

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

THE GAUNTLET

By Alex Rosenzweig

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9304.15:

The Avenger has been diverted from its patrol assignment along the Romulan Neutral Zone. We are now carrying a consignment of emergency medical supplies, bound for the planet Ahlyar. Ahlyar has been stricken by an unusually fast-acting viral plague. Thousands of people are dead, and thousands more are dying. Until now, Ahlyar has had only limited contact with the Federation. Representatives from that world have declined either membership or affiliation. However, circumstances have grown desperate enough for Ahlyar to call for help. The Federation, perhaps sensing an opportunity to enhance relations with Ahlyar, has opted to respond quickly. The Avenger is one of several vessels assigned to carry supplies, on a mission listed as 'most urgent'. For us, there is one more complication. Between our present position and Ahlyar lies a sector of space claimed by the Daltexi, a highly territorial and often hostile race. Entry into this sector could precipitate a major diplomatic incident, if not outright war. While the Daltexi do not pose a serious military threat to the Federation, Star Fleet Command feels it to be quite important not to cause a confrontation. We can avoid Daltexi space by flying through a narrow band of unclaimed space which borders their territory. The problem is that this band of space also borders the Klingon Neutral Zone, and with tensions still high, there is a natural wariness."

Sickbay was chaos. It was organized chaos, but chaos nonetheless, as the staff worked feverishly in preparation for the Avenger's arrival at Ahlyar. Five of the departments were involved at once, an unusual occurrence to say the least. Commander Gifford was readying support teams to aid in the areas most stricken by the plague. Lt. Commander Rosen was gathering surgical teams to assist native physicians in areas with limited medical resources. Lieutenant Richardson was coordinating crisis support management, to help the Ahlyaran people deal with the psychological trauma of the plague's devastation. Lieutenant Murphy and several of the Avenger's pathologists were working with both the Ahlyaran research community and the medical staffs of the other ships, trying to develop a cure—or at least a palliative—for the virus. Finally, Lieutenant Bush was busily preparing the nursing staff to act as backup EMT teams, supporting both Gifford's and Rosen's groups. Doctor Fillmore was in the middle of it all, keeping track of everything and making sure that it was all getting done.

Seeing that it was, she was able to take a moment to make her report to the bridge.

On the bridge, Commander Johnson was in the center seat, while Vice Admiral Rosenzweig attended to some more mundane issues in his ready room. Johnson listened as Fillmore made the report.

"It's kind of crazy down here," she told him, "but things are getting done. We should be ready by the time we get to Ahlyar."

"Has Doctor Murphy had any luck?" asked the exec.

"Not yet," Fillmore told him. "We're hopeful, but it looks like this is going to be a tough puzzle."

"Wish him and his staff luck for me," Johnson replied. "I'll pass on your report." With that, Fillmore signed off. Double-pressing the intercom control, Johnson signaled Rosenzweig in the ready room.

Meanwhile, Second Officer Fillmore was seated at the Mission Ops 1 station, coordinating landing party requirements with both Commander Bell—sitting next to him at Mission Ops 2—and Lt. Commander Csuti, who was down in his office in the Security area.

"I don't like it," Csuti said for perhaps the fifth time in twenty minutes. "All those people on Ahlyar have already died. I'd really rather not send my personnel into something like that. Combat, landing party protection, police functions, that's one thing. But plague environments? Nope. I do *not* like it."

Fillmore and Bell looked at each other. Bob mimed strangulation, while Brenda just sighed. Bob turned his attention to the intercom pickup.

"Bob," he began, "we understand your concern. But this is a critically important mission. Star Fleet feels that this is worth the potential risk."

"Remember, too, Bob, that part of the reason we're sitting here is to set things up to *keep* everyone safe." Bell paused for a moment. "Speaking of safety, shall we try to get back onto the topic?"

"Yes," said Csuti, as if it had not been he who had interjected.

"Good," Bell continued. "Now, I think that we'll be safer using the transporters, rather than the shuttlecraft."

"Shuttles would allow us to carry more," pointed out Fillmore.

"Yes, but shuttles could be contaminated. We can scan for unusual substances or organisms before we beam someone up."

Fillmore nodded to Bell. "Point taken. But what about the materials themselves? Will they be okay being transported?"

Bell wasn't sure, but a quick call down to sickbay answered their questions. Doctor Fillmore assured them that the medical supplies would not be adversely affected by beaming.

"Very good!" Bell's expression brightened. "Now, on to the next..."

