..." said Hart. "Can we get out?" At their confused looks, he pointed at the side hatch, which was normally a powered door.

Ensign Brandt went over to check it out. "The automatics are gone," he reported. "If I release it manually, we probably won't be able to fully close it again."

"Do it," said Maldonado. "We can't afford to be trapped in here." Brandt tried the release, and the door ground open.

The group looked outside. An annoyingly cheerful yellow-orange sun hung in a pale blue sky. The plain was covered with yellow-green grass, except where the shuttle had dug up the soil underneath. The soil was orangey-brown and claylike.

"We're going to be here for at least a few days," said Maldonado. "We should try to scout around a bit and see what's here."

"Commander?" It was Brandt. Carlos looked at him.

"Should we prepare a burial detail?" Brandt's eyes flicked to Gauthier's silent form.

Carlos looked at each crewmember, checking his or her feelings on the topic. After a moment, he said, "No. When we're rescued, we'll bring her body back for return to her family."

Being essentially uninjured, Maldonado, Brandt, Green, and Wilson were chosen to do the first recon. Maldonado specified teams of two, arguing that no one should be out there by him or herself. Meanwhile, Ragan—with Harris' and Hart's assistance—would do what she could to set up the shuttle as a base camp.

Phasers, communicators, and tricorders were pulled from the supply cabinets. In some cases, though, it was at the expense of cabinets too badly damaged to be opened except by brute force. Soon, though, everyone was ready.

"Okay," said Carlos, as the group stood near the inner hatch. "We'll see what's in this area. I'd prefer if no one went more than half a kilometer from the shuttle. If we can keep it in sight, that's even better. Keep in touch with the shuttle and each other." He indicated the communicators.

"While you're all out there," Ragan said, "I'll see what—if anything—can be done with the shuttle's comm-systems."

"Good idea," said Carlos. "Okay. Let's head out." He led the way through the hatch.

Brandt and Wilson set out for the nearby trees. They were tall and slender, and looked reasonably similar to typical Terran deciduous varieties. Tricorder readings indicated that their cellular structure was fairly typical for that of wood on most Class M planets.

"Y'know," said Brandt, "the wood would probably be pretty good for a campfire. Should we bring some back?"

"Not yet," said Wilson. "Let's see about that later."

As they got closer, they observed that several of the trees were fruit-bearing. This was good news, especially if the shuttle crew would be trapped on the planet for a while.

"If we do chop anything down for firewood," Wilson said to Brandt, "make sure we don't cut any of the fruit trees."

"Count on it," Brandt assured her.

Meanwhile, Maldonado and Green had gone in the opposite direction. They soon found a small brook that had not been noticed as they hurtled in. Scans indicated that it was safe for Human consumption, although Green suggested that, to be safe, they boil it before drinking it.

"Well, thank goodness for small favors," Carlos said. "At least bathing won't be a problem." He looked at the linguist. "So, should we set up a bathing spot down here, or haul the water back to the shuttle?"

"I don't know," Green replied. "On the one hand, if we bathe here, we can allow the brook's natural action to carry the...used water away. On the other, it'd be a lot more convenient if we could use some of the facilities on the shuttle."

"Okay. Let's see what we have on the Talisman that's suitable for water hauling. If we can get it there, it might be better to use it there. If not..." He shrugged.

"We come down here," Green said.

At a couple of points, the brook was narrow enough to easily jump over. The two traversed it and began climbing a gentle rise. When they reached the top, they realized that it was about fifteen meters above ground-level. Looking back, they could see the shuttlecraft. Beyond it, Brandt and Wilson were visible as they explored near the stand of trees.

"Good scenic overlook," Carlos said, after a moment.

"Any reply that Rhonda might have had was cut off by a harsh scream from above them. Their eyes sought the source of the scream, and they saw an avian creature diving toward them, claws extended.

"Down!" Carlos exclaimed, diving for the dirt and dragging Green with him. As they dropped, they could feel the breeze as the large claws passed through the air where they had just been standing. The creature swept over them and ascended, wings beating for greater lift. Looking up, they observed what looked to Rhonda like a condor of some kind, but with a 2.5 meter wingspan.

Carlos went for his communicator. "Maldonado to all Avenger personnel. Be alert for a large bird-creature of some kind. It's big and nasty, and likes to make dive-bomb attacks. Be careful."

"Wilson here," came Amy's reply. "Big nasty bird. Got it."

After the scare of the attack was past, and he and Rhonda had again caught their breaths, Carlos again looked around. "Hmm..." he said.

"What?" Rhonda asked.

"This would be a good spot for a beacon, even with the risk of the birds. Of course, that assumes that the beacon is still working."

"Even if it isn't, in a pinch, a tricorder can be rigged as a beacon if you use its data-transmission capabilities."

"That's right," Carlos said. "Well, here's hoping we *don't* have to use a tricorder that way."

The two went down the rise, and looked around for a little while longer. Finally, they looked at each other.

"Let's go back," suggested Rhonda.

"Agreed," replied Carlos. They walked back over the rise and toward the Talisman.

The crew gathered near the shuttle's hatch. Each team reported on what they'd found. The report of fruit within easy reach brought relieved smiles to everyone's faces.

"At least we have something besides survival rations," commented Ragan, wrinkling her nose at the thought of having to survive solely on rations for the next week.

When asked for a shuttle report, Ragan gestured at the survival blanket draped over the outer hatch. As Brandt had imagined, it wouldn't quite close again. "Amy was right. The Talisman will be a passable hut, but there's no power. As far as we can tell, it will

never have power again. A few of the on-board systems are still intact, but at this point, they're pretty much only usable as spare parts."

