

## THE TROUBLE ON FDR FACILITY 39

By Alex Rosenzweig, Based on the FASA Game Scenario "The Vanished",  
by Guy McLimore, Jr. and Greg Poehlein

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9208.05:

The *Avenger* is en route to the UFC-6059 Star System. Upon arrival, we will conduct a general survey, with an eye toward recommending follow-up studies as we determine the need. Thus far, the trip has been relatively uneventful. All systems are operating well."

"Sirrr, we'rre coming into rrrrange of Federrration Deepspace Rrresearch Facility 39," reported Lieutenant J.G. M'reen from the navigation station. Rear Admiral Rosenzweig glanced across to the Caitian navigation officer and nodded.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. How close will we pass?"

After a quick glance at her displays, M'reen answered, "About .8 parrsec, Admirrral."

FDR Facility 39 was one of a series of special scientific stations used for the development and execution of highly sensitive experiments. In order to maximize safety, these stations were set well away from any star system. This way, if anything went wrong, the potential effects could be limited.

This particular station was typical of its type, and featured four laboratory facilities in arms mounted radially from a central complex. The station itself was operated by Star Fleet personnel, but the laboratories were usually leased to private corporations seeking to perform research in deep space.

The research varied in type and nature. In some cases, it involved conditions (such as null gravity or hard vacuum) best found in interstellar space. In other cases, it required keeping sensitive instruments away from the gravity and magnetic fields present within a star system. And in a few cases, the research was simply considered too dangerous to be carried out in a populated area.

Regulations called for any ship passing within sensor range of a Federation facility to establish communication as a courtesy. Often, this communication was considered a godsend to the crews of stations like FDR Facility 39, who got only occasional visitors and were often isolated for long periods of time. A glance at the sensor displays told Rosenzweig that it was unlikely that the station had detected the *Avenger*. Magnetic storms in the area were likely to have reduced the effectiveness of its long-range sensors.

The rear admiral swiveled toward the communications station. "Mr. Francesconi, hail the space station."

"Aye, aye, sir." The lieutenant j.g. entered a series of commands into his console. The bridge crew waited calmly while he worked.

Visual communications proved impossible, due to a nearby storm, but Francesconi did establish a voice channel.

The voice on the other end bore a hint of French or French-Canadian accent, and more than a hint of boredom. "FDR Facility 39 acknowledging, *Avenger*. I assume you're just passing through. No one ever stops here. If it weren't for the Old Man raising Cain with the science boys, we'd have no excitement at all! You folks get all the interesting jobs, while we sit on our fa—"

Abruptly, the voice stopped. There was no hint of trouble, no outcry, no indication that there was anything out of the ordinary. After a few seconds, though, it became clear that the young man was not going to continue.

"FDR Facility 39, are you still there?" asked Rosenzweig. "Come in, please." There was nothing.

Alex looked over at Francesconi, who was running checks through his station. He shook his head in perplexity. "Channel's still open, Admiral. We're still getting a carrier, so the equipment is working fine at both ends." But, even after repeated attempts, they could not get a reply from the station.

Rosenzweig turned back to M'reen. "What's our distance from the station?"

"Just overrr a parrsec, sirrr," she replied.

"Plot a course for the station." Alex turned to Ensign Sonnenfeld at the helm. "Take us to warp factor 6."

The *Avenger* arrived at the station bare moments later. Rosenzweig turned toward the sciences station, where Lt. Commander DiMaio was concentrating on the sensor readings. She looked up as he completed the turn, and shook her head.

"There's too much interference from the magnetic storm. I can't punch a sensor scan through it, certainly not enough to penetrate the station's hull."

"All right. What do we have on this FDR facility in the computer?"

"Checking, Admiral." Judi tapped a query into her console, and data promptly came up on a viewer. "All four labs are currently leased. The companies using them are Bio/Genetic Research, Inc., Tachyon Micromechanics Ltd., Multiplanet Metals, Inc., and New Amsterdam Gravitics Co. The research itself is under security restriction, and the computer doesn't have any information on it."

"What's the standard complement of an FDR Facility?" asked Alex.

"It varies, depending on the research involved. It's typically 30-35 people. I can't get any life-form readings from the station, but with this storm," she shrugged, "it's not surprising."

"Boarding party?" suggested Lt. Commander Johnson. His voice was tentative; he had just succeeded Captain Lane as the *Avenger's* executive officer, and was feeling his way around his new role, getting used to its parameters, as it were.

