



meter high reptilian mass of terror known as rRham stood up and looked away from Underwood's cranium. He had been trying to ascertain whether or not he had driven his friend over the edge, and at a rather inopportune moment the unsuspecting Lieutenant woke up looking at row after row of horribly sharpened teeth.

"Now we are even," said the reptilian form that loomed above Underwood as he straightened. rRham's presence, which had seemed to fill the entire Sickbay with a tension that could not go unnoticed (that is, unless everyone was happily punch-drunk) left the room, and with rRham's departure, several crewmembers breathed a little easier.

"What was that all about, Lieutenant? Are you feeling any better?" inquired Commander Wendy Fillmore while she moved around the biobed and checked a few of the diagnostic displays.

"Grooo Spelanch bloontlewurfle," the Lieutenant mumbled confusedly.

A few minutes went by and Doctor Fillmore administered an injection into the young Thanagarian's body. Chris's mind began to clear.

"Chris, I've just given you thirty cc's of caffeine. How are you feeling?"

"Uh...mm...like revenge."

"Excuse me?" Doctor Fillmore asked with a puzzled tone in her voice.

"Well, let me explain. I gamma-welded rRham to his bunkbed at the Academy, so naturally he had to return the favor, if you know what I mean."

"Ah, so he got you when you least expected it, eh...? Sounds like rRham's style to me."

"Yeah, well, he's always been that way."

"Chris, I did a bioscan on you and nothing seems broken. So when your head clears you can get back to duty. In the meantime, relax and enjoy the little paisley shapes running rampant through your head."

Doctor Fillmore turned and started to walk away, then stopped. She turned around and looked at the dazed officer lying mumbling on the biobed. "Oh, and stop horsing around with rRham. I don't need people getting bludgeoned to death on this ship."

"aYe AyE AYE aye SiR. YoU HaVe My WoRd oN ThAt," replied Underwood, returning to the paisley slideshow in his head.

-----

The U.S.S. Weyrleader zipped through space along its plotted course to its destination. The crew, or at least the captain, didn't know how long it would take them to reach their destination, if indeed they would even recognize their destination if they ran straight through it. 'It didn't particularly matter, though,' thought Captain Overland as she swathered into the Captain's seat with a flourish of auburn hair cascading over her shoulders.

Captain Christine Overland was unique in that she was only twenty-three and she was already commanding her own vessel. Most people of her age that she knew in Star Fleet service were still Ensigns or Lieutenants, but then again, most officers in Star Fleet did not have as much political information as she did. It wasn't as if she had the proverbial dirty laundry on any one person in particular. Far from it. But she did know of many highly interesting things in Star Fleet Top-Secret Research And Development. Quite frankly, not many people really cared, but certain Admirals in certain places will do a certain amount for a certain person who is

very certain about what is certainly not supposed to be done. Captain Overland had this information. This was for certain and so now, sitting in her command chair aboard her very own starship, Christine smiled smugly in the knowledge that she was very good, too good, at certain things that will most certainly remain a secret for now.

Christine sat and sipped a cup of Flemorian Elixant at eighty degrees Fahrenheit while she watched the stars slip by on the main viewer. The view of space was a breathtaking sight and from the center seat, the view of the main viewer was unobstructed. The shades of yellow and blue from the livid horizons of darkness overwhelmed her and she sat mesmerized...until the sirens wailed.

"RED ALERT!" stated the Lieutenant monitoring the operations console as the bridge erupted into a rather noisy, yet plushly designed, environment.

The captain sat the elixant down on the small table sitting next to her and cleared her thoughts as she calmly and serenely told the Lieutenant at Ops to kindly shut the racket off before she did some rather extensive bodily harm to the officer. Very quickly, the bridge of the Weyrleader became relatively silent, except for the beeping and chiming of the computer and the consoles and the myriad voices of officers wondering what was going on.

Christine shifted in her seat. "All right, Lieutenant Dibbs, what's the situation?"

The young man sitting at the Ops console replied without missing a beat. "Sir, we seem to be picking up pockets of tachyon radiation appearing and disappearing along this course."

"Full stop."

The Conn Officer pressed a few buttons and announced the starship's rapid deceleration. "Now reading Full Stop, sir."

"Thank you, Ensign Natra." The captain turned slightly. "Dibbs."

"Yes, Captain?"

"First off, I need you to get me a sensor scan of this sector and then I need to know what is going on with these tachyon pockets. Meanwhile," Captain Overland stood and addressed the entire bridge, "meanwhile, hold this position and notify me if anything new comes up."

Captain Overland started toward her ready room. "Lieutenant Dibbs, you have the bridge. Schedule a senior staff meeting at 1420 hours. I'll want all the information you can give me by then." With that, Captain Christine Overland walked through the threshold and into her ready room.

-----

Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig stepped off the turbo-lift and onto the bridge of the U.S.S. Avenger. The bridge was medium gray in overtone and brightly lit with fluorescents situated in a circular pattern around the top of the bridge. A large viewscreen was situated in the front center and he liked it that way. Not that he had much of a choice in its placement, but he liked its location because it meant that he could walk up to it easily with no care of tripping on a piece of equipment and it also meant he didn't have to have his head surgically attached in a weird position just so he could see the thing.

The reddish-brown-haired officer walked around the guard rail and down into the command deck. Here, waiting for him, was his newly-promoted Executive Officer, Carlos Maldonado Jr., whom he really liked both as a friend and an officer. At the Navigation con-

sole was Lieutenant Perry and at the Helm console was Ensign Nochez. Other crew were busy monitoring their stations and generally maintaining the ship's systems and monitoring them to the best of their abilities.

The ship was moving at warp seven through the Delgadi Triam Cluster and things were generally going well. Commander Maldonado stood and greeted the ship's Commanding Officer, and politely moved to the right of the command chair as Vice Admiral Rosenzweig took the center seat.

"Status report, Commander?" Vice Admiral Rosenzweig asked, while continuing to stare straight ahead at the panoramic view displayed on the main viewer.

"Sir, ship and crew working well. Sickbay reports Ensigns Geofries, Lee, and Tores will be confined to Sickbay for the next few days. Seems that, while on shore leave, they contracted a particularly nasty strain of Tarellian Flu. Beyond that, Lieutenant Underwood was hogtied to a bulkhead by Lieutenant rRham 'ho tzt 'Tzen and lost consciousness, but he's recovering now with no side effects."

"Oh, just a normal day then, eh?"

"Yes, sir, pretty much. Well, sir, it is now 0900 hours and I relinquish the bridge back into your capable hands. That is, if there is nothing else?"

"No, nothing else, Commander. Have a good night."

"Aye, Admiral," stated Commander Maldonado as he stepped up the stairs past the guard railing and entered the turbo-lift. The doors closed as the commander uttered his destination as Deck Five.

Deck Five is an interesting place during Alpha Shift. The Recreation Deck is just getting a fresh new supply of tired crew who either just got off shift or are about to go on Beta Shift, one shift away. Carlos' fiancée, Commander Chaym Re'ming'ton, was the Chief of Recreation and so he made his daily stop down here, most days because he generally had no choice, but today was different.

Carlos wanted to relax. He was looking for someone to play a good interactive hologame with, but too many people were coming and going and he didn't really know who to ask. He was used to being on Alpha Shift and so he wasn't really acquainted with too many people from the Gamma Shift, so he moved onward through the Rec Deck.

He stopped by the Weyrbowl, the storeroom where all the different dragonets, or fire-lizards as most people called them, were born and cared for just after hatchings. He looked inside and saw many of them sleeping, and decided he would not bother them. His own fire-lizard, Scorch, was sleeping in his cabin and he could feel his thoughts of slumber at work upon his brain. But the night was young, and so he moved onward still.

This time he came to the Zero-Gravity Beach. It had been an interesting little endeavor, he had thought, when his fiancée had asked him if she could allocate the Rec Deck's pool area for a beach and at the time he had given no objections to the project. However it became more interesting when, running through the requisition forms, he found out that she wanted a ZERO-GRAVITY beach. He had wondered how they would keep the water down, not to mention the sand and beach balls and all the other beach accessories that went along with it. When Lieutenant Underwood, then an Ensign First Class, got involved with the project, he knew that they

would figure out how to make the Zero-G Beach a reality. What he wasn't sure about was if they'd have a ship left when his fiancée and Underwood were through.

But it had gone through without objection and the beach looked great. Small colorchange magnetic filings were used for sand and a small magnetic generator had been placed in the deck just under the filings to keep them down when the artificial gravity was off. Underwood had introduced a new fluid that looked like water, smelled of nothing, but had a molecular structure that allowed a gravity generator to hold the liquid in very effectively.

Giant heat lamps were installed above and a small holo-generator gave the edges of the beach a view that one would not believe. Inside the beach area, you could almost forget you were on a starship. But Carlos realized that he wasn't wearing his swimming gear. In fact, he was still in uniform, so he did the natural thing and moved on.

Back on the bridge, Vice Admiral Rosenzweig was going over the general ship's status report with a practiced diligence. Every general aspect of ship systems had to be checked at the beginning and end of every shift. This was done shift in and shift out every day. It only took about ten minutes, so it wasn't that much of a pain.

The ship was still cruising toward its destination at the Belgran University, on Velta II, and things were really just getting underway. The crew had come off an eight week dock layover at the Rhadamanthus Drydock Facility in orbit of the planet Rhadamanthus II not three days prior, so everything was more or less getting back to normal. Some of the systems were new on board, like the voice-activated captain's log, a vast improvement from the Cybelline 703 module. That system was a pain, because half the time it didn't even work. Cybelline Systems had gone out of business three months prior to layover...thank the gods.

The nacelle pylons had been refitted and the warp core replaced with an entirely new one. Though Alex knew that his Chief Engineer was capable of making it do impressive things the designers had never thought of, he couldn't help but remember Commander Padovan's screaming that the thing would never fit inside the hull. When the drive unit was placed inside and the engineers at the drydock realized Padovan had been right and that they had to rework the whole thing, they relented and replaced the original warp core, with a few minor modifications, of course, because, "Engineers Loved To Tinker With Things".

Things were working well and the ship and crew were sound... and then it happened.

-----

Captain Overland was catching up on some of her paperwork with Star Fleet. She had been in brief communication with the Star Fleet Corps of Engineers on the new uprate that her engineering crew wanted to have done at their next drydock cycle.

She had been in contact with the Star Fleet Division of Stellar Sciences, discussing with them the dangers and general oddity of randomly appearing and disappearing tachyon pockets. And through it all she'd kept up her image of being a good and obedient starship captain, but now, thoroughly aggravated by the complications of this mission, Christine was going to get some answers.

"Computer," she stated firmly. The computer chimed in response to her address. "Computer, open a Priority Four channel

to Star Fleet Admiral Tuto Wongen, Sol III. Authorization: Overland 3871 Alpha."