Maldonado ducked inside the shuttle and rooted around in a few supply bays. A short time later, he came out holding the emergency beacon.

"Mr. Brandt, Mr. Hart, grab a phaser each and join me while I set up the beacon."

"Aye, sir," said Brandt.

The three men climbed the rise and gathered at its summit. While the two Ensigns kept a careful watch for predators, Maldonado set up the beacon. Fortunately, none of the birds were seen. Once Carlos was satisfied that the beacon was functioning properly, they returned to the shuttle.

Meanwhile, the others had cut down one of the trees that was not a fruit-bearer and hacked it into firewood. That done, they dug a firepit, built the fire, and pulled out the evening's ration-fare. All was ready when Maldonado, Brandt, and Hart returned. While they ate, several of the group kept phasers close at hand.

"Remember," Wilson had told them, "that once the power packs are used up, that'll be it. We're not going to be able to recharge them. Use them sparingly." Everyone nodded. For a few minutes, there was silence, as the group sat and listened to the crackling of the flames.

The Ensign Harris spoke. "Does anyone know any campfire songs?"

A few of the old standbys were suggested: "Moon Over Rigel VII", "Camptown Races", "The Dragon O'er the Ridge". Each was sung in turn. As the crew relaxed, they even called for a few rather bawdy tunes. It was, in its own way, very relaxing just to sit back and sing, and let the worries slip away for a while. Finally, Green softly sang an old Russian ballad. When she finished, and the haunting strains of the final verse had drifted away on the wind, all was quiet. No one was sufficiently gauche to break the mood with applause, but Green could see their expressions in the flickering firelight. As she gazed at them, she allowed a slow smile to flow across her countenance.

It was as if no one could think of anything to follow that ballad. It was almost as if no one *wanted* to. Whatever the truth might have been, there was no more singing that night. As the group watched Ohkirot II's moon ascend, they were reduced to quiet conversation. Finally, they decided to get some sleep.

Maldonado again went into the shuttle, and reemerged with a perimeter warning field system. If anything crossed between the field relays, the central monitor would sound an alarm.

"I'll take first watch," volunteered Ensign Brandt.

"Very well," said Maldonado. "Wake me in two hours." The crew went into the shuttlecraft. Brandt took up a position at the inner door of the entry lock, eyes focused on the night.

The Avenger reached Parliament during late Alpha Shift. Commander Sastrowardoyo was holding down the center seat during the watch, while Commander Johnson was engaged in a research project, and called Vice Admiral Rosenzweig to the bridge as the ship pulled into orbit.

"Are we there yet, Rahadyan?" Alex asked as he stepped out of the turbo-lift.

"Actually, Admiral, yes, we are," was Rahadyan's reply.

"Parliament Orbital Control is hailing," reported Ensign Sullivan, as Rosenzweig replaced Sastrowardoyo in the command chair. "We're also being hailed by the Conference Center."

"Route orbit instructions to the helmsman and navigator," ordered Rosenzweig. "Put the Conference Center on audio."

"Aye, sir. Conference Center coming on."

"Welcome, starship 1860 Avenger," came the cheery voice of what Rosenzweig took to be the official greeter. "We are most assuredly honored by your presence here at Parliament. If you would, please place us in contact with your passengers."

"Tie this gentleman in to the ambassadors, Ensign. Just alert them that he's coming," Alex instructed.

"Aye, sir," Sullivan replied, just a hint of a smile on her face.

Following the formal diplomatic how-do's, the ambassadors reported that they and their staffs were prepared to beam down. Rosenzweig had several of the Mission Support staff escort them to the transporter room, where Ensign Lyons sent them surface-ward.

"The ambassadors and their support personnel are down," Lyons reported, just as Lt. Commander Klufas arrived on the bridge. Sullivan made as if to relinquish the Comm station, but Klufas shook his head and the Ensign stayed where she was.

A few moments later, there was a signal from the surface, as the ambassadors formally thanked the crew of the Avenger for their service.

"We are settling well into the apartments to which we have been assigned," T'Parra reported. "We will look forward to seeing you and your first officer at the ceremonies."

Alex could almost feel Klufas tense at that reminder that they were still restricted to this planet for another day, at least.

Klufas wasn't the only one. When asked about the crew's mood, Doctors Fillmore and Richardson both indicated that while there was considerable anticipation for the conference, it was mixed equally with worry about the shuttle crew and frustration that their ability to respond to the situation was limited by the need for appearances.

With the Daltexi arrival not due for several more hours, Vice Admiral Wyatt contacted the Avenger. Rosenzweig, sensing that the Star Fleet Operations Chief might have more on his mind than just routine matters, took the call on the bridge.

"Hello, Alex, and everyone else," Wyatt said, noticing the rest of the bridge crew. "You made excellent time getting here."

"Thank you, Admiral," responded Rosenzweig.

"I'm glad you did," said Wyatt. "As I've noted before, the Avenger's presence is considered very important to getting this conference off to a good start. I wanted to let you know again that I understand your concern for your shipmates, but this conference is too important to take chances with, and that means that the potential importance of the Avenger's presence cannot be underestimated."

"I understand, Admiral," Alex assured him. Johnson arrived on the bridge as he said this, and Alex nodded at him. "My exec and I will be at the opening ceremonies."

"Good," said Wyatt. "Thank you all for your time. See you later, Alex. Wyatt out."