Rosenzweig nodded. "We may have to."

"Admiral, I can't say as I like the idea of trying to beam anyone through that," Chief Engineer Padovan commented from where he stood near the engineering station. "With a magnetic storm of this intensity, controlling the beam would be a risky proposition at best."

"What about a shuttlecraft?" Alex asked.

"Nope," Johnson said. "These stations don't have shuttles or a shuttle bay. Between the generally-secret nature of the research and the distance from any planetary system, shuttles aren't seen as much use."

"Isn't that a little paranoid, Bill?" asked Alex. Johnson shrugged.

"Maybe so, but with so much of the work being private, the companies decided that they wanted controlled circumstances."

"But there are airlocks."

Bill nodded, but Judi shook her head. "If you're suggesting a direct EVA, forget it. With that much loose energy out there, an environmental suit will not be enough protection. Anybody trying it would fry in short order."

"Then we're back to transporters." Rosenzweig looked back at Padovan. "George, is beaming at all viable?"

The chief engineer looked thoroughly uncomfortable. "I don't like it, Admiral. I **think** we could do it, but I do **not** like it."

"Unless you truly don't think we could get a boarding party through, I think the situation warrants the risk." Alex glanced at DiMaio, then swung back to Padovan. The looks on both their faces told him what he needed to know. He touched his intercom control. "Transporter Room 2, prepare to beam a boarding party over to the station." He looked up at Johnson. "Who goes?"

"Not you, sir," Johnson said emphatically. Rosenzweig sometimes had a tendency to emulate James Kirk more than his exec approved of.

"All right. How about Mr. Warren?"

"Yes." Johnson nodded. Warren's computer knowledge would help a lot on the station.

"Very well, then." Alex nodded. "See to it."

The chosen boarding team assembled in Transporter Room 2 some fifteen minutes later. Padovan had strongly recommended that the party be limited to six persons. He was worried that the magnetic storm could worsen. If the *Avenger* had to make multiple transporter passes, the likelihood of casualties would increase significantly. Rosenzweig had agreed, so Warren chose only five officers to accompany him.

The boarding party included Ensign Longo from Engineering, Lt. Commander Lindemann from Medical, Lieutenant Csuti from Sciences, Ensign Wolberg from Communications, and Ensign Swanson from Security. Once they all had arrived, Warren handed out the equipment. Everyone got communicators and Phaser II's. Lindemann carried a medikit and medical tricorder, while Csuti sported a sciences 'corder. Longo carried a small systems analysis kit, in case the station's computer had crashed. This was unlikely, but both Longo and Warren agreed that the caution was warranted.

The transporter specialist looked up from his panel, and gazed at the boarding party through the transparent wall of the operator's booth. "I've locked onto the station's transporter reception beacon," he announced. "It's going to be tricky..."

"Energize, Mr. Lyons," ordered Warren.

"Aye, sir." Lyons began adjusting the controls. A hum rose from the equipment.

On the bridge, Lieutenant Ellowitch looked up from Mission Ops 1. "They're beaming now." He idly watched the displays. Suddenly, he tensed.

"What is it?" Johnson asked him.

"Trouble," Ellowitch responded.

"There's a spike in magnetic storm intensity," DiMaio reported. She leaned in to her station, trying to get a better sense of what was happening, fingers flying over the control arrays.

"Transporter Room 2," Rosenzweig said tersely into the 'com. "Report."

"Having trouble just now," Lyons' voice came back. "Be...right with you." A moment later, the specialist spoke again. "It's all right. I got 'em through...barely."

Padovan shot Rosenzweig a look that said, 'I told you it was risky.' The admiral ignored him. "Mr. Francesconi, hail the boarding party. Mr. Ellowitch, get a telemetry-lock on their tricorders."

"The storm is increasing," Judi said.

"How bad?"

"Sensors are working on that," the Science Officer replied.

"I have Lt. Commander Warren," put in Francesconi.

"On speakers."

The signal was laced with interference, but Warren's voice was audible. "We're on the station, but that was a very nasty ride. Let's try to avoid those in the future, shall we?"

"You bet, Frank," Alex affirmed. "Everyone's okay?"

"Yes. We're in the—bzzzzttt!!"

"What? Say again!"

"I have a computer projection," DiMaio announced. "Based on the current readings, we can estimate that the storm will peak in about 2½ hours. Beaming and full communications should be available again in 5 hours."