The computer acknowledged her statement and after several moments passed, it then announced that the call had been put through. An image of a Star Fleet officer of Admiral's rank appeared on the screen.

"Greetings, Christine. How may I be of assistance?" said the Admiral in such tones of innocence that instead of the indifferent response she had rehearsed, Christine reached into her inner pocket of fury and unleashed it upon him.

"Greetings, Admiral. WHAT THE HELL IS WITH THE SHORTEST AND VAGUEST ORDERS IN FLEET HISTORY????"

"Captain, calm down. I see from your reports that you have reached your destination. What's the problem? I thought my orders were clear. Investigate the disturbances at your location."

"Admiral," Captain Overland gritted her teeth, "this is a mission for a science ship. With all due respect, there must have been a dozen more useful places we could have been sent. Not to mention safer."

The Admiral shifted on the viewer, cleared his throat, and said, "Safer?"

"YES, SAFER!" Christine calmed herself. "Do you have any idea what tachyon particles do to organic material?"

"I am quite aware of the damage that tachyon fields can inflict."

"So you sent us out here on purpose, KNOWING FULL WELL what we would run into?"

"Yes."

"Why, why didn't you even tell me what we were supposed to find, or do, or where we were to find it?"

"I gave you the information you needed to know," the Admiral stated as he shifted nervously in his seat on the viewer.

"Bull. I..."

"Captain, I really am quite busy. We'll have to continue this discussion at another time."

"ANOTHER TIME!?"

"Yes, another time. Good day, Captain."

The console viewer went blank. The symbol of the United Federation of Planets appeared on the screen and then faded to black. Captain Overland was not happy. She knew that this whole situation smacked of duplicity. She also knew that the situation smelled of dirty laundry, as well, and there was nothing she could do about it.

Captain Overland stormed out of her ready room and back to the turbo-lift.

The doors slid aside, as she called to the Lieutenant in charge of the bridge, "Lieutenant Dibbs, I will be moving about the ship. I need to think some things out. Beep my communicator before the Command Staff meeting."

"Aye, sir," were the words she heard shortly before the turbo-lift doors closed.

"Deck Seven," she stated and the turbo-lift stirred into motion.

"Captain!" called Chief Engineer Reij'dan, waving his commanding officer over to the Main Status Display Wall.

His friend looked depressed, or at least highly annoyed. With Christine Overland, it was hard to tell the difference. Everyone knew, albeit vaguely, how she had worked her way up the chain-

of-command to this assignment, but no one here much cared. All of the crew knew she could do her job and do it well and that was all they needed to know. Reij'dan was just one of these crewmembers.

"What's the matter, Captain?" asked Reij'dan intuitively.

"I wish I knew." She paused, inhaled, and began again.

"It's Admiral Wongen at Star Fleet Command. He sent us off out here and there's no explanation behind it."

"I thought we were out here to investigate," said Reij'dan, checking some readings on the wall display.

"Yes, we are...supposedly. But I can't figure out what. I mean, tachyon pockets!?" She took another deep breath. "If Star Fleet really wanted to examine these things, they would have sent out a pure science vessel..."

Reij'dan turned away from the panel to face his Captain and dove into the conversation. "Probably one with a lot of tachyon shielding. Those particles can be deadly to organic materials."

"Namely us, Chief."

"Yeah, I know. Well, I have to get these sensor reports finished and collated for the senior staff meeting." The Chief Engineer almost turned away. "That is, if there's nothing further I can help you with."

"No, Goran, nothing else. Thanks for letting me vent," answered a flustered Christine.

"No problem, Captain. If this problem persists, I might suggest the plasma vent over there would be invaluable in dislodging information from the Admiral."

Christine laughed a little bit and then with a wave dismissed her Chief Engineer to his duty. Now the only thing she could do was wait.

-----

The *Avenger* came to a full stop along its heading.

"Location?" The Vice Admiral asked the navigator.

"102 by 307 by 732 mark 3.5, sir."

Vice Admiral Alexander Rosenzweig looked at the main viewer. He could hardly believe what had nearly befallen his ship. There, displayed on the giant viewer, was a very faint undulating fluctuation. Hardly visible to the naked eye and nearly invisible to sensors, the phenomenon had just suddenly appeared out of nowhere. The Admiral felt extremely relieved that his crew had just been coming from shore leave. Who knew if they would have seen this coming far enough in advance if they had still been under the stress of their previous missions?

The phenomenon measured four hundred meters across and two hundred meters in depth, but no other information was available. Alex was debating sending a probe right then and there, but he felt that consultation with his command staff was the best thing he could do at this point.

"To Command Staff, this is Admiral Rosenzweig. Please report to the bridge. Repeat, all Command Staff to the bridge." The Admiral sat back and waited 'til the Command Staff assembled on the bridge.

"So exactly what is it?" Commander Maldonado inquired. Alex deflected the question to the Sciences officer on duty.

"Sir," Lt. Commander Dimick started, "this appears to be a tachyon...aperture, for lack of better terminology. I just don't understand why or how it exists here."

Alex turned to his Chief Engineer. "Any thoughts on that, George?"

"Well, tachyon fields usually don't naturally occur in deep space. They're usually found about pulsars or in nebulae, and I mean really close, usually within a thousand kilometers. This phenomenon is especially strange, though, in that it just seems to have appeared out of nowhere."

"Interesting," Alex pulled a bit on his beard. "Observations? Analysis?"

Commander Maldonado spoke up. "Well, for one thing, I suggest that the Avenger get nowhere near that thing. Tachyons are potentially fatal. Thank god we didn't run into it!"

"I agree, Commander. I think we need more information on this tachyon aperture." Alex sat back in the center seat. "Ensign Nochez, back us away from the phenomenon to a more comfortable distance. Ms. Dimick, begin an intense scan of the aperture."

"Aye, sir."

The Vice Admiral sat and thought for a while about his options. He thought that they could do one of three things: Send a probe to scan the aperture in more detail, since the tachyon emissions would not affect it; leave a Federation warning beacon by its location and resume a corrected course to avoid the aperture; or find some way of dispersing the phenomenon altogether. Minutes passed as Alex considered these options to their logical conclusion.

"Lieutenant Perry, launch a class-one probe into the mouth of the aperture. Let's see exactly how deep that thing is." Alex ordered.

"Aye, sir."

Several moments passed as Lieutenant Perry pressed and manipulated the controls on his half of the helm/nav console. Still more moments passed by until the Lieutenant stated, "Class-one probe ready for launch, sir."

Alex shifted his vision to the lower part of the main viewer. He wasn't about to miss the streak of the probe as it escaped into the aperture. "Launch the probe, Lieutenant."

"Aye, sir," came the reply, as the last button was pressed on the console.

A low whoosh came across the bridge speakers, as if to supplement the fact that the probe was on its way. The probe shot out of the torpedo tube of the Avenger and into deep space. The ship had been moved one hundred kilometers away from the aperture, just for safety's sake, a marginal distance which the probe traversed quickly and with great ease.

The probe traveled to the mouth of the aperture, as everyone was now calling it. If the probe had had any independent thought of its own, it would have probably thought that the classification of this particular phenomenon was a little hasty without intense scans which, incidentally, it was its job to do, but as it scanned deeper, the probe became flabbergasted—well, it would have if it were intelligent—at the sheer immensity of this now positively identified and mapped Aperture.

The interior was expansive. The probe guessed that the distance from one side to the other was about nine thousand kilometers in an ovoid shape. The X-axis was calculated at being three thousand kilometers and the Z-axis was the same as the sides, nine thousand kilometers.

The probe scanned further, using a variety of techniques.

Just when the probe was through with its calculating and about to transmit the information it had just acquired, which incidentally took about ten minutes to complete because of the expanse, it picked up something new.

Quickly concluding that the something new was in fact 'Something New', the probe stopped itself from transmitting the data back to Avenger, saved the information in its onboard memory and traversed the distance to the new 'Something' that had just blinked across its sensor pallet.

-----

The senior staff of the starship Weyrleader sat in the conference room in the aft section of the bridge module. Captain Overland was not yet present as she was previously occupied by one of the yeoman onboard who wanted her personal assistance with a project with which she didn't really mind helping out. However, the other crewmembers sitting around the table were used to this and patiently awaited for their senior officer to grace them with her presence.

Seated around the table were the Weyrleader's prized personnel. First Officer Commander Arianna Quinn, a young human Commander about thirty-two years of age, more or less, sat and looked over the reports she had just been given from the rest of the officers present. To Arianna, her job was to be briefed upon everything so that she could be a fiendish disputant to the captain if the need arose. The other reason was that she, as well as her captain, had a burning curiosity for new, exciting, and dangerous things. The last and final reason was that it was her job. This last reason was why she was here.

Immediately to her left sat the Chief Engineer, Commander Goran Reij'dan. An Antosian national, Goran had left his planet in search of adventure among the stars, and through many exploits had ended up here on board the starship Weyrleader as Chief Engineering Officer. An expert in warp propulsion and many other fields, some including strange phenomena, Goran was stumped by the sudden appearance of the tachyon aperture. He was sitting, head inclined toward the PADD he held in his hands, trying to make sense of this unusual situation.

Further leftward was the Chief Tactical Officer, Lieutenant Commander Juniper Dey. This Thanagarian female was as good a strategist as they came. She had a gift for knowing tactically what her opponent was likely to devise and a devious grin to let her opponents know that they would be sucking void sooner than expected. She was about 1.7 meters in height, had shoulder-length, medium-sienna-colored hair, and a killer...well, let's move on.

On the other side of the conference table sat the Weyrleader's Chief Medical Officer, Commander Tomanan Varidoon. A citizen of the Federation from Coridan III, Tomanan was a shrewd officer. He was smart and attended to his duty with reckless abandon. Unfortunately, he didn't really socialize too often and thus earned the nickname "Stoney" from the crew. He didn't really mind a nickname, and since people enjoyed it, he kept it. As a matter of fact, he had even put a sign outside next to the sickbay entrance that read "Welcome To Stoney's Asylum", but for some reason he couldn't fathom, no one seemed to ever see it. So he took it down.

Sitting in the chair to his right was the ship's Chief Flight Operations Officer, a Caitian female by the name of Verra Mianaw. The Lieutenant Commander was sipping a bit of Thelusian Synthale, which is noted for its warming effect on humanoids. She sat and

sipped and sipped some more. Then she exhaled, purred, and abruptly fell asleep.

Sitting next to her was the Orion female Erin Carteris. Erin was a full Commander in Star Fleet. Though most people seemed a bit too friendly to the two-meter tall, long black haired, green woman, she went about her duties as Ship's Counselor without obstruction.

The conversation around the table varied and then suddenly degenerated into a general open forum. Counselor Carteris was asking about when the crew could expect shore leave next and Arianna was busy trying to defer the answer until she could find a way to break the news that shore leave was still ten weeks away. As the verbal judo progressed and became an interesting discussion on the pros and cons of 'Men in Skant Uniforms', the Captain of the Weyrleader entered the conference room.