"Avenger out," Rosenzweig said. Wyatt's mustached visage faded from the viewer, to be replaced with the view of Parliament from orbit. Alex slumped back in his chair.

Klufas, who had said nothing throughout the conversation with Wyatt—though Rosenzweig was sure he was itching to—spoke up. "We have to wait another—"

"—Day," Alex responded tersely.

"A whole day?"

"Given the way these things go, I wouldn't be surprised."

"Admiral, isn't there *anything* we can do?"

"You heard Wyatt. We have our orders."

"Well, our orders stink. I want it on record that I formally protest the fact that this entire ship is being held here because some diplomats think that seeing a ship with our hull markings is going to change the course of some conference."

"Mike, I understand. I think it stinks, too, but there's nothing I can do." Alex really did understand. He knew that Klufas was upset, that he was worried. But Alex was beginning to get exasperated, wondering what the Communications Chief expected him to do.

Klufas looked morosely at the deck, then at the Vice Admiral. "Kris is down there," he said, for perhaps the hundredth time since they'd gotten the distress signal.

Bill looked frustratedly at Mike, expecting Alex to ignore the comment, just as he had for the previous ninety-nine utterances. This time, though, was different.

Alex whirled to face the Communications station, where Mike was standing. "Don't you think I *know* that?!" he exclaimed. "Do you think you have some sort of *monopoly* on worry?! I know damn well that Kris is down there. And so is Amy. And so is Rhonda. And so is Carlos." He shook his head. "What the hell am I supposed to say to Chaym if anything happens to him? And so are four others of our crew. They are all people I allowed to be out there, people who went on that mission with *my* approval. Mine, not yours. But I have to weigh just few other responsibilities, too, which I will thank you to remember." He stood up. "I will be in my ready room. Mr. Johnson, the bridge is yours." Ignoring the wide-eyed bridge crew, he stalked out.

The rest of the personnel on the bridge stared blankly at the turbo-lift doors after they had closed. Klufas tore his gaze away from the doors and met Johnson's eyes.

"I didn't realize he was that upset," he said weakly. Bill shrugged.

"You haven't made it any easier on him," the exec said.

"You're right," Mike admitted. "Request permission to leave the bridge for a brief time."

"Permission granted," the exec replied.

"Thanks," said Mike. He slipped off the bridge.

Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig sat at his desk in his ready room, his face in his hands, feeling the weight of command on his shoulders. He didn't want to be a celebrity. Gods knew he hadn't *asked* to be a celebrity. But circumstances had forced it upon him, at least in this case. And those circumstances were endangering his crewmates, his friends. But, he reminded himself, he'd asked for a command. He'd sought to keep the Avenger even when he also had command of an entire fleet. These were the risks he took...damnit.

Wonder sat on the desk in front of him, looking up at his concealed face. The bronze fire-lizard was crooning softly, trying to understand the unhappy mood he could tell that his friend was in, but unsure what had caused it.

The door chime sounded. Alex looked up. He reached out and scratched Wonder's eye-ridges, then touched the control that re-

leased the door. Wonder looked over and saw Klufie, whom he liked. His expression brightened. Klufie often made Alex laugh. Maybe he would now. But Klufie looked unhappy, too. As Alex waved Klufie in, Wonder padded to one side of the desk and settled down again.

"Alex?" Mike began slowly. "I wanted to apologize. I know this isn't your fault. You're in it just like the rest of us."

"Thanks, Mike. I want to apologize, too. I'm not given to blowing up like that, especially not on the bridge."

"Well, it wasn't like I was making your life any easier."

Alex looked at him, a smile quirking at the edges of his mouth.

"No, you weren't. But I forgive you."

Mike smiled, too. "It's tough when you've got that close an emotional bond to your crewmates," he said. "I'd hate it if anything happened to Kris."

"Mike, I'll tell ya'. So would I. You should try being in my shoes, and having to send your friends into potentially dangerous situations, wondering if you'll ever see them again. It's not easy, but that's what life in the service is like."

"I think it's the waiting that's the worst. The uncertainty."

Alex nodded. "I think you may well be right," he said softly.

"Y'know, there's one reassuring thing." He nodded at Wonder. "The fire-lizards haven't reacted."

"Could they even hear their owners at this distance?"

"I don't know," Alex admitted. "But I have this feeling—call it a hunch—that even if the telepathic link is extremely tenuous at this distance, if someone on the shuttle who was bonded to a fire-lizard was killed, or even gravely injured, the fire-lizard would know. And none of them are acting as if that had happened. Right? You've been watching over Pookie Bear, correct?"

"Yes."

"And Chaym is watching Scorch, Lieutenant Hijiruach is keeping an eye on Mirage, and Lieutenant Bush is minding Killashandra. The other crewmembers on the shuttle don't own fire-lizards, and nobody's reporting any problems with those four."

"I guess you're right," Mike answered, feeling somewhat reassured. "Either way, I understand that there's nothing you can do right now, and that we have to make the best of it. I'll try to remember that when my frustrations threaten to get the better of me."

"All right," Alex said, feeling a little better himself. "And Mike? Trust me on this: As soon as our obligations here are met, we are gone, and on the way back to Ohkirot. That much I can assure you."

"Thanks, Alex. I appreciate that." Klufas stood and took his leave. As the door slid shut behind him, Alex sighed and leaned back in his chair. Then he looked down at Wonder. "Well," he said to the fire-lizard, "I guess I was convincing." Wonder chirrupped encouragingly. Alex smiled at him.