In the center of the bridge, Lieutenant Graevyn looked over her shoulder at Johnson. "Commander, we're approaching Daltexi space."

Johnson acknowledged, his gaze sharpening and drifting toward the viewer. Then he glanced toward Communications. "Mr. Klufas, has there been any contact with the Daltexi?"

Klufas looked back and shook his head. Star Fleet was supposed to have transmitted a formal advisory to the Daltexi, informing them of the Avenger's passage near their space and explaining

the circumstances behind the flyby. Thus far, to the best of anyone on the Avenger's knowledge, there had been no response.

The lift doors slid apart and Lt. Commander Colgan stepped out onto the bridge. He quietly crossed to the Tactical station and scrutinized the readouts on the displays. Johnson noticed him. Standing up, the exec moved to join the strategy officer.

"You look worried," Bill said.

Colgan nodded. "Fair conclusion." He shrugged. "What's bothering me is that there are too many good places for the Klingons to attack us." He stabbed a finger at one display. "Especially here, where we'd have limited maneuverability."

"The 'corridor'," Johnson said, gazing at the viewer Colgan indicated.

Tom nodded. "Just so."

Colgan's fears were well-founded. As the Avenger approached the strip of unclaimed space through which they needed to fly, Commander DiMaio looked up from the Sciences station.

"Commander Johnson, I'm tracking what appear to be a group of Klingon warships moving across the border and into the 'corridor' ahead of us. I'm also detecting Daltexi ships ranged along the corridor, just inside their border. No sign of hostility from them, though."

Johnson nodded. "Red alert," he commanded. The alarm klaxons sounded through the ship. A moment later, Vice Admiral Rosenzweig arrived on the bridge.

"What's up?" he asked Johnson.

"We've got Klingon vessels moving into the corridor. The Daltexi are still in their own space, but have brought their own ships along their border."

"Any details on the Klingons?"

"Not yet," replied DiMaio. "Sensors should have it resolved soon."

"Mr. Klufas," Rosenzweig said, "hail the Klingon vessels. Explain the nature and urgency of our mission." Klufas nodded and enabled his console. After a few minutes, he shook his head.

"No answer, Admiral."

"Sir, may I say something?" Rosenzweig turned to face Colgan, who was standing at the railing. The Admiral nodded, and Colgan went on. "Our maneuverability in this area of open space is going to be very limited. I'd suggest that we try not to even get caught. What about a high-speed dash, an attempt to blow right past the Klingons?"

"Good advice," Rosenzweig agreed. He swiveled forward, turning his attention to the helm/navigation console. "Mr. Toland, increase our speed to warp 4. Ms. Graevyn, plot potential evasive maneuvers."

Commander Johnson moved to Communications. "Send a high-speed squirt to Star Fleet Command. Advise them of our situation. Code it so the Klingons will understand it."

"So they *will*?" Klufas asked.

"Right. We want them to know what we've told Star Fleet."

Klufas nodded, understanding, and again turned to his console.

"Raise shields," Rosenzweig was saying. "Energize phasers and arm photon torpedoes." At Johnson's look, he added, "The Klingons have already acted in a provocative manner. Hopefully, we won't need either shields or weapons, but I'd rather have them ready and not need them than need them and not have them ready." Bill nodded.

Rosenzweig's preparation turned out to be fortuitous. The Klingons opened fire shortly afterward. Several disruptor bolts struck the forward shields. The Admiral spun around toward Sciences.

"Commander, do you have any more information on those ships?"

"Coming in now, Admiral." She paused for a moment, then continued. "I'm reading three Birds of Prey, a K'tinga-class battlecruiser, and a Saber-class frigate."

"That's a lot of firepower for just one ship," said Johnson.

"If it's a point they're trying to make," Alex answered, "I think they're practicing a bit of overkill."

"Sirs," interjected Colgan, "recommend we return fire. I think we'll improve our position if we give them a show of strength."

"I understand your point, Commander," responded Rosenzweig, "but I think we'll do better to avoid delay and try not to put the mission at risk, rather than making a point to the Klingons." He swiveled forward to the helm/navigation console. "Mr. Toland, Ms. Graevyn, maintain evasive tactics for the moment. But be prepared to return fire if we are fired upon again." Glancing to his left, he added, "Mr. Klufas, please advise the Klingons of our intentions. Be sure they understand that while we do not wish to *provoke* combat, we will not be deterred from our mission." Klufas nodded, and Rosenzweig turned back toward Colgan. "I appreciate your concern, Mr. Colgan, but a strong statement with the readiness to back it up can be as effective as simple firepower. But watch those readouts like a hawk; we'll need you ready if push does come to shove."