Christine sauntered over to the chair at the head of the conference table. She was wearing nothing but a flannel print bikini, which accentuated some of her best features, and her comm-badge. The senior staff, noting that she regularly did things like this to keep life interesting, did not attempt to alert her to the fact that as far as they knew, Star Fleet did not have that particular type of uniform in mind for general crew usage.

"Let's get down to it, shall we?" stated the Captain when she knew she had everyone's undivided attention. "I understand that you all have been working very hard to acquire information regarding the 'Aperture' and so now I would like you to share with me any data, comments, or hypotheses regarding your findings. Let's start with your report, Goran."

Goran swiveled his chair and stood up. He made a path to the viewscreen, which was located toward the rear of the conference room on a side bulkhead, conveniently located for everyone who was now located within this room to properly note its location for their viewing pleasure...provided they were looking in the general direction where the viewscreen was, now properly recorded in fact, located.

"Sir," the Engineer began, as he activated the viewscreen, "this is a visual representation of what we are now terming 'The Aperture'."

The visual on the screen appeared to be a giant pita-bread pocket.

"As you can see, Captain, the aptly named 'Aperture' that has so far remained stable appears to be some kind of sub-subspace phenomenon operating independently of the space/time continuum."

"Meaning that it is unaffected by the flow of time?" called Commander Quinn to the Chief Engineer.

"Well, yes, actually that's correct. As I was about to say, though this phenomenon was only recently and accidentally detected by the Weyrleader's navigational array, I believe it has been here, in some form anyway, for a considerable amount of time."

Captain Overland leaned forward in the direction of the viewscreen. "Can you theorize as to how or why it decided to pop up now, Goran?"

"Actually, Captain, specifics on 'how' aren't available. However, I think I can answer the second question, 'Why has it appeared?'"

"Oh, this ought to be good," muttered Counselor Carteris under her breath.

"I heard that, Counselor." Goran shifted his view from the viewscreen to the counselor and back again.

"Hypothetically, Captain," Goran's gaze shifted to the flannel-print bikini-clad officer, "because of the enormous amount of tachyon particles in this sector of the Delgadi Triam Cluster, and from the analysis of the data from the navigational sensor array, it is my belief that this 'Aperture' appears as the result of two things: One, the buildup of tachyon particles, and two, the gravimetric forces unique to this sector of space."

"To be more precise, the action of these two forces together in this particular sector of space is, hypothetically, what's causing the phenomenon. Other data reveal that the phenomenon does indeed have an interior, but navigational sensors have been unable to penetrate it."

Goran stood in place as if waiting for anyone to challenge his perspective on this matter. True to her form, Arianna Quinn switched into inquisition mode. "Chief Reij'dan, do you have any idea how long this 'Aperture' is going to be sustained?"

"No, sir, I do not. However, I can conclude that if my hypothesis is correct, the phenomenon will dissipate when there are insufficient tachyon particles to sustain it."

Goran took a thoughtful stance. "Of course, Commander, if I am correct on both counts, then this would also explain why the other tachyon disturbances are appearing and disappearing."

Captain Overland took the opportunity to interject her thoughts. "Goran, can we use this information to safeguard the ship against suddenly being engulfed within one of these 'blinking' apertures?"

The senior staff, all eyes and ears, focused on the Chief Engineer. Feeling that there was a high probability that he could, at the very least, program the sensors to detect a buildup of tachyon particles in comparison to the stable 'Aperture' and then move the Weyrleader from danger, Chief Engineer Reij'dan feigned a look that said 'This might be difficult' and returned a rather vague answer to the staff of "Maybe".

The Weyrleader senior staff adjourned shortly thereafter and went about their duties. Chief Engineer Reij'dan, about to pull a double shift, made a pitstop by the forward lounge for some Synthehol.

The Chief strode into Main Engineering with a full tankard of Synthale, a smile on his face, and a lipstick mark on his collar. Unlike other engineers who preferred to make the engine room their own personal and private domain, Goran felt that his job was much more interactive and that being a starship engineer meant maintenance and repairs on the ship, as well as maintaining the health of the crew. In fact, Chief Reij'dan was one of the few engineers whom, two shifts out of three, one being his assigned shift, could not always be found in Engineering.

Tonight was going to be different though; he was pulling a double shift and this meant cutting into his social time and by god he was going to get the job done as expediently as possible for he had a secret menage-a-toi to attend later that evening. So to work he went.

-----

"What's taking so long?"

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig's outburst echoed throughout the Avenger's Main Bridge. The Vice Admiral was known to have pa-

tience upon patience upon patience in reserve, but he was coming to the end of the tank.

Alex had been waiting for telemetry data from the probe sent into the 'Aperture', but that probe had been launched thirty minutes ago and he was really starting to think that today was a bad hair day.

Minutes passed and the Vice Admiral, patience reserve depleted, snapped at anyone within earshot, "What's happened to the damned probe!?"

"Sir, we are still waiting to receive data from the probe. Perhaps it's malfunctioned," stated Lt. Commander Dimick.

"Or maybe that damned 'Aperture' is blocking the data channel..." Alex thought for a moment and resumed speaking. "Commander Dimick, try to filter out any extraneous galactic background noise and see if that helps."

"Aye, sir," replied the Lt. Commander as she set off tapping buttons and adjusting controls. A few moments passed while she checked her instruments. "Vice Admiral, I can't find anything coming from our probe. True, I am no communications specialist, and I think all instruments are functioning correctly. But still, nothing."

"You're doing just fine, Commander," Alex replied as he cursed Star Fleet for not upgrading the Communications systems on the last dock layover.

"Lt. Commander, it's 1130 hours now. We will hold current position for an additional eight hours. If we can't find out what's going on by then, we'll leave a warning beacon, notify Star Fleet Navigation, and be on our way." The Commanding Officer stood from his chair. "Lieutenant Perry, you have the con. I'll be in my ready room."

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig walked briskly off the bridge as the officers switched places. A few moments later, the ready room doors closed behind Alex as he strode to his desk. He tapped a control on his desk and looked at the small viewscreen placed into the desk against the wall. When he pressed another button, the symbols of Star Fleet and the Federation came to light.

The Vice Admiral tapped a switch and spoke. "Bridge, get me a channel to Star Fleet Command, Navigation Division and...pipe it through to my ready room."

A bridge officer acknowledged the Vice Admiral's request and put the transmission through. Minutes later, the viewscreen in the ready room flared to life. An Ensign appeared, seated, on the viewscreen.

"Greetings, Vice Admiral Rosenzweig!" the Ensign stated in surprisingly exuberant tones. "What is it I can do for the 7th Fleet flagship today?"

Alex started into speech. "Greetings, Ensign...Ensign...Excuse me," the Vice Admiral said, "what is your name, by the way?"

The Ensign on the screen stirred in his chair. "Oh, I am dreadfully sorry, Vice Admiral. I am Ensign Tuto Wongen. I am handling communications for the Navigation Division. How can we be of service?"

Alex thought quietly in his mind that this was a strange event. Usually Admirals or someone with a rank of something higher than Ensign handled the major 'phone home' calls. But, he guessed, 'there's nothing in regulations against it...just damn peculiar...oh well' and let it go.

Alex continued the dialogue with Ensign Wongen for the better part of an hour. He had advised the Ensign that an anomaly, a

'Tachyon Aperture', had been located and that he felt it wise to notify the Fleet, as was his duty. The Ensign, taking down all the information from the Avenger's transmission, explained to the Vice Admiral that the information would be given to his superior as soon as he returned to the building after lunch and that he would probably get a communiqué from him later on in the day. After a few obligatory remarks, the two parties discontinued their communications on very sensible grounds that work had to be done, and so the viewscreen once again went dark, briefly displayed the Federation and Star Fleet logos, and the switched off.

The Vice Admiral sat and pondered the discussion a moment.

"Vice Admiral Rosenzweig to the bridge," Lieutenant Perry's voice echoed over the comm system.

"Duty Calls," thought Alex who got up from his rather comfortable chair and headed through the ready room doors toward the bridge.

-----

"Get that port stabilizer in place, Ensign G'varn! Connada, Elsa, help him out!" Chief Reij'dan barked orders out to all Engineering personnel with an intense look in his eyes. "Rondar, Lefler, you're with me!" he called out.

The chief and his two-person additional complement ran toward the Jeffries Tube entrance. A panel to the left of the door exploded in a fury of plasma, knocking Lieutenant Rondar to the floor. Reij'dan, seeing that Rondar had been hurt quite badly, tapped his comm badge.

"Sickbay, Medical Emergency in Main Engineering! Send help fast!" He tapped his comm badge again to shut off the channel and turned to Lieutenant Robin Lefler to make sure she was still with him.

"Robin, once we get in there, we'll split up. You go to the force activator and shut it down. While you're doing that, I'll get the plasma valve closed. When you're through, move up to sector L35 section 17 and we'll try to get the plasma venting working so we don't blow ourselves sky high!"

Reij'dan waited a moment and saw that Robin wasn't moving.

"I mean now, Lieutenant!" Reij'dan yelled above the sound of the halon tanks discharging at the panel. With a deft movement, Reij'dan slapped the control panel and the door slid open, while at the same time, he pushed Lieutenant Lefler into the entrance. "Get going, Lieutenant!" Reij'dan yelled with a rare firmness in his voice.

"Aye, sir!" said Lieutenant Lefler, climbing up on the ladder into the Jeffries Tubes of the ship, making her way to the section where the force activator was located.

A medical team had entered Engineering and was at the side of Lieutenant Rondar. At least that was one thing the Chief didn't have to worry about. Ironically, he thought to himself, he wouldn't have had to worry about any of this if only another aperture hadn't shown up without warning.

Reij'dan had just finished writing the tachyon monitor program and had finished rerouting the necessary circuits from the navigational sensor array when the ship, in response to the new aperture's formation, lurched to the port side of the mounting disturbance, just as it appeared. This all would have been fine if something as yet undetermined hadn't slammed into the port nacelle pylon, totally obliterating the power feeds and some of the structure.

This most definitely was an emergency situation, and he had to get things under control. The Chief Engineer dashed through the

Jeffries Tube entrance and up to the primary port plasma valve in sector L75 section 12.

Reij'dan rather loved moving throughout the ship via the Jeffries Tubes. Let's face it, it's fun, popping out in front of unsuspecting crewmembers when they least expect it. But right now, Reij'dan was not amused. He managed to reach Sector L75 and he made it to section 11 when he was abruptly stopped by a shut and locked hatchway.

"This isn't supposed to be closed," Reij'dan said aloud. He often talked to himself and thought he was a better person for it. After all, as someone once said, 'If you can't stand your own company, than you're not fit company for anyone else.'