The new day on Ohkirot II dawned amidst a truly unpleasant downpour. The crew awoke to the sound of the rain drumming on the roof of the shuttlecraft. Fortunately, the survival blanket had kept most of the water out of the shuttle.

Lt. Commander Ragan decided to take a look at the gray day that had greeted them. She stepped through the lock and pushed the blanket aside, leaving the shelter of the Talisman. It took only a few moments for her to retreat back into the shuttle. Maldonado looked up as she fairly jumped back through the inner door. His eyebrows went up; she seemed soaked to the skin, and she was

shivering. Carlos hurried to a supply locker and came back with another survival blanket, which he handed to Ragan.

Pointing toward the back of the shuttle, he said, "Go back and dry off. Keep the blanket 'til you warm up again."

Kris smiled at him. "Thanks."

"Well," Carlos said to the others, "I think we'll stay in here unless it is absolutely necessary to go outside."

"No, really?" quipped Rhonda. Carlos shot her a 'later for you' look.

Ensign Harris walked over to the doorway, and stood looking out into the rain.

"What is it, Ensign?" asked Wilson.

"I hope we don't have to worry about flooding," Harris said simply. "That's a lot of water for the ground to absorb."

"Any sense of how much it *can* absorb?" asked Green.

"The tricorders don't have the range for me to get comprehensive data about the water table," Harris replied.

As the morning wore on, it looked as though flooding would not be a serious problem. However, a different complication had presented itself. The ground was becoming so sodden that the Talisman was beginning to sink into the muck. Although no one thought that the soil was loose enough for the shuttlecraft to sink completely, there was considerable concern that water might be able to run in through the open outer hatch. Harris, Brandt, and Maldonado quickly erected a makeshift barrier across the base of the doorway, using broken paneling and some extra blankets.

Fortunately, the settling stopped before much water got in. "Just be glad we've got boots to go outside," Maldonado said. The others sighed. Kris threw a wadded-up washcloth at him. Carlos ducked.

The group remained inside through-out the morning. In an attempt to ward off cabin fever, Green moderated a number of word games. When the crew tired of those, she gave them a crash-course in the basics of Klingonese, which had skyrocketed in popularity in the wake of the Khitomer Conference.

After a while, Rhonda grew quiet. While Harris started a new round of games, she seemed to draw back and into herself. Sitting out the next game, she listened for a little while, then walked to the doorway and looked out.

Kris followed her. "Rhonda? What is it?"

Rhonda paused thoughtfully before replying. "Y'know, in a discussion I had with Alex the night before we left, he said that people sometimes play the roles they have in unexpected ways." She turned and looked at Kris, then flicked a glance in the direction of the cheerful game in the center of the cabin. Looking back at Kris, she went on, "He was right."

Kris smiled. "Our dear Admiral *has* been around the block a few times," she reminded Rhonda. The linguist nodded and again shifted her gaze outside. After another moment, Kris left her to her thoughts.

The Daltexi reached Parliament on schedule, as well, and promptly announced their readiness to start. The diplomatic staff on the planet wasted no time in swinging things into high gear.

It was fortunate that both Rosenzweig and Johnson had been expecting the call since they first observed the arrival of the Daltexi starships. They quickly donned all the appropriate dress appurtenances, ribbons and medals and such, and beamed down to the Conference Center.

Materializing near the Federation section of the arena where the opening ceremonies would be held, Rosenzweig and Johnson strode toward the gathering of Star Fleet officers and ambassadors. Vice Admiral Wyatt was representing Star Fleet Command, as Fleet Admiral Lerman and Vice Admiral Davis were tied up in conferences with the Federation Council. Also present were the COs and XO's of the Guardian, Hood, and America. To one side, a large band was playing an appropriately martial tune to welcome the various dignitaries.

On the other side of the arena, a second set of gates swung open, and the Daltexi entered. Both ambassadors and military leaders strode in, walking side-by-side. With only a quick glance at the assemblage opposite them, they walked around and took their positions in the Daltexi section.

For a long, uncertain moment, both groups simply gazed at one another. Then the senior Federation ambassador and titular head of the Federation delegation stepped forward to meet the leader of the Daltexi delegation. As they met in the center of the arena, the band struck a chord, then fell silent. The Federation ambassador gave the Daltexi gesture of greeting, and the Daltexi responded with a typically-Human handshake.

What followed was a series of introductions, as first the ambassadors, then Wyatt and the senior Daltexi military officer, then the starship COs and XO's were announced and identified.

Following the introductions were a series of presentations highlighting both Federation and Daltexi history and culture. The presentations, done with both actors and holographic projections, were ably executed by the Parliament staff, along with a small cadre of Daltexi advisors. They portrayed some of the major events in both histories, ending with the Khitomer Conference and the Daltexi decision to open the current negotiations.

After the presentations had concluded, the administrator of the Conference Center announced that a lunch had been prepared, and that all were invited to partake. He gestured to the main hall not far from the arena. "We have set up the food within the Great Hall," he intoned formally. "We hope that all will enjoy our offerings."

By mid-day on Ohkirot II, the rain had stopped and the sun finally broke through the clouds. As the first rays to reach the surface shone down, they reflected through the suspended water droplets to create a brilliant rainbow arcing across the sky. Upon seeing the rainbow, Ragan exclaimed, "How pretty!" The others crowded up to the doorway, then stepped out as they saw that the storm was over.

Outside the shuttle, the starship officers looked around at the sappy, but fresh-smelling plain. It seemed that a storm had much the same effect here as it did on Earth, making an environment seem cleaner and fresher once the rain was gone.