"Did you get that, Mr. Warren?" Rosenzweig asked.

"ssss...tsts...ving a lot of trouble real\*//\* you," Warren's voice came back. "Think we got—sss—numbers. Losing—stssss—tact."

"Be careful over there. Acknowledge."

There was no reply. "That's it, sir," said Francesconi. "We'll just have to wait out the storm."

"All right. Keep a close ear."

"Aye, Admiral."

On the station, Warren closed his communicator. "We're on our own," he said. "We'll make the best of it."

The boarding party had arrived in the station's transporter chamber. Located in the "southeast" quadrant of central level 2, it was essentially the only safe beam-in point in conditions like these. The six from the *Avenger* looked around. The place was deserted. The lights were on and the equipment seemed to be operating normally, but there were no people.

With a gesture to Longo and Csuti, Warren walked over to the transporter console. The three men looked it over. The unit's usage log showed no recent activity, which seemed reasonable under the circumstances. All settings were neutral.

Wolberg slipped into the communication's office. A moment later, the door slid open and she put her head out. "Mr. Warren?" Frank hurried toward her, the others in tow. Entering the office, they examined the curved console. The transmitter was still on, and a light glowed on the voice-pickup unit. The chair was pushed partly under the console, and a cup of cold coffee sat to one side of the control array.

"If they left," Lindemann commented, "they certainly weren't planning to be away long."

"You're right," Csuti noted.

Warren looked carefully around the room, his eyes sweeping the walls, floor, ceiling... "There," he said, pointing. Set into the

corner was a small security surveillance camera. A red light glowed on one side of the unit. "Unless they're doing something very unusual," Frank said, "that camera will be automatically recording all activity in this room. At least," he added, "it ought to be."

"Can we access the security records?" asked Csuti.

"Not from here," Swanson said.

"We'll have to try through the console in the security office," Warren firmed. After a moment, he looked at the others. "Okay, let's have a look around. Stay in this quadrant, but see if you can find anything that might help us out here."

The group left the office and scattered. Ensign Wolberg headed past the computer bay and toward one of the main corridors. Passing the assistant station manager's office, she paused. Was that the sound of running water? She looked for a door, and soon found one that led into a bathroom. Yes, indeed, the water was left running. The ensign shook her head. Not only weren't the station personnel planning to be away long, in at least one case, they obviously hadn't been planning to leave!

Warren, with Csuti on his heels, headed for the station manager's office. Looking around, they found a padd sitting on the desk. On the display screen was a memo, reminding the station manager of a scheduled inspection of the Tachyon Micromechanics labs at 1300 hours that afternoon. Csuti snatched a quick glance at his wrist chrono.

"That's only an hour away," he noted.

"Yup," said Warren.

There wasn't anything else to be found in the manager's office, and the two men left soon afterward, heading across the quadrant toward the Security Chief's office. They met the rest of the party on the way. Except for Wolberg's observation of the running water, the other offices had yielded nothing really useful.

Even the Security Chief's office had nothing of obvious interest around. The chief, it appeared, kept a clean desk. He did, however, have a computer terminal, and the investigation quickly focused on that.

"Can we get to the monitors through here?" asked Wolberg.

"We ought to be able to," Warren answered her. "We just have to get past the chief's privacy lock." He fell silent for a moment, concentrating on overcoming the security chief's ciphers. Then, with a soft, "Ah, ha!", he touched a switch and straightened up as the viewer lit. After a rapid scan of the functions menu, Frank hit another series of controls. After the briefest of pauses, the viewer began imaging various areas of the station. Most were empty. There was simply no one around during the timespans in question. However, when they called up the logs of the communications office, they were rewarded by a view of a man identified by the computer as Ensign Andre LeClerc. Wearing engineering/ops gold, he sat at the communications console sipping coffee. He then reached out to tap a control, and list-ened for a moment.

"If I read this right," Csuti said, "he's hearing us."

"Computer," Warren ordered, "repeat this log, last two minutes, with volume."

Sure enough, Csuti was correct. The group from the *Avenger* listened as LeClerc responded to the query from Lieutenant Francesconi. In mid-sentence, LeClerc vanished. There was no light flash, no sound, no pause, nothing. He was simply there one minute, and gone the next. Even at extreme-slow speed, there were no additional clues. LeClerc simply became absent.

A quick scan of other monitors showed no unusual activity. Areas were generally open. It had been the middle of the working day on the station. However, the monitors all showed one inescapable fact: there was no one there.