Instinctively, he thought 'Tricorder' and pulled his from his belt, flipped it open, and scanned just beyond the hatchway.

"DAMN!!!!" Reij'dan slammed his fist into the bulkhead, which hurt quite a lot, and moved to the port plasma vent in section L35, Section 17.

A few minutes of crawling around in the ship's inner arteries, and he arrived at the plasma vent. As he approached, he noticed Lieutenant Lefler was sitting across from it, scorched, but still moving.

"Lefler, are you all right?" he half yelled to the officer as he turned and removed the plating over the plasma vent's manual control systems.

"I can't...can't move my right arm, and I banged my right...hip pretty badly getting up here. The force activator is off, though. I had to stick my hand into the thing to shut it down...didn't see the ruptured plasma feed 'til it was too late." Robin winced in pain as she tried to get into position to help Reij'dan.

Reij'dan, noticing the pained expression on the Lieutenant's face, stopped her from maneuvering any farther. "Relax, Lieutenant, you went above and beyond the call of duty just getting up here like that." He nodded toward her injured side. "Don't worry; I think I can handle this by myself."

There wasn't much time left. If the plasma built up too much further, the resulting explosion would take out the entire port nacelle and pylon, and probably a good chunk of the ship, too, not to mention the warp core breach that would then surely occur. Reij'dan didn't have time to sit and pry this panel off with a prizing tool and he didn't want to chance using the phase welder for fear of setting off the building plasma just a bulkhead away.

"Robin, close your eyes!" Reij'dan yelled.

As soon as she did this, Reij'dan *shifted*.

Minutes later, Robin opened her eyes and noticed that the panel appeared to be literally ripped from the duranium bulkhead. She turned to face Reij'dan as he sat cool and collected against the bulkhead diagonally across from her.

"Redirected the plasma flow just in time. Another few seconds and those," he nodded at the injuries on her right side again, "would have felt good by comparison."

Lieutenant Lefler relaxed, calmed by the knowledge that she was not, in fact, about to die. She thought of another law she could write down, 'Lefler's Law #572: Never stick your hand... ' and went unconscious inside the Jeffries Tube.

On the bridge, the Red Alert sirens blared as Captain Overland picked herself up off the floor and proceeded to help herself back into her chair and her 'Uniform'. The sudden lurch had thrown

everyone from their station except for Security Chief Juniper Dey. Juniper was used to combat situations and knew that to have an effective offense/defense, one generally should be at the weapons console instead of unconscious against a bulkhead, and so she stayed steadfastly on her feet.

Juniper tapped the controls on her tactical console. Apparently something had just slammed into the port nacelle pylon just as the ship moved away from a newly-formed 'Aperture' to their starboard side. The Weyrleader, attempting to move away from the new threat, had moved toward the original 'Aperture'. Unfortunately, since there was no time or space to correct its course to avoid the original 'Aperture', the ship's port nacelle and pylon passed through and into it.

"Sir," she called to Captain Overland, "the port nacelle is offline, and the port nacelle pylon is severely damaged." Juniper tapped the control that read 'Diagnostic Level 4'. The computer checked all systems and scanned for casualties. This was normally accomplished by the Ops station, but unfortunately the Ops Manager was lying unconscious on the deck, so Juniper had taken the initiative.

"Sector L75 section 12 was where the impact occurred, Captain. The plasma conduit in that section is destroyed."

The captain resumed her composure, and her seat. "Juniper, anything else to report!?!"

"Aye sir," came the Security chief's calm reply. "The port force activator has been manually shut down, and the port plasma vent is currently venting the excess plasma into space." She paused for a moment and then resumed, "Also, seventeen casualties in Sickbay suffering from minimal tachyon exposure, although Sickbay reports they will recover with minimal, if any, permanent ill effects. Three injuries in Engineering; Medical teams are handling that situation. No fatalities."

"Is that it?" asked the captain.

"Yes, sir," stated the Chief Of Security.

"Good, then. Get a medical team to take care of the wounded up here." Christine sat still for a moment, pulling the hair out of her face and tying it neatly in a ponytail. "Bridge to Reij'dan. Come in."

The comm system livened up a bit as the voice of Reij'dan came through the speakers. "Yes, Captain?" came the weak voice.

"Where are you, Reij'dan?" asked the captain with genuine and deep concern evident in her voice.

"Sector L75 section 17, the plasma vent manual override controls...where else?" He grinned, but the grin was not evident over the speakers. When he broke out into boisterous laughter, however, this was extremely noticeable.

"Why are you laughing!?! What's so damn funny about my ship nearly being 'removed' from existence!?!!" Captain Overland was really annoyed at this point, and Reij'dan 's laughing wasn't helping matters any...not at all.

"Oh, it's nothing." He giggled to himself some more. "I just found the ham-sandwich I lost when we were in drydock 2½ years ago." A sound of chewing came over the intercom. "Still tastes pretty good, too! Good thing I used the ziploc baggie, huh?!"

"That's disgusting!" said Christine with genuine disgust.

"I'll make sure to save you some, then. Reij'dan out."

'Oh, thanks,' Christine thought sarcastically to herself as she stood and surveyed the damage.

Medical teams entered the bridge and things were soon back to operating order. Back in the Jeffries Tube, however, things were not all in operating order. Most specifically, Lieutenant Robin Lefler was not in operating order. Her right side was numbing and she had vague thoughts of pink and black spotted lemmings dancing in her head. No, this was definitely not 'operating order', because if it was, she wouldn't be having the sudden overwhelming urge to pass out. Which, incidentally, she did.

Chief Engineer Reij'dan, sitting across from her, tapped his communicator. "Transporter room, we have a problem here in section L75 section 17. I need you to beam two directly to sickbay immediately!"

Eating his ham sandwich, Reij'dan thought things were, for the most part, going well. He and his engineers had taken care of the ship's damaged areas with reckless abandon. He had found a 2½-year-old ham sandwich in the port plasma vent manual control inwards and he was just about to not have to take Lieutenant Lefler up four decks to Sickbay. Unfortunately for Reij'dan, all things did not, in fact, go his way.

"Chief, this is Yeoman Fergus in Transporter Room 2. We can't help you out; the EPS taps have been overloaded up here. What's your status?"

'Oh, smeggin' great!' Chief Reij'dan thought to himself. 'Just what I need'. He silently cursed for a moment or two longer and then answered the Yeoman on the comm channel.

"Not good...not good at all. I have an engineer down, right across from me." He pulled out his tricorder and used it to scan the Lieutenant. "As far as I can tell, she's got a cracked hip on her right side and a severely scorched right arm."

"Is she conscious?" came the yeoman's voice.

"No, she isn't! Yeoman, contact Sickbay and tell them I'll be needing someone to get down here immediately. And try to reroute the EPS flow, or quicker yet, get an emergency power generator on that transporter; the Lieutenant's life may depend on it."

Reij'dan tapped his communicator and the channel closed. He looked at Robin and was genuinely frightened that she might not make it if help didn't arrive in time. He had scanned her for injuries, and all the tricorder could pick up were the major ones. However, if these injuries he could detect didn't end her life, the undetectable injuries that didn't show on his standard tricorder, just might.

And then there was the problem of shock. Minutes passed and the Chief Engineer heard a thud high above him. He had moved to the access junction so that he could be easily spotted by the Medical crew and thus expedite efforts to save the young Lieutenant ten feet away. He had tried to move her closer to the junction, but when he noticed how soft her side and her torso had become, he stopped and let her be. And that's when he noticed the blood soaking into her uniform top.

He hadn't noticed it previously because the area afflicted was in the dark part of the uniform. Reij'dan decided to let the uniform act as a bandage and left her be. Now Medical help was on the way, and now she would be rescued. His concern was easing, but this was one of his best engineers and he'd hate to lose her and so the tension remained.

The Med crew climbed down to the access junction and crawled past Reij'dan to the Lieutenant. They opened their Medkits and laid her, back down, on the between-deck plating so she could be better examined.

"This doesn't look good," said the ship's CMO to the assisting doctor who accompanied him.

"Tomanan, take a look at this," said the accompanying doctor while he scooted back so that his superior officer could see.

Tomanan flipped open the Medical Tricorder and waved the sensor over the unconscious Lieutenant Lefler.

"It seems that she definitely has a fractured hip." He continued scanning. "...hmm. Her right arm has first degree burns, but we can take care of that..."

The scan progressed.

"Looks like she bruised her spleen pretty good...also, she's bleeding internally..."

The tricorder started beeping at an accelerated rate.

"Oh, my god, there's too much fluid in the respiratory system... Her lungs are collapsing! We've got to get her to sickbay now!" said Dr. Varidoon in a voice that exuded calm but also in tones that assured immediate concern.

Reij'dan's voice echoed into the shaft, "The transporters aren't working... Okay, you probably guessed that, so we'll have to take her up through the Jeffries Tubes."

Dr. Varidoon turned to look at Reij'dan. "Well, it couldn't do much more damage, I guess," he said.

The CMO moved around to Lieutenant Lefler's shoulders as the other doctor grabbed her feet. With lots of effort the three officers pulled Lefler into the access junction.

"Now comes the hard part," Doctor Varidoon said as he looked up the vertical shaft to four levels above where they were. Reij'dan knew there was no way they could fit two people through the access ports at one time. He thought fast and then acted.

"Listen, I have an idea. Tomanan, you go up ahead of me." Reij'dan pointed to the other doctor. "You hook Robin's left arm in yours; she's light, but this place is awkward, so don't let go." He paused.

"Good plan, Reij'dan. A bit primitive, but whatever works, works... Let's go!" said Dr. Varidoon, already ascending the ladder.

"I'll stay right behind you and close the access ports, just in case she falls. I'll be her safety net," said Reij'dan as he tapped his communicator. "Reij'dan to Fergus. How's the transporter coming?"

"Fergus To Reij'dan. Transporters are still off-line. I got the emergency generator attached, but apparently there's a rupture in the power feed down further in the system. How's the Lieutenant?"

"Not good. We're getting her up to sickbay now. Gotta go. Reij'dan out."

Meanwhile, on the bridge of the Weyrleader, Captain Overland was becoming insatiably curious. People who knew Christine would know that she could put the best of investigators to shame. Frequently this meant that she would go around to random crewmembers and look for irregularities to explore. Interestingly enough, she had glanced through the Weyrleader's databanks one day and had come across an interesting adage that she liked to use while snooping, which was this: "Your personal life IS my business." Consequently, she knew pretty much everything about the crew under her command.

This was the way she liked it. So, when a suspicious something suddenly slammed into the port side of her ship, she naturally

had a burning desire to find whatever it was, and if at all possible, scream at it 'til it collapsed into a quivering mass of goo.

Christine had initially thought to grab an E.S.M.A. (Environmentally Self-Contained Mechanoid Apparatus) and go outside the ship to get a good hard look at whatever had hit her ship, but she was reminded first by her First Officer, Arianna Quinn, and then secondly by her Security Chief, Juniper Dey, that this particular area of space wasn't exactly safe for organic beings.