Ensign Hart brought the group back to reality. "I wonder if the beacon's okay," he said. "That was a lot of rain."

Ragan ducked back into the Talisman and returned with a tri-corder. Setting it to the beacon's frequency, she turned toward the rise and executed a scan. Then she nodded. "Still there," she said. "Those things are built to last."

The group decided to do some additional investigating. This time, they decided that there would be two groups of three persons each.

"I'm going this time," Ragan insisted. "It's not as if we're likely to be getting any signals that we'll miss if I'm not there." After

some discussion, Wilson volunteered to stay and watch the shuttlecraft. Ultimately, Maldonado, Green, and Hart comprised one group, while Ragan, Brandt, and Harris made up the second. The first group headed for the trees, while the second made for an open area on the other side of the shuttlecraft and on a tangent to the rise that Carlos and Rhonda had climbed earlier.

As Ragan's group strolled across the field, Ensign Harris was busily making notes on the cloud formations he was observing. Ragan and Brandt's concerns were more earthbound, as they kept a sharp eye out for puddles. Everything seemed placid.

The calm was broken by a screech. Whirling, Ragan and Brandt looked up, just in time to see one of the bird-like creatures diving in out of the sun, aiming straight for Ragan. Grabbing her by the shoulders, it started to lift her off the ground. She struggled to escape. The bird only gripped her more tightly, talons digging into her shoulders. Brandt scrambled for his phaser, but by the time he'd gotten it out, Kris had been pulled 2 meters into the air.

The Security Specialist fired several stun bursts at the bird. Two struck home, while the third went wild. The bird dropped Ragan and plunged to the ground after her, falling only a few meters from where she lay in a crumpled heap. Brandt and Harris dashed forward and grabbed Ragan, carefully lifting her and rushing her back to the shuttlecraft.

Once they had returned to the Talisman, Brandt immediately began first aid beyond just trying to hold things together. Harris, meanwhile, signaled the others and informed them of the incident. The other group quickly hurried back to the shuttle.

By the time they arrived, Brandt and Wilson had stanching the bleeding from the talon gashes, and put new-skin patches on.

"That should hold things for the next few days," Brandt replied. Then he looked at the now-conscious Ragan. "That's provided you don't do anything too strenuous during those few days." Kris nodded.

"Well," said Maldonado, "that means, Kris, that you are going to be the official shuttle-sitter." He thought for a moment. "But until you're a little stronger, we're going to also need a Kris-sitter."

"I'll keep an eye on Kris," volunteered Wilson. Ragan gave her a sharp look, and Amy added, "At least until she's a bit more recovered."

"Sir," suggested Brandt to Maldonado, "I think we should see if we can find a nest or habitation of these creatures. We've been attacked twice, now, counting the bird that went after you and Commander Green."

"I think you're right, Ensign," replied Carlos. The others nodded agreement. Soon, everyone was carrying phaser IIs and the group had mobilized for the search.

"Let's move out," Green said.

After they had gone, Ragan and Wilson looked at each other. "Well, aren't we a pair?" Amy asked rhetorically.

"What do you mean?" Kris still felt a bit woozy from the painkillers, and her thought-processes weren't fully up to par yet.

"Well," Amy elaborated, "here we are: a pilot of a craft that will probably never fly again, and a communications officer with absolutely no way of communicating over any distance."

"Yeah," Kris replied. "Well, fate is playing games with us, that's true."

"And we can't do anything about it!" Amy exclaimed.

"Maybe not," Kris replied, perhaps more calmly than she felt, "except learn from it."

"Learn from it?"

"Do we have any other choice?"

Amy thought for a minute. "No, I guess not."

Kris nodded. "We have to make the best of what we have. In this case, what we have is a lousy situation. But that's what we're stuck with." She shrugged.

"I guess you're right," said Amy. Then she noticed that Kris' eyes were closing. "Get some rest," she told her. "I'll be here."

After a fairly extensive search of the area around the shuttlecraft, the team was unable to locate any evidence of a nest or similar habitation for the birds.

"Do you think they might be migratory?" suggested Green.

Harris shrugged. "It's possible."

"We should have brought a biologist," growled Maldonado, "even if we weren't planning to land."

"Carlos," Green said, "look. I wish we had more planetary specialists, too. Hell, one more of them would be doing you a lot more good than I can right now. But there was no way to fit *everyone* we could've used on the shuttle. We just have to make do with what we have, and quit worrying about what we don't."

Maldonado stopped and looked at her. "You're right," he said. Then he looked around. "We've made more than a full circle around the shuttlecraft, haven't we?"

"I think you're right," replied Hart.

"That's it. We've done what we can do. Let's get back to the shuttle." Most of the others nodded, although Brandt looked unhappy about it. Maldonado empathized with him, but he honestly couldn't see what else could be done. They started back.

That evening, the group again gathered inside the shuttlecraft. Although the rain had stopped during the day, there was no dry wood, and precious little dry ground, for a campfire. What had been brought out by the rain was, apparently, an assortment of fauna, the calls of which could be heard across the plain.

"We'll need to be even more careful tonight," Brandt said. "We don't want any curious critters to come poking inside the shuttle."

"Amen," said Green.

"I wonder when the Avenger's coming back," Hart said into the silence that followed.

"I hope it's soon," Harris added.

"I hope it's before anything nasty happens," returned Hart.