Warren ordered the computer to deactivate the security locks around the station. "No sense making our lives more complicated," he commented. The others agreed.

Leaving the security office a short time later, Lieutenant Csuti opened his tricorder and swung it in a slow circle, scanning for anything new. His eyes narrowed.

"Commander Warren, I'm picking up some unusual power usage patterns on the station."

"What do you mean?" asked Ensign Longo. Csuti's report had gotten his attention.

The scientist tried to focus his scan. "It seems as though power consumption is up overall, with the drain tending toward the 'north' side of the station."

"Which arm is on the 'north' side?" asked Lindemann.

A quick check of the nearest terminal showed that the "north" arm was leased to Bio/Genetic Research, Inc. Since nothing that corporation was likely to be using would create such a power drain, the group was confused.

"Okay," said Lindemann, "here's a suggestion. Let's go to the middle of the station and take another set of readings." The others concurred, and the boarding party proceeded toward the central turbolift. As they gathered near the lift, Warren suddenly held up a hand.

"Did you hear that?"

"What, sir?" queried Lindemann.

"I thought I heard something breaking, or a clattering sound." The others stopped to listen, too. The sound came again.

"That way!" Csuti pointed toward the "northeast" quadrant. The station deck plans, which Csuti had downloaded into his tricorder, indicated the room in that direction to be the canteen/cafeteria. The six officers made for the nearest door.

Entering, they looked around. The place was a disaster, with plates, platters, and dishes thrown everywhere. Near the food synthesizers on the inner wall sat the likely cause of the mess: two creatures, of a type completely new in the boarding party's experience.

The creatures were approximately the size of an average Human. Their bodies were semi-translucent, and glowed faintly with an orange light. They were semi-solid in nature, with an elliptical feature in the center of what could best be termed their "heads". It appeared that the creatures had discovered how to acquire food from the synthesizers, and had been happily consuming.

Lindemann pointed at a pile of food thrown to one side. "Look," she said. "There are plates, cups, trays...and vegetables thrown around, but not meats."

"Ahh," responded Swanson. "So they like meat. Carnivores."

The two creatures seemed rather gorged. They were moving slowly, and shadowy lumps could be seen within their bodies. Indeed, thought Warren, they seemed as surprised by the *Avenger* party as the starship crewmembers were by them. The time for surprise ended quickly, though, as the two creatures began emitting a high-pitched bleating keen.

"What the--?" began Csuti.

"Are they calling for help?" wondered Warren.

"Are they intelligent?" queried Lindemann.

Swanson drew his phaser. He looked at Warren. "With your permission, sir, I'd rather not find out just now."

"Granted," Frank said. "On stun." Swanson fired. The beam passed right through the creature, which began to approach the group.

"No effect," growled Swanson.

"Suggest retreat, Mr. Warren," said Csuti.

"Agreed," Warren replied. He indicated the doorway behind them, and they backed toward it. The creatures crept toward them. The group was moving slowly, so as not to agitate the creatures any more than necessary. Still, they were making steady progress toward the doors. But the creatures were moving faster now. Swanson fired again, his phaser now set on heavy stun. Again there was no effect.

"Try something else," offered Wolberg.

"Such as?" asked Swanson.

"Heat?" The idea came from Lindemann.

Swanson glanced at Warren, who nodded. "Try it." The security specialist did so. He was rewarded when one creature flinched away from the phaser beam.

"Ah, hah!" said Csuti.

"Keep the beams on them," Warren ordered. As he said it, something began oozing under the doors on the other side of the cafeteria.

"It's more of them!" exclaimed Lindemann.

"Damn. Hit them, too."

"Aye, Mr. Warren." Swanson, Longo, and Csuti alternated their beams between the two creatures in the cafeteria and the two slithering under the door. They hurried their own escape, as well, and were soon back in the corridor.

"Keep your phasers on those doors. If anything starts coming through, hit it."

The security officer paused for a moment. "So. They don't like heat."

"Sir," said Csuti, if they're intelligent, and if we can communicate with them, they might know what happened here."

"No one brought a universal translator," commented Warren.

"There must be one on the station," interjected Longo. "Let me ask the computer in the station manager's office."

"All right," said Warren, "but be careful."

"Aye, sir," responded the engineer. He dashed off.

"When he gets back, we have to have some idea of what we're about here. New life or not, we still have to find out what happened to the station's crew."