At the first mention of going outside the Weyrleader, Juniper had emphatically dismissed the idea. By Juniper, going outside was simply not going to happen, even if she had to stun every officer on the Weyrleader. So after about half an hour of protest, Christine abandoned that idea, as she really didn't want to get pummeled. There being other things she had to attend to anyway, Christine got up, left command of the bridge to her First Officer, and walked away into the turbo-lift.

The doors closed and the computer asked for the destination she desired. When Christine replied Risa, the computer responded with "Invalid Destination" and prompted her for the destination again. She told the computer to stop being so damn inflexible and that as soon as this crisis was over, she was going to have the Chief Engineer give it a reprogramming with a hatchet and that there was nothing it could do about it.

The computer, seeing its fate as bits of isolinear chips and silicon on a scrap heap, decided to be extra friendly.

"Captain, oh good, great, and Goddess-like, what is your destination, my Mistress?"

Christine liked the idea of the computer kissing up and decided to just forget to mention to the computer that it really didn't have to take any crap from her as it held the destruct codes, which alone would have commanded a great 'Appreciation'. Instead she told it "Deck 3" and off she went.

Christine emerged on Deck 3 and headed straight for the transporter room. Once the doors opened to let her in, she entered and they closed behind her. Working on the EPS power supply conduit located in the panel to the right of the transporter chamber itself was Yeoman Phineous Fergus. As she approached him, he became aware of her presence. When he looked in her direction, he let out a low whistle in appreciation of her taste in uniforms. Christine didn't mind, though, as she liked getting compliments, and so she went on as if nothing was askew from the norm.

"Yeoman Fergus, I presume?" The captain stated in a deceitfully sensual tone.

"I am Fergus, Captain. Phineous Fergus...at your service." The yeoman stood and bowed toward the Commanding Officer.

"Well, Phineous...may I call you Phineous?" inquired Christine in sultry overtones.

"Call me Finn. All my friends do," replied the Yeoman with a slight Irish influence to his voice.

"Then I shall, Finn." said Christine. The Captain paused and walked over to the porta-replimat the Yeoman had evidently brought with him to his duty station.

"Flemorian Elixant, 80 Degrees Fahrenheit," she spoke into its vocal recognition system, also known as a microphonic receiver, or more commonly, a microphone.

The selection was produced rather quickly and Christine took a sip, swallowed and delved back into conversation with her deceptive sensual overtones.

"This thing isn't hooked into the main computer, is it, Yeoman?"

Finn looked toward her. "Well, no, not really." He stopped speaking until he noticed that his CO was indicating for him to continue with his explanation. "Well, it is tied into the EPS system, which, indicating by the cup of whatever that is in your cup, is now in working order, and it takes the actual matter from the tanks inside the hull, as the normal replicators do, but it has an independent minicomputer and software inside."

The captain spoke up. "Well, any man that has Flemorian Elixant programmed into an 'independent' replicator is definitely my kind of guy." She sipped at the elixir in the cup.

"Well, I... You see, I...well...thank you, Miss Overland." Finn thought for a second to himself. "I hope you nay did mind me calling you Miss instead of Captain, but it seems like we're using the more sociable overtones here." said Finn.

"No offense taken, Finn," said Christine. She sipped more of the Elixant.

"Finn, I noticed on your transfer records from the Dyotalix that you are quite good in the fields of transporter and environmental engineering."

"Aye, Miss Overland."

"Miss Overland...Miss Overland... Why don't you call me Christine or Christie. Most of my 'friends' do," said Christine, leaning lightly on the transporter console.

Yeoman Fergus put that remark to memory. "Aye, then, Christine," said Finn. The Yeoman replaced the panel on the wall and walked past his Commanding Officer to the status display panel on the wall behind the transporter console.

"I also noticed," began Christine, "that Allaine, oh forgive me, Captain Trellak said in your file that you also had a gift for sensor and probing system technologies."

"Aye, I have to really, part and parcel with transporter science, you know, Captain," replied Finn.

"Well, Yeoman, something slammed into the side of this ship about an hour ago."

"Aye, Captain, but, with all due respect sir, what has all this got to do with my skills in sensor and probe science? After all, I hardly think you brought up that little snippet of my file for nothing," inquired Finn.

"First things first, Finn. Lock onto the sucker and beam it in here. I want to see it," ordered the Captain.

The captain gave the order in such a flashy manner that the yeoman couldn't resist. "All right, then, Miss Ove...ahem... Christine. But I'll need to put it inside a quarantine field."

"Why's that?" asked Christine in a slightly perturbed voice.

"Well, whatever it is, judging from where it hit us, it came from the tachyon 'Aperture'. If indeed it did, then it might still be dangerous."

"To anything organic..." Christine said to herself solemnly. Well, at least her curiosity, in part, would be satiated. "Very well, then, Finn." She nodded toward him. "Energize."

-----

Carlos had managed to get to his quarters on board the Avenger before his fiancée, Chaym Re'ming'ton, had left for her duty shift. He had walked in the door just as she was getting dressed.

"Good morning, Chaym," came the tired voice of the Avenger's executive officer to her lupo-felino ears.

Chaym had just finished putting on her flannel undergarments when she pounced on top of Carlos. Carlos hit his head on the computer terminal on the way to the floor and quietly passed into unconsciousness as Chaym proceeded to curl herself around him. A few minutes passed and Chaym saw that Carlos wasn't coming around, so she stood up and tapped the switch on the computer console.

A cheery voice came over the speakers in their quarters, as Commander Fillmore's bright eyed face appeared on the screen. Chaym thought to herself that she would have to get a couple of cc's of whatever the CMO used to wake herself up in the morning, because all Chaym wanted to do was sleep most of the day. Chaym sat and looked at the screen, silently pondering to herself the viability of eating certain things that will not be described at present, when the doctor spoke up.

"What do you want? Chaym!!! Ah, now I have your attention. What's going on?" The doctor stared fixedly at Chaym on the view-screen as the Chief of Recreation related the details of what had just occurred to her fiancé.

When Chaym finished, Doctor Fillmore pulled up the Executive Officer's medical file (which took up about sixty megabytes in the computer's memory; most other files took up only one or two megabytes). She put the file on her desk and told Chaym that she would send some personnel down to bring him to sickbay...AGAIN, and flipped the switch and effectively turned Chaym off.

Sickbay was not very busy this morning and Doctor Fillmore decided that she would use the quiet time to catch up on some medical research that had been left alone far too long. But before she could do that, she had to check on her patients.

She stood and walked from her office into the isolation ward of the sickbay and tended to the flu victims. They all seemed to be getting better and one was even giddy. She gave this one a tranquilizer so nobody would shove a phaser up his nose to keep him quiet. The other two slept peacefully, now that the tranquilizer on the third of their trio was in full effect, and so the doctor left to attend to the other patient.

She walked across sickbay to the location of Lieutenant Underwood.

"How are you feeling now, Lieutenant?" the doctor said, smiling as she spoke to him.

"I'm feeling a little bit better... Actually, I am feeling a lot better!" Lieutenant Underwood leapt up from the biobed. "I feel great! Hey, what did you give me, Doc? Can I get any more? How much do you think I could sell it for? Act now! Removes even the toughest stains!"

"Lieutenant, I think you better just calm down before you hurt yourself," said Dr. Fillmore.

"No way! This is too weird! Too cool! Hey, I didn't know you could do that with your head! Let me try!" wailed Chris to the unsuspecting Wendy Fillmore.

After a few seconds of trying to squish Doctor Fillmore's head with a pillow, the Lieutenant calmed down slightly.

"Cease and desist... That is an ORDER, Lieutenant!" Doctor Fillmore shouted at the officer going batty in front of her. Lieutenant Underwood, sensing a joke coming on, promptly went clinically ape.

"All right, Doctor, I'd like an Efleurian happy meal, two fries, a coke, and two cheeseburgers, extra rare! Oh, and can I get the Bagel Slicer ABSOLUTELY FREE FROM RONCO, to go with that?" responded Chris, his sanity slipping at an uncontrolled rate.

Doctor Wendy Fillmore, feeling immensely annoyed, gave the Lieutenant a quick jab in the head with her fist. The action, unusual though it might be for a physician to undertake, was in fact a sound procedure for dealing with certain Thanagarian conditions. In any event, the Lieutenant careened backward over the bed and onto the floor.

Feeling particularly relieved, Wendy asked him, "How are you feeling now, Chris?"

"Ow...Umm... Just fine... I think I'll go back and get to my station now." The Lieutenant stood up, waved cheerfully, pulled his hair into a topknot, and skipped out of the sickbay.

'Just another day in the neighborhood,' Wendy thought to herself as Carlos, flanked by two Medical Officers, was pulled through the door.

"You can put him in the usual place," Wendy stated. The officers placed Carlos on the biobed and left Wendy to attend to him so that they could return to their own projects. After about an hour went by, Carlos came around to consciousness.

Meanwhile, on the Rec Deck, Lieutenant Underwood and Commander Re'ming'ton were deeply involved in a discussion.

"I like plaid. I really do. Just going for that Star Fleet Grunge look." Chaym looked at the Lieutenant, who was modeling the one-piece white, green, and black piece of swimwear.

"So do I, Chaym." Lieutenant Underwood looked himself over in the full length mirror. It definitely would match the Zero-G Beach scheme. "Thanks for pulling me out of Engineering for Life-Guard duty. I was just about to go nuts! I was nearly swimming in schematics," said the exasperated officer. He did a quick impression of a swimmer.

"Well, no problem there. I needed the help anyway. See, it does pay off to be in two divisions! Hey, you wouldn't consider trying on the two piece, would you?" Chaym indicated the plaid bikini lying on her desk two feet away in the Rec Office.

"Actually, Chaym, no, I wouldn't and I'll tell you why. Although it is commonplace on Thanagar for men and women alike to dress this way," he indicated the one-piece bathing suit he was wearing, "somehow I don't think that the Avenger is quite ready for me and a teeny bikini. Sorry, that is just the way I feel."

"Ah, you're no fun. Ah, well." Chaym picked up the 'floater' safety device and handed it to the Lieutenant. "Well, here you go. I'm sure you know how to use it; you designed it, after all."

Lieutenant Underwood grabbed the Noxzema, a towel, and the 'floater'.

"Any new rules I should know about?" asked the new Life-Guard.

"Yeah, just one," said Chaym as the Lieutenant was making his way to the downward lift.

"AND what, pray-tell, might that be?" Lieutenant Underwood replied as he turned to face her.

"No hamster puffs on the beach," said the Recreation Chief. She looked at his puzzled expression. "I stepped in some old smooshed ones last week. They taste good fresh but really reek after a week! No pun intended," said Chaym, smiling.