"Now *wait* a minute," Ragan interjected. Tartly, she reminded them that they had plenty of supplies and that the Avenger was due back in only a few days. Smiling, she added, "If I know Vice Admiral Rosenzweig like I think I do, he won't be able to wait 'til he can get back. And if I know Michael like I think I do, as soon as he realized that something had happened to us, he'd be pushing hard to accelerate that timetable for the return. They're not going to forget about us."

Wilson echoed Ragan's smile. "Somehow," she added, "I just have this feeling that everything's going to be okay."

"Is that just plain old optimism," asked Green, "or something from your training with Mr. Boldstar?"

"Both?" Amy replied, her smile widening.

The lunch in the Great Hall was as lavish as advertised, Rosenzweig and Johnson found. For several hours after it was over, during the unstructured time given over to meet-and-greets, photo-ops, and the other trappings of large diplomatic events, both the CO and XO of the Avenger found themselves wondering what

more they could stuff down their throats, and what might lie in store at the promised dinner.

The dinner seemed to come all too quickly, particularly after Rosenzweig had to pull away from a fascinating conversation with the Caitian ambassador to prepare for it. The conversation had begun with the fact that the Avenger had several Caitians, and a few other felinoids, among the crew, and things had progressed from there.

The dinner had more speeches than one could shake a stick at, and even Rosenzweig's love of verbiage was tested to its limits. Johnson's appreciation for wordiness was pretty much completely past *its* limits. It had turned out that the Daltexi, for all their previously withdrawn tendencies, were easily the equal of the Federation diplomats in the area of flowery speeches, and it almost seemed like there was some kind of unofficial competition going on to decide who could be more flowery and poetic.

Finding his attention wandering during one of the seemingly interminable speeches, Rosenzweig glanced around to see where Wyatt was sitting. Once he found him, he waited until the speech was over, then told Johnson to hold the fort and sidled over to the Chief of Operations.

Johnson watched as the two flag officers huddled. After a few minutes, Wyatt nodded and whispered back to Rosenzweig. Alex nodded and then hurried back to Johnson.

"We can slip out after the fireworks," he said.

Bill looked at him. "Fireworks?" Alex shrugged. Bill sighed. "These people aren't playing around." Then he stopped. After a quick glance to see who was in earshot, he leaned closer to Alex. "Or maybe they're doing too *much* playing around."

Alex shrugged again. "Ours not to reason why..." he quoted. "Anyway, all the *real* work starts tomorrow. Maybe it's best that they play tonight."

"Maybe," conceded Bill.

At the conclusion of the dinner, everyone was ushered out to a large observation deck overlooking a lake. The fireworks began, brilliant bursts high in the air reflected in the still waters of the lake, and accompanied by the "ooohs" and "aaaahhs" of the crowd.

Alex had to admit it was an impressive show. The folks in charge of spectacle were earning their keep. But as the show wound toward its conclusion, Alex's eyes were on Wyatt. At Terry's signal, Rosenzweig tapped Johnson on the shoulder, pointed at the two of them, then pointed skyward. Johnson nodded and smiled, and the two quietly slipped away.

Going back into the Conference Center, they slipped into a shadowed cul-de-sac. Rosenzweig pulled out his communicator. "Avenger, Rosenzweig here. Two to beam up."

"Aye, sir," came the response. "Energizing." Rematerializing in Transporter Room 4, Alex tossed off a jaunty salute to Ensign Vestri, then beelined for the bridge, Bill right behind him.

The turbo-lift disgorged them onto Deck 1, and they quickly took their stations. Rosenzweig turned to Communications. "Ms. Rhea, please secure us a clearance for departure." He turned back to Navigation. "Lieutenant Graevyn, plot us a course to Ohkirot. Calculate ETA at warp factor seven."

Graevyn nodded. A few minutes later, she looked back. "ETA at warp seven is 12.6 hours. At warp eight, 8.4 hours. At warp eleven, 3.24 hours."

"We couldn't hold warp 11 for that long," Johnson pointed out.

"I know," Rosenzweig answered him. He turned to the helmsman. "Mr. Wells, warp seven as soon as we're at terminal range."

"Aye, sir. Engaging impulse drive now."

As the low rumble of the impulse drive sounded through the ship, Rosenzweig stood up. He glanced at Rhea. "Please have me alerted as soon as we reach Ohkirot."

"Yes, sir."

"Thank you." Alex turned to Lt. Commander Colgan, who had been holding down the center seat. "Commander, the bridge is yours."

"Aye, sir," Colgan said smartly, stepping back to the command chair.

Rosenzweig nodded at him and left the bridge.

It was late at night. The crew—except for Ensign Harris, who was standing watch—were asleep. Suddenly, there was a huge crash against the side of the shuttle, jolting everyone awake. The shuttle itself rocked, and a box toppled to the deck.

"What the hell—?" exclaimed Wilson.

"Ensign Harris, report," ordered Maldonado.

"I don't know," said the lab tech, as he scrambled back to his feet. He poked his head outside, then pulled it back in. "I don't see anything on the hatch side."

Green peered out a viewport on the port side of the craft. She gestured the others over and pointed. Looking outside, the crew could see a large, apelike creature growling at the shuttle and looking for all the world as if it wanted to pound it open. Each time it pounded on the hull, the shuttle rocked again.

"The hull won't take *that* forever," warned Wilson.

"I know," muttered Maldonado. "There was an old trick that somebody used in a similar situation... Oh, yes. They electrified the hull of the shuttle and scared away the attacking life-forms."

"Carlos," said Amy, "we have no power to do that."