"There's still that note the manager had in his office."

Warren looked at Csuti. "You mean the inspection?"

"I guess," responded the scientist. Warren shook his head. Every time someone asked Csuti something directly, he almost seemed to withdraw into himself.

"Well, your guess is as good as any we have right now." Csuti brightened slightly. "We'll go in that direction, and see if there are any clues."

A few moments later, Longo returned. He held up a universal translator, a grin on his face.

"Where was it?" asked Wolberg.

"Very easy to find," Longo answered her. "It was in the station manager's desk."

"If we run into any more of those creatures, we'll try to communicate with them," Warren replied. "But unless anyone wants to suggest that these things had something to do with the station crew's disappearance, we'll try to follow our leads. And right now, those leads are pointing toward the Tachyon Micromechanics labs."

"Than off we go," Swanson said jauntily. He moved toward the station's "east" arm. The others followed, somewhat more warily.

Walking down the hallway, the group reached what they thought would be the lab. However, further progress was impeded by the large security door that blocked the corridor.

"Is that supposed to be closed?" asked Csuti, an expression of concern crossing his countenance. "It seems... wrong."

"Agreed," responded Warren. "But we still have to get in."

"Cut through?" suggested Longo. Warren shook his head.

"If we do, we could bring those creatures down on top of us."

"Then...?"

"Override the locks," said Swanson.

"Computer access. Yes." Csuti nodded firmly.

"Very well, then. Can we do this from any terminal?"

"Probably," Csuti answered, "but if we can access the computer from the security chief's unit, it'll probably be easier."

"Great," muttered Wolberg. "We have to go back there?" She hitched a finger toward the station core-module.

"Not all of us," said Warren. He looked at Csuti. "Bob, can you do it?"

"Me?" Csuti seemed startled.

"You are a computer specialist, right?"

"I can try," the Lieutenant said uncertainly.

"Good! Mr. Swanson, you'll accompany him. Stay in touch, and good luck." Frank smiled at them, and they headed out.

After about ten minutes, the two returned. With a satisfied smile, Csuti reached out and touched a sensor on the side of the door. The panel slid aside. "The security chief already had an override program set in," Swanson explained. "Everything should operate normally now."

"Good," answered Warren. "Let's go in."

Entering the lab's central area, the group looked around. Ahead of them and to the left was a control console. On the other side, a transparent panel was closed in front of what looked like an odd transporter chamber. The chamber was lit from within, and the low hum of equipment permeated the area. On both the free-standing console and the two others attached to the walls, lights blinked and shifted.

Longo and Warren stopped to examine the central console. "This is weird," said Longo. "I recognize some of these controls, but not others. These over here make no sense!" He shook his head, puzzling over the odd panel.

Looking over at the monitor panel, Csuti thought he saw something familiar. "Commander Warren, this readout looks like a pattern monitor. But if I read it right, it's saying there are patterns in here!" Attracted by the increase in Csuti's pitch, Longo walked over. He stopped.

"Gods. I think he's right." His eyebrows knitted. "This makes no sense. It seems to be saying that there are a **lot** of patterns in there, more than I've ever seen in a transporter before...of any size. And they've been in here longer than I'd've believed possible."

"But why are they in there?" asked Csuti. "Or," he added, amending himself, "how did they **come** to be in there?"

"Good question," commented Warren. "Can we pull the lab records? Let's see what they thought they were doing."

Csuti leaned over the console, activating the unit's records function. Soon, they learned that Tachyon Micromechanics, Ltd. had been experimenting with a new type of transporter system. The new unit was silent, instantaneous, and could differentiate between various types of life-forms, allowing for greater selectivity in operation. On the lab's lower level was a very complex computer link, which appeared to explain the unit's ability to retain so many patterns for so long. During an experiment earlier that day with this transporter unit, a high-voltage pulse came in through the station's electrical system, one too great for the circuit breakers to deal with. A number of key circuits fused, and the transporter activated in an uncontrolled fashion. A beam swept through the station, dematerializing the entire complement.

"Oh, my gods..." muttered Lindemann.

To make matters more complicated, reintegration took a lot of power. When checked, the monitors showed that there was a power loss in the system. Until it was corrected, they would be unable to reintegrate the stored patterns. Analyzing the energy-flow monitors, Csuti and Longo traced the power loss to a damaged relay station on Central Level 3.

"Can we fix it from here?" asked Swanson. Longo shook his head. "I was afraid you'd say that," sighed the security specialist.