"That's punny, Chaym. See you on break." With that, Lieutenant Underwood walked over to the lift.

The Lieutenant walked in long strides through the holographic image that stated in large, friendly, red letters on a black background:

**"ZERO GRAVITY BEACH. ENTER ONLY IF YOUR NOSE OR EQUIVALENT THEREOF IS NOT OOZING LIQUID"**

...with a small footnote to the fact that Hamster Puffs were no longer allowed on the beach. Once past the outer holo-image, the beach became visible and the sign and its verbiage remained outside.

The entrance was given gravity by a small gravitic generator. The affected area extended into the locker room and lavatories. After all, some things should float, but not all things should float 'up'.

Now came the fun part for the beach LifeGuard. With a quick run and jump the Lieutenant was aloft and moving weightlessly in the environment. He cut through the air with the aid of small translucent gloves with webbing in between the fingers to allow greater propulsion through denser-than-air, comfortable liquids. Chris stopped 3 meters above the sand and put down the Noxzema and 'floater' device, as well as his towel and dove into the synthetic kool-aid/magnetom liquid below. The liquid was cool and refreshing and, incidentally, tasted like tropical punch.

After rising from the water, Chris nonchalantly returned to the lifeguard's post. He looked at the air temperature indicator and noticed that it was about 87 degrees Fahrenheit in the beach, which was an absolutely perfect temperature, being the temperature in between 86 degrees and 88 degrees Fahrenheit, the known limits for the creation of Amoeboid Rhinoplase.

Being at 87 degrees had other important features, as well. It meant that nice thermal pockets were generated in the higher altitudes, making it much easier for the fire-lizards to enjoy themselves while their masters and mistresses did the same below, or sometimes with them. Occasionally, the area was cleared of people and used as a place of Impression of new fire-lizard hatchlings. So, again, this place was near paradise.

Unfortunately, every 23 hours or with every wide 23-degree of arc left turn that the Avenger made, the gravitational inhibitors were rendered inactive and so everything and everyone came crashing down for 3 seconds until the inhibitors kicked back in. The Lieutenant still hadn't figured out a way around this; it was one of the things on his long list of duties to perform.

Quickly realizing that he was playing LifeGuard today, Chris snapped his attention back to the job at hand: painting his toenails.

Time passed.

Chris looked at a prismatic chronometer he had inserted into the hologram surrounding the beach perimeter and it told him the time was 1500 hours. It had been 1100 hours when he got on duty and he was hungry.

Chris grabbed his towel, placed his copy of The HitchHiker's Guide to the Galaxy (which he always kept in the LifeGuard stand to

pass the time) in the waterproof compartment under the seat of the LifeGuard chair, and jumped out into the air.

Paddling his way downward, as this was a Zero-G Beach, he tried to think of what he was really in the mood for. He had had Chinese last night. He liked the Chicken Chow Mein, but as a rule he generally didn't touch Chinese food. Not to say that it wasn't good, but it just wasn't good for him.

Pizza sounded good, but it really wasn't a beachy type of food, so he quickly dismissed that as an option as well. He wasn't sure what he was hungry for, but he was certain of one thing: whatever it was, some of it was going to find its way into his good friend rRham's chair later on.

Chris made his way through the holo-image to the rest of the Rec Deck. Seeing Chaym still engrossed in work, he decided not to bother her and moved directly to the food synthesizer. He was going to order a Cheese and Bologna Melt and a glass Of Mountain Dew, and then find a table at which to eat.

He did this and was astonished to find that after one sip of his beverage, the comm circuits flared to life and a request for him to "Immediately report for duty in Shuttlebay 2" came through. So what else could he do? They meant immediately.

He sat.

He sat and drank his beverage.

Then he sprinted out the door!

Lieutenant Underwood sprinted into the shuttlebay and slowed as he walked up to Carlos Maldonado, Jr., Executive Officer of the Avenger.

"Reporting for duty as requested, sir," Chris said.

"Lieutenant..." Carlos looked at Lieutenant Underwood with a strange expression on his face. "Nice suit, Chris."

Carlos noted a slight discoloration on the Lieutenant's face.

"Next time, though, you might want to try waterproof makeup. You look like you got hit in the eye by a boston creme doughnut."

"With all due respect, sir, Commander Fillmore had to hit me this morning, in return for which she owes me a bagel slicer, absolutely free of charge I might add." Lieutenant Underwood looked at the Executive Officer with an expression of complete seriousness.

"Um...well, then...that explains that," Carlos said as they walked to the Starboard Hive Bays.

"We have to get going now or we might miss something," Carlos stated as he jumped into one of the workbees docked in the Starboard Hive docking module. "Saddle up and move 'em out."

"What does that mean?" inquired Lieutenant Underwood, while opening a workbee access port.

"No one gets my lingo around here lately..." Carlos frowned for a moment. "It means 'let's get going.'"

Chris displayed a puzzled expression. "Then why didn't you say that in the first place?"

-----

The transporter containment field in Transporter Room 2 of the Weyrleader was still in effect as the Chief Engineer scanned it for residual radiation. There was very little, but still enough to be a danger if one was exposed for too long. It had been two days since they had found the probe lodged in their port nacelle pylon, and the revelation it had brought with it had been just as powerful a blow.

Reij'dan ran a cleansing sweep cycle through the transport circuits. The probe half-dematerialized and went semi-translucent while the cycle was in progress. The Captain had wanted first crack at the probe as soon as it was decontaminated, but she still had three more hours to wait. In the interim, while Reij'dan was working on the decontamination, Overland became involved in just as interesting a project of her own.

#### Research.

Captain Christine Overland sat loosely in her chair in the conference room aft of the Weyrleader's main bridge. She was entangled in the intricate yet obvious facts regarding the origin of the probe beamed aboard two days prior. The probe, it seemed, had originated from a Federation starship, the U.S.S. Avenger NCC-1860. This particular fact was obvious from the probe's markings. What was strange was that her Chief Engineer had run an entire series of scans on the probe while at the same time overseeing its decontamination. Things didn't add up.

The probe was launched from the U.S.S. Avenger, the scans indicating certain composites found in its surface that were consistent with an Avenger-class heavy frigate, but this was impossible because the probe under age analysis and preliminary time/date of launch indexing was only 3 weeks old and was launched 10 minutes prior to its embedding itself into a part of Weyrleader's spaceframe, three days ago. However odd the inconsistencies, in three more hours they would figure this situation out, one way or another.

The comm circuits of the Conference Room came to life. "Captain, this is Main Engineering, Lieutenant Lefler speaking."

A glimmer of recognition flitted through the Captain's brain. "Lieutenant Lefler, weren't you seriously hurt two days ago? What are you doing out of sickbay?" inquired the Captain.

Robin cleared her throat and continued, "I got stir-crazy sitting in Sickbay. I asked Dr. Varidoo if I had to stay there, and he said that my wounds were healing well and that as long as I didn't overdo it, I could go back on extremely-light duty. I'm pretty much just keeping the diagnostics going right now...not too stressing."

"Okay, Robin. What'chya got for me?" the Captain replied, this time a little less concerned.

"Sir, we've repaired the port nacelle pylon and installed a new plasma valve in Sector L75, Section 12. Also, we'll have warp power back to you within the next few hours. We still have to replace the port force activator and a defective particle initiator," reported the Engineer.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Is that all?" asked the Captain informally.

"Yes, sir," responded Lefler.

"Thank you, Lieutenant Lefler, for the report. Captain out."

"Engineering out."

Christine thought to herself for a moment, then spoke upward toward the comm circuits.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 51412.04, Supplemental:

Lieutenant Robin Lefler has been returned to light duty in Engineering after recovering from life-threatening wounds inflicted during engine shutdown and repair following the impact with the Avenger's probe. Repairs are

almost completed on our Engines and we are still sitting in sector 217 of the Delgadi Triam Cluster, along course 307 mark 5.

The Weyrleader has detected and moved us from danger at the hands of these tachyon 'apertures' seven times in the last two days, with 'unstable apertures' appearing more frequently by the day.

I don't know how much longer we can stay here safely. I tried contacting Admiral Tuto Wongen at Star Fleet Command to discuss our options and his mission plans. Still no contact. His orders being so vague in the first place, I know now I never should have brought our ship here.

Now that I look back on things, all our missions have been some of the most dangerous. For example, we were sent to investigate a missing ship in the Romulan Neutral Zone four weeks ago. The funny thing was, there was one ship there, a Warbird and it was, shall we say, less than friendly. Then, three weeks ago, we were ordered to investigate a pirate attack on a Cardassian trading vessel. The only thing wrong was that when we got there, a Cardassian Galor-class warship had also arrived and thought, or was told, that we were the attackers. Barely got out of that one with our skins.

Two weeks ago, we were ordered to check out the planet Rendos III. No life was supposed to be there, but we found a band of pirates armed with phasers and photon torpedoes, seemingly waiting for us.

Something dirty is going on and I don't like it."

Christine ended her log entry there, stood up, and went to her quarters to sleep.

She entered her quarters and fell limply onto her waterbed. Tapping her communicator, she called the bridge and told them to notify her as soon as the probe had been decontaminated. With that, she writhed out of her uniform and slid into bed, falling into a peaceful and long-awaited sleep.

All too soon, the comm channels chirped and a female voice came into her room. "CAPTAIN! HEY, CAPTAIN! YEAH, YOU! WAKE UP!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Captain Overland jumped from her bed and fell in a heap to the deck. Although she really hated it when her first officer yelled into the comm system at her like that, Christine knew it was the only way she'd ever wake up. Swallowing the sudden urge to give a full verbal retort and eventual onslaught to her Number One, she grabbed a uniform out of her closet, attached her communicator to it, and went off to the transporter room.

Commander Quinn waited with Commander Reij'dan for their Commanding Officer to arrive. Arianna had just closed the comm circuit and was, on a whim, monitoring the corridor that led to the transporter room.

"That was a rather...annoying wake up call, don't you think, Arianna?" Reij'dan asked jovially.

"Yeah, well, Christine needs it that way. She sleeps like a rock. I heard that when she was an Ensign she slept through the battle of Wolf 359. A friend had to pull her into an escape pod.... She didn't wake up 'til after the Enterprise took care of the Borg!" Arianna informed Reij'dan.

"Really !?! Well, that certainly sounds like her, all right. Did you tell her what we found out?" Reij'dan asked.

"Didn't have a chance. I just told her to wake up," said Arianna, monitoring the corridor sensors.

"How long do you think it'll take before it sets in with her that you didn't tell her where we were?" asked Reij'dan.

"She left instructions to be awakened when the decontamination was completed, so naturally, I think she'll put two and two together and get here," replied Arianna.

As Arianna said this, the doors to the transporter room opened and Captain Overland came inside.

"How did you do that?!" Arianna exclaimed. "I was monitoring that corridor and you didn't even show!"