Despite the best efforts that the crew could make, it soon became clear that combat would be inevitable. The Klingon vessels continued to crowd into the corridor ahead of the Avenger. A moment later, they began a new attack run. The Federation ship took additional hits across the primary hull.

"Shields holding," reported Commander Lynch from Engineering.

"All right," Rosenzweig commented, with the air of one who'd been patient but had just had his patience tried too long. "Lieutenant Toland, Lieutenant Graevyn, maintain evasive maneuvers. Mr. Toland, I'd like you to add in a combination of phaser and torpedo fire."

"Aye, sir," responded Toland.

"Admiral?" Alex glanced back at Colgan. "Recommend that we focus on the Birds of Prey. They'll be more vulnerable to our weapons."

"Agreed," said the Vice Admiral. "Mr. Toland, do so." Toland nodded silently and targeted the phasers on the nearer Bird of Prey.

As the combat continued, Bell kept a close watch on the supplies that they were carrying for Ahlyar. She worried that the pounding could damage them. She leaned closer to the console. "Bell to Lt. Commander Rosenzweig." Lt. Commander Ann-Ruth Rosenzweig was the Chief of Mission Support. She was also, it had turned out, a distant cousin of the Admiral's.

"Rosenzweig here," Ann's response came through the speakers.

"Get some of your people and secure the Ahlyar supplies," Bell instructed. "Make sure that all this pounding doesn't damage them."

"Will do," Rosenzweig replied. She broke the channel. Bell glanced toward the viewer in time to see a Bird of Prey explode into a cloud of expanding gas and debris.

"Got him!" exclaimed Toland. A moment later, he had to scramble as another Bird of Prey dove at the Avenger and released bolts from its wingtip disruptors. He swung the frigate around and speared it with a blast from the megaphaser cannons. A cloud of vapor billowed from the scout's underside and it heeled sharply to the right and away.

The Saber-class ship then moved in. In the face of its more powerful weapons, it was the Avenger's turn to fall back. That was when both Rosenzweig and Johnson noticed that the K't'inga was hanging back.

"What's so special about that battlecruiser?" wondered Rosenzweig. "You'd think that no Klingon captain would want to shy away from battle."

"That ship might be the key to the whole thing," Johnson suggested.

"You may be right," Rosenzweig answered.

As Toland feverishly worked to spin the Avenger around and bring the phasers to bear on the Saber once again, the XO tapped the intercom switch at the Master Situation station. "Ensign Alison Chernicoff to the bridge." Receiving the Tactical Specialist's acknowledgement, Johnson turned again to face the viewer, just in time to grab the rail as the Saber launched a disruptor volley at them.

A few moments later, Chernicoff arrived on the bridge. Johnson pointed her toward the Mission Ops 1 station, which Fillmore had vacated at the start of the alert. Quickly, the Ensign settled into the chair and began reconfiguring the console.

The battle continued. After a furious exchange, a second Bird of Prey was destroyed. The Avenger, though, was also taking damage, although fortunately most of it was light. Based on Johnson's and Rosenzweig's conclusion, the Avenger's counterattack was being directed at the K't'inga, but the remaining Bird of Prey and the Saber—although both were by now damaged themselves—were screening the battlecruiser. Periodically, the Avenger would make another attempt to disengage from combat and continue on through the "corridor". But each attempt was directly hampered by the Klingon ships.

Following yet another sharp exchange of phaser and disruptor fire, DiMaio looked up from her station. "Sir, we have minor damage on Decks 4 and 9. Damage control teams are handling it."

The intercom chimed. "Sickbay to bridge. We've had several injuries. Things are under control, but I hope we can get this over with soon."

Alex brought his fist down on the arm of the command chair. "That's it." Startled, Johnson looked at him. The Vice Admiral ignored him. Turning to the Communications station, he ordered, "Mr. Klufas, open a channel to the K't'inga."

"Aye, aye," Klufas answered. A moment later, he nodded. "Channel open."

Rosenzweig stood up. He took a step toward the main viewer. "Battlecruiser, this is Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig of the Federation starship Avenger. We've noticed you, hiding behind the frigate and a Bird of Prey, like a weak coward seeking protection. And this, even as you fly the most powerful vessel of your squadron. So, tell me, are you truly the cowards you appear to be? Do you lack the

stomach for battle?" With a sharp gesture, he had Klufas cut the channel. Alex then looked at both Toland and Chernicoff. "Be ready. The K't'inga ought to be coming through any second now..."