"Sorry," replied Tim, "but someone's going to have to fix it directly."

"You realize," said Wolberg, "that that someone is most realistically you."

"Yup," Tim answered, shrugging his shoulders.

"Okay," said Warren. "Get your gear together. Mr. Csuti, Mr. Swanson, you'll accompany him. Be careful. Don't forget about those aliens."

"How could I **possibly** forget?" quipped Swanson. But he hefted his phaser and checked one of the translators.

The three men left the others and headed back into the station's central module. They went down one deck, to Level 3. Checking the data stored in his tricorder, Csuti guided them to the main engineering control room. There, they examined the main console's displays. It was quickly determined that the northernmost power relay station had been damaged. Evidently, the outer door was the culprit, and the resultant failures were compromising the system.

"I wonder if the aliens had anything to do with this..." suggested Csuti.

"Might well be," Swanson replied.

Because of the damage to the door, the relay station was in a vacuum. The station's inner door had sealed automatically. The only way to reach the station would be to either do an EVA (which Warren flatly vetoed when they called to discuss it with him, due to the remnants of the magnetic storm) or have someone depressurize the fabrication center while suited workers waited inside. The latter choice was made, and it was decided that Longo and Swanson would go into the relay station, while Csuti handled the atmospheric controls.

Carefully, Longo and Swanson suited up. Mindful of the alien creatures they'd seen, they slipped their phasers into suit-holsters where they could be easily gotten to. Csuti ran them through the standard pre-EVA checks, making sure the station's environmental

suits were functioning properly. Everything seemed to pass muster. Exchanging thumbs-up signals with his suited crewmates, Csuti returned to the engineering control room. He activated a series of monitor-viewers, then tripped a communication switch.

"Gentlemen," he advised, "I'm depressurizing the fabrication area now." He keyed in a series of commands, and watched the atmosphere-level indicator drop. A moment later, he spoke again. "I'm reading full depressurization. It's up to you, now." Switching off the 'com unit, he sighed. "I hope you get it right," he muttered to himself.

"Okay," said Longo. "Let's get going." He led the way to the inner door of the relay station and palmed the override switch to open it. As the panel slid aside, both men stopped in their tracks.

"Oh, gods, it's another one of those things," growled Longo. With a look at Swanson, he drew his phaser, just as the creature extended a pseudopod.

"Duck!" exclaimed the security specialist. Longo reacted instantly, dropping to the deck as an energy pulse crackled just over his head. Swanson fired his phaser, playing a heat beam over the body of the creature, which recoiled instantly. Straightening, Longo added his own phaser fire, and soon the creature was cowering in a corner.

"Paul," said Longo, handing Swanson a universal translator, "try and talk to it while I work on fixing this relay unit."

"Talk to it," replied Swanson. "Well, okay. Might as well. Mr. Csuti, you may want to listen in."

"Listening," Bob answered.

Swanson's efforts were rewarded with limited success. After a few false starts, including the need to fire on the creature when it made as if to go after Longo, he finally got it to at least begin "listening". The translator was utilizing EM signals in response to pulses the creature was putting out. By the time Longo had repaired the outer door and the relay station itself, Swanson had learned that the creatures called themselves I'glilii, that they were a part of a colony that flew through space under its own power, and that they viewed anything that was both living and not I'glilii as potential food.

"Oh, great," growled Longo.

It quickly became clear that these creatures were just too different to make ready communication—let alone cooperation—viable. At Csuti's suggestion, Swanson focused on trying to get the creature to understand that it and its companions needed to leave the station. By the time Tim had finished his repair-work, Swanson was ready to admit defeat.

"It still thinks of me as potentially interesting food," he complained. "We're not getting anywhere."

"Well, I am," Longo responded. He snapped an access-plate back onto the large relay unit. "Well, Mr. Csuti, what do your monitors show?"

"You've done it," Csuti answered a moment later. "Power levels are coming back to normal. Flow rates are stabilizing all over the station. Good job."

"Thank you, sir," answered Longo. "We're coming back into the fabrication area." The two men left the relay-station.

"I wonder if the I'glilii will leave the relay alone," mused Csuti.

"I hope so," Longo said. "I'd rather not have to go back in and fix it again."

"Amen to that," Swanson chimed in.

With the repair-job complete, Csuti quickly repressurized the fabrication area and Swanson and Longo divested themselves of their environmental suits.