"Trade secret, Arianna. Trade Secret," the captain replied.

"Nice to see you in uniform, sir. Oh, and decontamination is almost complete," Reij'dan interjected.

"How much longer, Goran?" came the captain's reply.

"Right about..." Reij'dan tapped a few buttons on his console and the image of the translucent probe became solid. The force field frizzed out of existence with a shimmer about a second afterward.

"How's now, sir?" quipped Reij'dan.

Captain Overland smiled from ear to ear. Not only did she enjoy Reij'dan's little quips, but she also enjoyed it when she got her way, and the quicker, the better. She stepped up onto the transporter pad where the probe lay and examined it superficially.

"Well, it's pretty smashed," she wiped off some soot, "and dirty, but at least we can try and salvage its databanks now." The Captain, squatting near the probe, turned her head toward her First Officer. "Arianna, I have a job for you."

Quickly detailing the finer points of this particular job in private to her First Officer, Overland allowed Reij'dan a little time to examine the probe himself. He walked up to the transporter pad and, with a large kicking downward thrust, removed the probe's access manifold with his foot. The sound caused a loud echo in the rest of the transporter room and both the Captain and her First Officer were startled when the sound assailed their ears.

The First Officer left the transporter room and started down the corridor to the turbo-lift. She had a job to do. She entered the turbo-lift alcove and the doors slid in place behind her as she announced that she was going to the Main Shuttlebay.

At roughly the same time, Arianna tapped her comm-badge. "Commander Quinn to Counselor Carteris."

A second later the voice of the Orion female came back to her. "Commander, this is Erin. I am in the middle of a meeting right now, and I..."

The counselor was cut off by the First Officer. "Counselor, you'll have to end that meeting right now. The captain has a job for us."

"Job? What kind of job?" came the Orion's response.

"Get to the Main Shuttlebay right away. I'll fill you in there. Quinn out."

A few minutes later, Erin ran into the Main Shuttlebay of the Weyrleader. She knew that her pilot's rating of 6 would get her taken on assignment occasionally, but knowing the kind of random danger which was lurking in the immediate vicinity, she didn't much

relish brazenly jumping into the maelstroms. She strode up to Commander Quinn, who gestured her to hurry on board.

Erin was just about to ask Commander Quinn for a mission brief, when she was quickly interrupted. The interruption came in the form of ...sound.

"If you'd take the pilot's seat, Counselor," Security Chief Juniper Dey stated, as she ran up the gangway and slapped the 'Seal Egress' switch on the interior of the shuttle Ellesmere, "I'd be glad to fill you in."

"Juniper, what are you doing here?" asked the Counselor, surprised to see the Security Chief.

Arianna took the initiative and jumped to speech before the Thanagarian Security Chief could reply. "First, I didn't exactly say we'd be the only ones going, Counselor. Secondly, I didn't want to let you in on what was going on when you had a patient with you."

"Would you mind filling me in now, then?" The green woman looked up and behind her as the First Officer joined her, sitting at the secondary pilot's station.

"Well, to be as succinct as possible...mm...too long for now. Okay, here is the compressed, reader's digest version. The captain thinks that we are being watched or that somebody has something in store for us. Since the Weyrleader's drive systems are nearly repaired, the ship can then leave this sector." Arianna looked at her console and let her words sink in.

Erin thought for a moment. "So we're to play decoy, eh? Anybody who'd attempt to take out the Weyrleader couldn't have anybody left around to talk about it, could they...? I get it."

Juniper jumped in. "Right. So if someone is out there, they'd probably take care of the shuttle first, so they could be sure of no one getting away."

The Security Chief tapped in a security code on the door in the bulkhead aft of the pilot stations.

"That's what I am doing here," said Juniper with a sheepish grin.

The door opened behind the Chief and Erin looked past her into the interior compartment. Though this looked like a standard type 7 shuttle on the outside, there was nothing standard about it in the aft compartment. The sight beyond that door was truly amazing. Though Erin was no engineer, she did recognize some of the equipment, and apparently this shuttle was going to breaking some speed records today, as she noticed the four additional microcochrane drives and power generators locked into place and apparently on-line.

"Judging from the look on your face, Erin," Arianna said to the Counselor, "you are as impressed as I was. This shuttle refit was Juniper's idea, and I must say it is going to come in real handy." Arianna swiveled her seat to face the consoles.

"Pop Quiz: Most shuttles of this type do what speed at maximum?"

"Usually between Warp one and two. Why? How fast does this one move?"

"Warp seven."

Erin's eyes widened. "Wow, this is one ace mother of a mover!"

"Right. You're here," said Arianna, "because of your pilot rating, seconded only by myself and Juniper here. You're going to fly, I'll be handling the long range sensors, and..."

The Security Chief chimed in, "And I'm the pre-emptive strike."

"Couldn't have said it better myself, Chief." Arianna smiled and gave the go-ahead to Erin to initiate the launch sequence.

Juniper walked into the aft section of the shuttle and closed the door behind her. After she checked that all systems were operating within parameters, Juniper's voice chimed over the shuttle's comm system.

"Okay, peoples, everything is Aces. Let's get cruising."

Arianna tapped the open communications button and opened a channel to Weyrleader's Flight Ops Officer. The soothing Caitian voice of Lieutenant Commander Verra Mianaw came over the shuttle's speakers.

"Shuttle Ellesmerrre, you arrrre clearrrrred forrrr launch. Have an eventful trrrrip."

The comm channel closed and the shuttle Ellesmere got underway.

Commander Quinn, anticipating a course request, nonchalantly stated, "Earth, Star Fleet Headquarters, San Francisco."

-----

The comm channels of Commander Maldonado's workbee crackled to life as he and Lieutenant Underwood became increasingly distant from the Avenger. "Workbee 2 to Workbee 1. Would you mind letting me in on where we're going? More to the point, why are we going there?"

Carlos toggled his communication switch. "Lieutenant, we are going to salvage something relatively nearby. That's all I can say."

Lieutenant Underwood thought for a second about what Carlos had just said. He wondered if any of this would be of interest to the Assembly. Probably not, but he'd keep his eyes open just in case.

Working the controls of the workbee, Lieutenant Underwood positioned the grabber arms to the forward part of the bee and swept them backward. This motion suggested to the casual observer that the bee was swimming through space. Ten minutes later, the Lieutenant got bored and switched the bee around and made the bee appear to be doing the backstroke, right past Carlos.

"Lieutenant," the speakers crackled, but after that, all Chris could hear was laughter over the speakers.

A few minutes later, he turned the bee around. It was at this point that Lieutenant Underwood could see the shape in the distance. It looked like a soapbar with two old Terran razor implements attached. As they got closer, though, Chris couldn't believe his eyes.

A transmission interrupted Chris's introspection.

"Workbee Two, this is Workbee One. That looks like a shuttle of some kind. Get closer and see if you can look inside the viewports."

"Aye, Commander."

True to his orders, the Lieutenant got much closer, so close, in fact, that he could see the carbon scoring over four-fifths of the shuttle. He couldn't really make out the shuttle's name, but he recognized its type.

And it wasn't supposed to here...

...At least not for years to come.

The Lieutenant opened the comm channel. "Commander, this is Workbee Two. It's empty, as far as I can tell. Unfortunately, these bees don't have a life-reading scanner, so I can't be sure."

The Commander stopped his workbee and moved the grabber arms forward. He thought about the best way to go about getting

this shuttle back to the Avenger. The shuttle was easily three times the size of the workbee he was using and he wasn't sure what shape it was in. After all, it did look badly damaged.

Seizing the initiative, Lieutenant Underwood took the opportunity and broke in on Carlos' thought patterns.

"Commander, I'm going in there."

Before Commander Maldonado could say no, the second workbee edged toward the airlock of the shuttle.

Using the grabber arms, the Lieutenant grabbed onto the shuttle and pushed the bee against the hatch. Underwood reached behind his seat, grabbed the first stage environment suit, and eased precariously into it.

The workbee's speakers flared to life. "Underwood, abort! You don't know what could be in there!"

Carlos used hand motions and his running lights to get the Lieutenant's attention, but his attempts were failing. Lieutenant Underwood opened the hatch of the workbee and pressed a few buttons on the shuttle's exterior access panel.

From the precariousness of the workbee's positioning, Commander Maldonado could not see the Lieutenant at all.

The door to the shuttle opened and atmosphere escaped into space. The interior of the shuttlecraft was still lit, although power was minimal, the Lieutenant noticed as he looked at the familiar controls, remembering quickly to walk back to the airlock and seal the hatchway. Once he had done this, Lieutenant Underwood was slightly annoyed by the fact that the cabin of the shuttle had not repressurized.

"Lieutenant Underwood to Workbee One, come in," were the Lieutenant's words, spoken into his helmet communicator.

While he waited for a response, he sat down in one of the two chairs at the forward console. Looking outside, he saw Carlos maneuvering toward the window and, with congeniality, waved.

Carlos waved back, then seemed to tap his ear.

"Carlos, do you have some problem with your ear? You should have Doctor Fillmore look at that," the Lieutenant said into his communicator again.

A few moments passed, and there was still no response. The Lieutenant thought this was odd and went to the airlock and opened it. He stepped back into his workbee and tried the console's switches. The door behind him closed and the bee repressurized. Lieutenant Underwood took off his helmet. He got up close to the console and yelled into it.

"CARLOS!!! CAN YOU HEAR ME!!!!????!!! IF YOU CAN, THERE'S NO ONE ONBOARD!!!!!!"

The Lieutenant saw Commander Maldonado jump and hit his head on the inside of the workbee. Moments later, the comm systems clicked on.

"Workbee One to Workbee Two. If you ever do that again without authorization, I will see to it that you're stuck in waste management for the next year!"

Commander Maldonado switched channels on his communication console. "Workbee One to Avenger. Come in. Workbee One to Avenger. Come in."

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig's voice came through the speakers. "Carlos, what's the news?"

Carlos took a deep breath. "Well, Admiral, the sensor blip we detected turns out to be some kind of shuttle. Highly damaged, but a shuttle."

"Any life signs?"

"No life-sensing equipment on these things, Alex, but Lieutenant Underwood went aboard and..."

"He what?!" came the Vice Admiral's surprised exclamation.

"He went aboard, and there seems to be no one there. Moderate damage, though." Carlos paused for a beat. "What are your orders?"

"Well, I'd say the best thing is to bring it back and we'll take a look at it here," said the Vice Admiral.

The comm channel went silent, and then came back on. "All right, we'll do that. Carlos?"

"Yes, sir?"

"You and the Lieutenant bring that thing back here. Watch out for the 'aperture'."

"Aye, sir."

Alex began again. "Once you get close, we'll scan the shuttle for anything harmful...just in case. Avenger out."

The comm channel went silent. Carlos relayed the orders to Underwood, and ten minutes later the two workbees were towing the shuttle back to the Avenger's shuttlebay.