Rosenzweig had been right. Releasing fire from both disruptors and photon torpedo tubes, the K't'inga-class vessel bolted past the vessels which had been screening it and dove at the Avenger. Again, both Toland and Graevyn reacted quickly, adjusting the Avenger's position to avoid major damage from the Klingon counterattack.

"Admiral...?" prompted Colgan from the Tactical Station. Rosenzweig held up a hand to silence him.

What the hell does he think he's doing? wondered the Strategy Officer. But he held his peace. Rosenzweig was a good tactician. He wouldn't have become a fleet commander if he hadn't been.

The battlecruiser closed on them. "Sir, we can't evade them forever," said Graevyn.

"Mr. Toland, Ms. Chernicoff, get ready," Alex said softly.

"Ready, sir," Toland responded.

Rosenzweig paused for one more moment. "They're less than 100,000 kilometers away," reported Graevyn.

"Now," said the Vice Admiral. Toland and Chernicoff flew into action. A furious volley of phaser fire erupted from both the standard phasers and megaphasers, followed rapidly by a full pattern of torpedoes. Impacts bloomed against the primary hull, the secondary hull, the boom... The vessel reeled back, frantically attempting to recover balance. The other ships in the squadron regrouped around it, giving the battlecruiser cover.

"It would seem that you were right, Bill," Alex said softly to the exec. Swiveling around toward Communications, he continued, "Mr. Klufas, hail the battlecruiser again."

"Aye, aye, sir," Klufas responded. For a few moments, the only sound on the bridge was Klufas as he spoke into the pickup at his station.

It wasn't long before Klufas looked back toward Rosenzweig. "Admiral, I'm receiving a reply."

"On viewer," Alex said quickly.

The main viewer lit with an image of the battlecruiser's bridge. In the center of the view, the ship's commander held onto the arms of his chair. Pinkish blood dripped from a gash on his forehead, but his gaze was clear and steady. He spoke.

"I am Commander Khamyr of the Imperial Cruiser Dark Talon. You have dealt me a serious blow, yet you would now talk?"

"We really don't have the time," Alex said straightforwardly, "for a long, drawn-out discussion. We have met you in combat, steel against steel. Are you now prepared to allow us to complete our mission?"

Khamyr glanced around his bridge, apparently assessing his ship's condition and that of the other vessels in his squadron. Then he returned his attention to his viewer. He smiled, just slightly. "We are well met, Admiral, and you have done us considerable damage in honorable combat. We shall concede this round to you." He leaned forward, his expression suddenly more intense. "However, be aware. The Empire's interest in this sector, and all that it contains, is by no means abated. I feel quite safe in saying that you will likely meet with our vessels again. Perhaps those who watch us today may see the value in dealings with us."

Rosenzweig opened his mouth to respond. Before he could utter a sound, though, Klufas interrupted.

"Admiral, we have a new hail. Audio only."

"Let's hear it," Alex said.

Klufas hit a control, and a new voice came over the speakers, in mid-sentence. "...desire interference from *no one!* But, were we to explore such, it would surely not be with those who would disrupt a mission of mercy. Federation ship, proceed through the channel. But do *not* intrude upon our space! Klingon vessels, be-gone! And we ask that neither of you presume to bother us again, for the next time may not bring such a charitable response." The channel broke.

"Who...?" asked Alex. Then he paused. "Of course. The Daltexi."

"Reaffirming their neutrality," Johnson added.

"Precisely," Alex agreed.

There was no immediate reply from the Klingon vessel. Indeed, as the crew of the Avenger watched, the Dark Talon began to draw away.

Second Officer Fillmore shook his head abruptly. Noticing the action, Rosenzweig turned to look at him.

"What is it, Bob?"

"I'm just wondering," Fillmore said. "Why did the Klingons withdraw? They've still got quite a bit of firepower. You'd think they'd be interested in impressing the Daltexi."

"Or at least intimidating them," Colgan put in.

"Maybe they figure that looking cooperative will benefit their long-term plans with the Daltexi more than looking intimidating," suggested Bell.

During the exchange, Commander DiMaio had been scrutinizing her sensor readouts. She looked up. "I might have an answer for you," she put in. As the others turned their attention to her, she gestured at a viewer. "Our readings are indicating the presence of materials very much like the supplies we're carrying for Ahlyar."

"Is it possible," wondered Rosenzweig, "that they hoped to eliminate us, then play cavalry in hopes of gaining a foothold on Ahlyar?" He smiled with slight amusement. "Sneaky devils."