"Let's get back to the lab," Csuti suggested. The other two agreed and they all headed for the door. Behind them, unnoticed, the I'gllii flowed out from the relay station and moved across the fabrication area toward a door on the opposite side from the one the Star Fleet officers had used.

Returning to the Tachyon Micromechanics lab, the men found Warren analyzing the records in the experimental transporter. "I think I understand this," he told them. "We'll only be able to pull them out one at a time."

"Let's go," said Lindemann. "The quicker we get them out of there, the happier I'll be." Warren nodded at the medical officer.

"Okay. Engaging." With that, Frank began the setup procedure. Slowly at first, but with increasing sureness, he began bringing the station's crew out of their state of limbo. Wolberg, Longo, Csuti, and Swanson caught them as they materialized and promptly lost consciousness. As they were moved off the platform and put onto the floor on one side, Lindemann scanned them with her medical tricorder.

"They're basically in good health, though they're suffering from shock due to the reintegration process. They'll be okay in a few hours."

After about 26 of the station's crew had been reintegrated, Lieutenant Csuti's tricorder—which had been left sitting near the lab module's entry doors—suddenly started beeping. Csuti scampered over to check it.

"Oh, no. Damn!"

"What is it?" asked Swanson.

"It's the I'gllii. They're coming this way."

"How many?"

"I'm not getting a clear reading, but on a guess, I'd say..." The scientist looked up, his expression somber. "All of them."

"Oh, great," muttered Warren. He kept his eyes on the controls as he spoke. "Does it look like they want to talk?"

"I don't think so," answered Wolberg, who had gone to look over Csuti's shoulder.

"Defensive positions, then." After completing the current reintegration, Frank quickly switched the transporter to standby. "And please try not to hit any equipment."

"We'll do our best, Commander," Swanson answered.

The I'gllii made their intentions clear almost as soon as they flowed through the doors. Energy bolts struck a wall and a console. Fortunately, thought Warren, the equipment was well insulated. The battle was short but intense. Having already learned about the creatures' aversion to heat, the *Avenger* boarding party used that knowledge to advantage, though this was counterbalanced by the need to protect the unconscious or semi-conscious station crew. Lindemann took a glancing hit from an I'gllii bolt, and was quickly pushed down by Csuti, who counterattacked with a ferocity that none of the others could ever remember having seen in him.

Just then, Warren's communicator beeped. Startled, he nearly dropped his phaser as he looked down at the communicator in surprise. Drawing it out, he flipped it open. "Warren here. We're a little busy right now. Can I get back to you?"

"We're picking up some odd life readings over there. What's going on?"

"That's what's keeping us busy. I'll call you back. Warren out."

On the *Avenger's* bridge, Rear Admiral Rosenzweig traded glances with Lieutenant J.G. Francesconi. "What the hell is going on over there?"

"The storm is clearing out, Admiral," DiMaio reported. "Beaming should be safe in another five to ten minutes."

"Thank you," Alex responded. He turned to the exec. "Mr. Johnson, have a medical and security team meet me in Transporter Room 2 in five minutes." He stood up. "The bridge is yours." Before Bill could utter a sound, Alex had stepped into the turbolift.

"Aye, sir," Bill said, the comment almost a sigh of resignation. He crossed to the command chair and tapped the intercom switch. "Bridge to Security..."

It soon became clear that the creatures were being driven back. Abruptly, they ceased trying to enter the lab and flowed back out through the doorway. Warren ordered the party to cease fire.

"Mr. Csuti," he ordered, "track them. Where are they going?"

"Tracking," Csuti answered. "They're making for the airlock."

As Rosenzweig met Dr. Gifford and her team, as well as Lt. Commander Cook and Ensign Norden, in Transporter Room 2, the intercom beeped.

"Bridge to Admiral Rosenzweig. Sir, the creatures are leaving the station through an airlock in the lab arm. They're grouping together and moving away from the station."

"Hmm..." Alex tapped the 'com switch. "Judi, track their direction, but do not follow. I repeat, do not follow. We're going to go see what's happening on the station. Out." Receiving his equipment from Ensign Lyons, he hopped onto the platform. As soon as the others joined him, he gazed levelly at Lyons. "Energize."

The second *Avenger* boarding team materialized in the Tachyon Micromechanics lab area. Gifford, Lieutenant J.G. Bush, and Ensign Zwebner immediately fell to assisting Lindemann with the station's crew, most of whom were by this time conscious...and feeling quite ill.