"I know, I know," Carlos answered. He looked at Amy. "Could we feed phaser power into the shuttle's electrical systems?"

"Sure," she replied, "...if we could get the creature to stop pounding long enough to let us hook up the connections."

"Not too likely," said Ragan.

"Nope," agreed Wilson.

"Maybe we should just take it on directly," suggested Hart. He gave them all a significant look. "Especially before it finds the hatch." He pointed.

Maldonado agreed. He, Brandt, Harris, Hart, and Green grabbed phasers. Green took a tricorder, as well. Wilson and Ragan were given weapons and told to watch the doorway. "If the creature comes through the lock," Carlos told them, "fire for all you're worth." Kris and Amy nodded understandingly.

The group started for the door. "Carlos," said Kris, "it's still dark out. Take some hand-lights."

"Good point," Carlos said. He grabbed several lights and passed them out. "Let's go," he said.

The five starship officers slipped out of the shuttle and crept around the craft, moving up behind the creature. It was standing on the shuttle's port side, pounding on the hull amidships just aft of the upper phaser bank. It didn't see them. Maldonado motioned the others to stand in a semicircle behind the creature. It seemed so intent on its pounding that it didn't hear them, either, a bit of good fortune for which Carlos was duly grateful. When everyone was in place, he made a sharp gesture, and the group fired stun beams at the creature. It reeled and let out a roar, but did not fall. It whirled

to face them, rage and pain on its bestial countenance. The group fired again, then a third time. Finally the creature fell, slumping to the ground about halfway between the crew and the shuttle.

Green scanned the creature. "It looks like a cross between primate and ursinoid, with a few oddities thrown in for good measure. I can't make much of them, but I don't think they're definable as typical."

"I wonder if they're solitary creatures, or do they travel in groups?" Harris said curiously.

"Let's hope they're solitary," Brandt replied.

"What do we do with it now?" asked Harris.

"Get it away from the shuttle," said Hart.

"Kill it," countered Brandt. The others all looked at him. "We can't risk it waking up and starting in on us again."

After some debate, they decided that killing the creature was the safest course of action, especially after it was emphatically argued that it was not intelligent, and had demonstrated no characteristics suggesting even as much sentience as a Pernese fire-lizard. Not everyone was happy with the choice, but it seemed that hard-bitten pragmatism had carried the day. They dragged the creature away from the shuttlecraft and destroyed it with phasers set on "dematerialize". They then went back into the shuttle.

Hart relieved Harris on watch, and everyone else went back to sleep. It took a while for everyone to fall asleep. Even after slumber did take them, for some the sleep was fitful.

On the Avenger, sleep was fitful for Rosenzweig, as well. He did his best, though, for he knew that in six hours, he'd have to be awake and functional, no matter what happened. Wonder, nestled at the top of Alex's pillow, did his best to comfort his friend.

Finally, though, Alex surrendered. He got up about two hours early. He dressed and, with Wonder on his shoulder, headed for the Officer's Lounge to seek breakfast.

In the Lounge, he met Lt. Commander Klufas, who was also up early in anticipation of their arrival at Ohkirot. Wonder took wing and dashed away, calling for Skyler, Klufas' fire-lizard, to follow. Alex smiled as he watched the two little creatures play.

"Gods, I wish I could be that carefree," he sighed.

"Just a few more hours to Ohkirot," Mike replied.

"It's going to be okay, Mike." Alex was one of the few who didn't call Klufas 'Klufie'. "They're resourceful and smart. If anyone could survive, they will."

"It's that 'could' part that worries me," Mike said.

"Mike, stop worrying long enough to eat. Your food'll get cold." Alex pointed at the plate. "Or are you going to feed it to Skyler?"

Almost as if sensing Alex's thought, both Skyler and Wonder flew over to see what their friends were eating. After only a look, they both flew away.

"Well, Skyler's not interested," Mike said uncertainly.

"So eat."

In between mouthfuls, Klufas still worried, and Alex listened. By the time he was done, Mike seemed talked out, and Alex told him that he, too, was anxious.

"But I just have to keep telling myself it'll be okay. I can't afford to be depressed yet. At least let's wait 'til we have something to be depressed about."

Mike accepted that, and with breakfast done, they headed for the bridge.

Reaching it, they found that the Avenger was on approach to the Ohkirot System, although they were still quite a distance out. Commander DiMaio was also up early, and was scanning the system with the long-range sensors.

"Any sign of the shuttle yet?" Rosenzweig asked her. She shook her head.

"Not yet," she answered.

"Could they have crashed somewhere?"

"It's possible," said DiMaio. "If so, I hope it was on the Class M planet."

"Me, too," the Admiral replied. "I assume that if they had any control of the shuttle when they hit trouble, they'd make for that planet." He swiveled to face the navigator. "Mr. Smith, plot a course for Ohkirot II."

"Aye, sir."

As the sun rose, there were no further occurrences of attacks on the Talisman. When the crew emerged from the shuttle, though, Wilson looked uncertainly around. "I feel something," she said. "Someone or something is watching us."

"What?"

She looked at Green. "I don't know. But there is something."

As Wilson's Jedi training with Lt. Commander Boldstar had progressed, she—and those with her—had learned to trust such feelings. This time was no different. Everyone kept a hand near a phaser as they explored the area.

On the more positive side, the ground had dried out substantially from the previous day's rain. Ragan suggested that they rebuild the campfire. Maldonado concurred, and the fire was quickly rebuilt. Harris and Green, meanwhile, went to pick some fruit to go with the survival rations.