"Admiral," Johnson began. Alex turned to face the exec. "If your theory is right, why don't we pull a bit of a surprise on them?"

"What do you mean, Bill?"

Johnson went into a huddle with Rosenzweig, whispering intently. The Vice Admiral listened, then grinned.

"I like it," he said, smiling. "Good thought." Straightening up, Alex turned toward the Communications station. "Mr. Klufas, please hail the Dark Talon. Use an open channel, and a frequency the Daltexi will be certain to monitor."

Klufas looked curiously at the CO and XO, then nodded. "Aye, sir." He touched a series of controls. "Channel open, Admiral."

"Thank you, Commander." Rosenzweig turned to face the viewer. "Avenger to Dark Talon. This is Vice Admiral Rosenzweig. I have a proposal for you." He paused. "As you know, we are on a mercy mission. If you would care to accompany the Avenger to Ahlyar, we would certainly appreciate any assistance you might be able to offer."

There was a long silence.

"Of course," Alex began again, "if you'd rather not..."

A terse reply echoed across space. "We accept."

Alex grinned. "Excellent news!" He paused. "Of course, the other ships will have to report this to the High Command." It was, of course, inevitable. Someone would tell the Klingon leadership,

whether it was Commander Khamyr or one of the other ship's commanders.

"Indeed," Khamyr replied. "I will in fact file a report myself. Please stand by."

As the bridge crew waited and watched, the Saber and the last Bird of Prey wheeled around and left the area, while the Dark Talon fell in alongside the Avenger.

"We are prepared," Khamyr said.

"Very good," responded Rosenzweig. He straightened in his chair, and glanced at the helmsman and navigator. Smiling, he announced, "On to Ahlyar!" The Admiral then gestured to Klufas, and the communications link was cut.

Commander Johnson took a step toward the command chair. "I'm a little surprised that they actually went for it," he conceded.

"Well," Colgan commented, "the alternative was to go home and report complete failure, and we know how the High Command would've reacted to *that*."

"On the other hand," Rosenzweig countered, "they might just possibly give a damn."

Colgan's only reply was a soft snort. The three men looked at each other for a moment. Then they shrugged. "Who knows?" Alex said.

"At least they *are* going for it," Johnson noted, reminding them of the important part.

"Maybe there's hope for them yet," Alex commented, a hint of a smile on his face. Settling comfortably into the chair, he swiveled forward to face the main viewer. Glancing at the helmsman and navigator, he issued orders. "Ms. Graevyn, back on course for Ahlyar. Mr. Toland, warp factor seven."

"Yes, sir." "Aye, Admiral." The two officers turned their attention to their consoles.

On the bridge of the lead Daltexi vessel, the crew watched as the two ships moved away. As their images shrank on the ship's viewer, one of the Daltexi turned his gaze into the center of the bridge.

"They may actually work together," he said, surprise coloring the edges of his tone.

Another of the bridge crew nodded in reply. "They may at that," she responded.

From her station at the center aft of the bridge, the fleet commander looked up from her musings. "Maybe there's hope for them yet," she commented.

Aboard the Avenger, things were getting back to normal, or, at least, what passed for normal during a rescue mission to a stricken planet. With the immediate crisis with the Klingons past, the crew of the Avenger were getting back into their preparations for the Ahlyar relief effort.

There was one big difference. A Klingon battlecruiser was flying to port of the Avenger, maintaining a parallel course en route to Ahlyar. At the Tactical Station, Lt. Commander Colgan watched it. He wasn't too concerned; the ship wasn't likely to try anything underhanded. If they did, after the show Vice Admiral Rosenzweig had put on in front of the Daltexi, Klingon standing with that race would be severely compromised. Moreover, it was by no means clear how the Klingon High Command would react to such a dishonorable move.

His concerns largely allayed, Colgan found himself almost spending more time listening to Lt. Commander Csuti, Commander Bell, and Commander Fillmore debate resource allocation. When he realized it, he shook his head. "What is the galaxy coming to...?" he asked himself.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental:

The Avenger has resumed course to Ahlyar. All personnel connected with the relief effort report that plans are back on track. The incident with the Klingons has actually proven beneficial, as we now have even more raw materials to work with, not to mention the unusual spectacle of a Klingon warship working in concert with several Federation starships. This might be viewed as over-optimistic, but I would like to think that we not only have new hope for Ahlyar's future, but perhaps some new hope for the future of both the Federation and the Empire. If true, it wouldn't be bad for a day's work..."

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