Warren briefed the admiral on what had transpired, and what had been discovered about the transporter system under development. Rosenzweig shook his head. "Someone," he said, "was inexcusably careless." Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice. Glancing toward the voice's source, he saw a young man in a gold tunic slumped near a console. Norden was assisting him. "Well, young man," Alex said, "I thought I recognized your voice. If we hadn't been in touch when—" he gestured in the general direction of the transporter unit—"this happened, we might never have known. What's your name?"

The younger man looked up at him, eyes struggling to focus. "Ensign Andre LeClerc, sir. I do communications and engineering on the station."

"Well, don't overexert yourself just yet. I expect we'll have you back to duty soon, but in the meantime, you just let our people help."

"Aye, sir." With a small smile, LeClerc sagged back against the console support.

Later, with much of the station's crew recovered, Rosenzweig, Warren, Lt. Commander Johnson, and the Tachyon Micromechanics lab administrator sat in the station manager's office. The manager, Lt. Commander Jason Lee by name, listened as Warren described what the party from the *Avenger* had found.

"Damn it," Lee growled. "I'd been worried about that lab and its transporter experiments. They were tapping too much power from the station's main net, and I didn't think there was enough shielding from transporter beams. And when I expressed my concerns, this..." He paused, controlling his temper, "...person blocked all my attempts to find out what was going on in there."

The administrator, Salvatore Santini, leaned forward and emitted a "Harumph"-ing noise. "Look, if you hadn't kept poking your nose into our work and where it didn't belong, we would have gotten somewhere and—"

"Really?" Johnson asked. He glanced quickly at Rosenzweig, who nodded for him to continue. "In the wake of what's happened, can you actually sit there and tell us that you took all suitable precautions in dealing with such risky experiments?"

Santini had the grace to look flustered at that. "Well—"

"You kept trying to block my inquiries!" Lee exclaimed, banging the desk with his fist.

"You didn't have the right to make that kind of 'inquiry'," Santini retorted.

"Well, I have the right to make **this** statement," Rosenzweig said emphatically, recapturing the attention of both men. "That system will be disconnected, immediately if not sooner, until a Star Fleet investigation team gets out here and determines whether the experiments should be allowed to continue at all."

"That's the best idea I've heard all day," said Lt. Commander Lee. Santini nodded tersely.

"Good," Alex said. "Mr. Johnson, has that advisory been sent to Starbase 12?"

"Yes, sir," Bill replied. "I've received word that Rear Admiral McGinnis is dispatching a team post-haste."

"Excellent. In that case," he said to the station manager, "we shan't take up any more of your time." He stood up, Lee and both *Avenger* officers followed suit.

"Thank you, Admiral," Lee said, shaking Rosenzweig's hand. "And thank you, Mr. Warren, for your team's efforts in dealing with those I'gl'ii whatsises."

"You're welcome," Warren said calmly.

"Good day, Commander," Johnson added. The *Avenger* delegation departed.

Back on the bridge, Rosenzweig settled into his command chair. He looked around the chamber, eyes flitting across readout viewers. Satisfied, he began to swivel toward where Lt. Commander Johnson stood. Abruptly, Lieutenant J.G. Francesconi broke in.

"Admiral, update transmission from Starbase 12. An investigation team has been dispatched aboard the *U.S.S. Pegasus*. They're due here in two days. And Lt. Commander Lee called from the station. He's sure there'll be no further trouble. Just about all the researchers in the Tachyon Micromechanics lab agree with the decision. Mr. Santini seems to be the only one not very happy about it."

"Very good," Rosenzweig said with a smile. "Thank you, Lieutenant." Struck by a thought, he rotated to face the sciences

station. "Ms. DiMaio, did you get a fix on which direction those creatures went?"

"Yes," DiMaio replied. "They headed roughly toward Shapley Center. I put out a message squirt to several bases in that direction, and they'll be keeping an eye out for the I'gl'ii."

"Thank you, Commander." Shifting his attention to Johnson, Alex said, "Well, I guess we can get back on course to UFC-6059. Agreed?"

Johnson smiled. "Agreed."

Rosenzweig swiveled forward. "Good. Ms. M'reen, do you have that course ready?"

"Aye, sirrr," the Caitian replied.

"Mr. Sonnenfeld, warp factor five." The rear admiral leaned back. "Engage."

And the *Avenger* returned to its mission...

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