Breakfast was uneventful. The food was at least acceptable, and the crew seemed none the worse for wear after the night's attack. Even so, Wilson's sense of concern was increasing. There was something out there. She knew it was there. But she could not identify it.

Just after they had finished breakfast, the new attack occurred. This time, it was a pack of creatures that looked like a cross between wolves and cougars.

"Oh, no," muttered Maldonado. "Lupo-felinoids!" He swore to himself that he would *not* tell Chaym...if he survived this.

Quickly, the crew withdrew into the shuttlecraft, setting up a defensive line at the hatchway. In turn, they would fire their phasers at the oncoming creatures. There were a large number of creatures, though, and Maldonado began to worry that they would drain their phasers.

"Choose your shots carefully," he warned. "Remember, we can't recharge."

"Whites of their eyes?" asked Rhonda, quoting a very old Teran story.

"Something like that," Carlos answered, squeezing the trigger and blasting another creature.

The Avenger arrived at Ohkirot II and quickly took up a standard orbit. DiMaio immediately began scanning for the shuttlecraft. It took less than a single orbit before both she and Klufas looked up sharply.

"I have the beacon," DiMaio said, her words just beating Klufas' out.

"Scan the area," Johnson ordered.

DiMaio focused the sensors on the plain from which the beacon's signal emanated. "I have it," she said. She shook her head, then began running down the results. The shuttle was a wreck, and was clearly unflyable. However, the hull was intact. There were also life-signs for seven persons.

"There was a crew of eight," Johnson said.

"Yes," Rosenzweig responded. His eyes met Klufas', and the mutual concern was acknowledged silently.

There were other life-signs—animals—also surrounding the shuttle, and indications of phaser discharge. "They're under attack," said Klufas.

"I think he's right," DiMaio replied.

"Mike, hail the Talisman."

"Trying," Klufas replied. Then he looked up. "There's no response. I'm trying their communicators."

Just as Maldonado picked off his eighth creature, all of their communicators beeped. Shifting to allow Wilson to take his spot, Carlos pulled inside and flipped open his communicator, making contact with the ship. Ragan—to Klufas' intense relief—had also answered.

"Kris, I'm so glad you're okay," Klufas was saying.

"Michael, shut up and listen," Ragan snapped out. As Klufas stopped, surprised, she nodded to Maldonado. Quickly, they explained the situation.

Klufas had put the transmission on the bridge speakers. As soon as they had finished their brief description, Rosenzweig tied himself in. "Prepare for emergency transport." He double-tapped the intercom control and went on. "Transporter Room 4."

"Ensign Lyons."

"Ensign, lock on for an emergency transport at the coordinates you're about to receive." He pointed at DiMaio, he transmitted the coordinates.

"Got 'em," responded Lyons.

"Stand by." Rosenzweig looked at Klufas, who nodded. "Talisman crew, prepare for emergency transport."

"Give us five seconds," responded Maldonado.

"Tie them right to the transporter room," Rosenzweig told Klufas.

At a strategic moment, the crewmembers on the planet ceased fire. The creatures charged toward them, and Maldonado shouted, "Energize!" into the communicator. A moment later, they disappeared, just before the creatures reached them.

The first six crewmembers rematerialized on the transporter platform. Maldonado dove off and shouted "Energize!" at Lyons, who brought in Ensign Hart.

Lyons had barely gotten the words, "They're aboard" out of his mouth before Rosenzweig was in the turbo-lift. Klufas glanced at Johnson and received an affirming nod before bolting after the Vice Admiral.

Transporter Room 4 quickly became the scene of celebration, as the returning crewmembers were greeted with handshakes, hugs, smiles, and even tears. As the word spread through the ship that they had returned, other crewmembers somehow managed to find their way to the transporter room to join the throng.

Somewhere in the middle of it all, the Talisman crew, Rosenzweig, and Klufas paused for a moment to remember Gauthier. She would be recalled fondly. There was also sadness for the loss of the Talisman, which would never fly again.

"I wonder what kind of reaction we'll get when we requisition a replacement vehicle?" Rosenzweig said.

Wilson paused. "I wonder what we'll call it."

"Perhaps the crew should vote on it when the craft arrives," Rosenzweig suggested. While Wilson was mulling that idea, Alex grinned. "Look, you all should get to sickbay to get checked over." He smiled again. "Go. Git."

They pushed their way through the crowd of well-wishers. Once they all got out of the room, the Talisman crew headed for sickbay, and Rosenzweig and Klufas returned to the bridge.

"Mike, please advise Vice Admiral Wyatt that the crew of the Talisman have been rescued, with a single casualty. The shuttle itself was lost."

"Yes, sir." Klufas turned to his station.

DiMaio glanced over from Sciences. "Y'know, as long as we're back here, we might as well resume the system survey."

"It would let the shuttle crew know that their trip was meaningful," Johnson said, seconding the idea.

Rosenzweig concurred, and had Klufas make the request to Wyatt.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9311.16:

The Avenger, short one shuttlecraft, has resumed the survey of Ohkirot. Extra care is being taken to watch for any more unexpected stellar flares. Services will be held for Ensign Gauthier on the next duty shift. Her body has been recovered and placed in stasis for return to her home and family.

The requisition for a new shuttlecraft—probably one of the recently-designed Aladdin-class large shuttles—is being prepared.

Meanwhile, I have been monitoring the news from Parliament of the conference's progress. I hope it continues to go well, so that what has occurred in this system will be worth it."

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