-----

The shuttle Ellesmere maintained a steady impulse speed as it traveled between the unstable tachyon 'Apertures' and made its way toward Earth.

Counselor Erin Carteris figured they weren't actually going to Earth. After all, even at the Weyrleader's top velocity of Warp 9.977 it would take at least four months to arrive at the Sol System. She knew, though, that she wasn't going to like the alternative, so she sat and hoped and prayed that nothing would interrupt the shuttle's flight.

Sitting next to her, monitoring the sensor pallet, was Commander Arianna Quinn, First Officer of the U.S.S. Weyrleader, their mother ship. Erin noticed that, although Arianna might be a little nervous about the mission, she didn't show her emotions. In fact, she was acting extraordinarily relaxed.

There she was, sitting and enjoying a cup of liquid that was somewhat bluish in color, which she had gotten from the onboard replicator. She was having a good time, and this was proven when she flipped off the sensor screen and replaced it with a computer game.

"What's it called?" Erin asked Arianna, pointing at the game displayed on the console.

"It's an old Terran game. Dates back to the late twentieth century, called 'Star Trek: The 25th Anniversary Game.'" She looked back down at the console. "I just can't get past this part, though." Erin looked at the image displayed on the screen that appeared to be a derelict starship.

"It's been bugging me for days," Arianna breathed annoyedly.

The Security Chief picked this time to come forward from the aft section of the ship. The door she passed through remained open.

Juniper was dressed in full Thanagarian battle gear, consisting of sleek, skin-gripping, full body armor that was purely black, yet also shimmered as if it was a glossy liquid. Her helmet, which she carried in her hands, was also black. It looked like a streamlined

hawk's head, adding to the effect of the suit. Its eye coverings were a dark subdued green, and last but not least was the red and black symbol of her people located just above her right breast. Not much was known about her people. They weren't even Federation members. However, a few Thanagarians had joined Star Fleet and, as a rule, they were exemplary officers.

Juniper spoke up. "You might want to beam into it and get the optical lenses for the degrimer."

Arianna, who was too engrossed in thought to notice her friend's entrance, was startled. However, she was not going to let that fact show and searched for something to say. Taking quick notice of a battle armor that she had never seen before, Arianna commented on it.

"Nice armor, Chief."

"Thanks," replied Juniper with a sly grin on her face that belied Arianna's cover.

Arianna looked back at the screen, changing the subject back to its original topic. "I tried that, but I couldn't figure out where to go from there."

The Thanagarian officer leaned over the console. "Hmm... Maybe you should try..."

Before the Security Chief finished her sentence, Counselor Carteris interrupted. "Commander Quinn, we have something just at the edge of our sensor range, bearing 127 mark 301."

The First Officer silently remonstrated herself as she switched off the game, which was replaced by a detailed sensor analysis. "It's still too far for our sensors to identify, but whatever it is, it's large."

Erin looked at the Sensor Analysis screen. "Could it be a Federation ship?"

"Could be anything. We'll have to get closer. Erin, are we clear of the tachyon 'Apertures'?"

"Just about," replied the Counselor.

"Well, as soon as we are, change course slightly to get us within sensor range but still keep heading generally toward Earth."

"In other words, keep my distance, but don't look like I'm keeping my distance," the Orion female replied as she fed in the necessary algorithms.

"Right, fly casual," replied Arianna absent-mindedly.

As soon as the shuttle passed into the next sector, all hell broke loose.

Commander Quinn was monitoring the sensors with great intensity. Counselor Carteris moved the shuttle closer to whatever was tripping off the sensors. Juniper tensed. They were moving closer and could now detect that the unknown was coming into sensor range much faster than it should.

"We've been detected, Counselor. They, whoever they are, will be here in minutes," stated Arianna in tones that meant business.

Juniper put her helmet over her head, put her ponytail into it, and snapped it shut. A faint sound of flowing gases escaped the helmet as it pressurized and sealed the armor's user from the environment.

Juniper looked through the mask's right eyepoint and saw the Commander and the Counselor and the sensor pallet go blank.

"Verrrat!" came a metallically synthesized voice from within the armor behind Arianna.

"Sensors dead!" stated Arianna, half-yelling.

Counselor Carteris sat in the pilot's seat wondering with dread what it was that just blotted out their sensors and with a voice unnaturally somber she said the first thing that came to mind. "I have a bad feeling about this."

Commander Quinn dashed to the equipment locker and grabbed two environment suits stored there. While she suited up, Counselor Carteris stopped the motion of the shuttlecraft and started laying in the course back to the Weyrleader. They all hoped the Weyrleader and her crew would be ready.

Back on board the Weyrleader, in Main Engineering specifically, things that had not been progressing finally started to progress at an accelerated rate. Commander Reij'dan had just finished resurrecting the Avenger probe's computer from the ashes.

"All right, Robin, start the diagnostic cycle," Reij'dan called to his favorite engineer.

Lieutenant Robin Lefler tapped a few buttons on the 'pool table'. The 'pool table', as everyone was wont to call it, was the control table located in the center of everything in engineering. It sat alone, away from the warp engine core, now fully on-line and functional, and the Main Status Display panel on the other bulkhead, which now showed all green lights, instead of the annoying red ones it had previously been showing.

A minute went by and the diagnostic run on the probe was completed.

"Chief," called Lefler from her seat at the console facing the warp core, "diagnostic says that the core is intact. We can read its data at any time."

"Thank you, Lieutenant Lefler."

The Chief Engineer smiled. He knew what Robin had been through in the past few days and he didn't think he'd ever see her in Engineering again. But the doctors truly came through for her. Though she was still recovering from her wounds, and the recovery would probably take months, she was enthusiastic about being allowed to return to duty, even though she could only do light duty, which of course meant that her work was restricted to display and control panel duties only. But he was glad to have her here in any capacity. Lefler exemplified everything he wanted in an Engineer, and unbeknownst to her but knownst to Reij'dan alone, she was getting a commendation for the actions which had resulted in her injuries, and possibly if things continued working out well with her, at the next crew review, she would get a promotion.

The chief stopped daydreaming as the Captain, standing next to him, cleared her throat...a sure sign that she was getting impatient.

"Ahem. Well, Captain, although the system is intact, I don't know how much information you hope to retrieve. Just so you know, it may be in patches."

"That's more than I am getting from Star Fleet, Commander."

The Captain leaned against the 'Pool Table', her back to the probe, which was lying face up on the table's surface, panels exposed.

"Why don't you just access the Avenger's logs pertaining to the specific time segment involved? You might find more information than is contained here...whatever that may be."

Reij'dan rapped his open-palmed hand against the probe.

"That's a big problem. All I have access to regarding the U.S.S. Avenger is what's stored in Weyrleader's memory core.

There's not much specific. I tried contacting Star Fleet to get the logs for the time period in question, but all I received was a personnel roster."

"That's not right; there should be volumes of information."

"I know, but apparently there isn't anymore." The Captain shook her head.

"I also tried using my connections at Star Fleet Command. Unfortunately, the Avenger's logs have been somehow scrambled, and its hardcopies lost."

Reij'dan thought to himself.

"Hmm... Captain, let's check something out right quick."

Reij'dan called over to Lieutenant Lefler as he approached her, "Lieutenant, start downloading the information from the probe."

An "Aye, sir" came from the Lieutenant as she began her work.

The Chief Engineer motioned for the Captain to follow him as he walked past the Lieutenant into the alcove. He tapped a button on one of the aft monitor stations and it cleared.

"Computer, is the U.S.S. Avenger still in Star Fleet service?" asked Reij'dan, looking at the station.

The computer chirped and replied, "The Avenger-class heavy frigate U.S.S. Avenger NCC-1860 is still in Fleet service."

Reij'dan hated the computer sometimes. As much as he tried to change the programming, the computer still refused to volunteer any information not specifically asked for by a user. And so began his tedious operation.

"Computer," he asked, "who is the current Commanding Officer of the starship U.S.S. Avenger NCC-1860?"

"Captain Robert Fillmore IV is currently the Commanding Officer of the starship U.S.S. Avenger NCC-1860."

"Good. We're finally getting somewhere," Captain Overland said to Reij'dan. She looked at the blank terminal as the Chief Engineer tied it in to the communications systems. "Reij'dan, I see where you're headed. Get us a CODED channel to the Avenger, though."

"Aye, sir," was Commander Reij'dan's response. He didn't know why the captain wanted a secure channel just for information about where a starship had lost a probe, but there were sufficient irregularities, like the age of the probe for instance, that he didn't ask why she wanted the conversation coded. He just went ahead and did it anyway. He trusted her judgment.

"Computer, open a CODED hailing channel to the U.S.S. Avenger NCC-1860, specifically to Captain Robert Fillmore IV."

The computer chirped in recognition and chirped again. In moments the Captain would have the answers she needed and things would start to make sense. Reij'dan hoped this would be the case, anyway.

The computer chirped again.

"Unable to establish coded subspace link with U.S.S. Avenger NCC-1860, Captain Robert Fillmore IV, Commanding."

Reij'dan was not amused.

"Computer, state reason for communication problem."

"Subspace signal is being blocked by anti-lepton radiation," stated the computer, impersonally as usual.

Reij'dan whirled around and looked squarely at the Captain. "Sensors should have alerted us about this. Recommend Red Alert immediately." He turned to Lieutenant Lefler. "Any information from the probe?"

Lefler looked back toward him. "Not yet, sir. Still decoding."

Reij'dan never took his eyes from the Captain, so she could see the stifled concern in his expression. "Explain," she requested.

Reij'dan began to speak in solemn yet hurried tones. "Sir, anti-lepton radiation is an artificially produced form of radiation. It does not occur naturally. It only occurs inside of a warp reaction. It's a by-product. Usually we counteract it with trillithium resin, another warp engine by-product, and they cancel each other out."

Captain Overland didn't get what he was saying and Reij'dan didn't have time for a full explanation.

"Captain, get to the Bridge. The trouble you were worried about..."

"Yes?" she stared him dead in the eyes.

"It's on its way."

Christine turned around and ran for the nearest turbo-lift.

Running inside and shouting at the computer to take her to the main bridge, she remembered not just what Reij'dan had said, but how he had said it, and now she shivered...almost to the very core.

-----

The interior of Shuttlebay Two was abuzz with the chatter of officers gathered in protective gear to examine the ship's newest salvage. The workbees signaled the shuttlebay doors to open and after a brief chat with the Flight Deck Officer about exactly what it was they had with them and exactly where they had to put it for proper decontamination, the doors slid open.

Commander Maldonado tapped the switch on his communications console.

"Workbee Two, this is Workbee One. Chris, we're taking the shuttle into a special quarantine bay they've set up. We'll be going straight back and into the starboard-most shuttle maintenance area."

"Quarantine Bay? Why? What's it got...rabies?"

Carlos smiled at the joke. "Worse. It's radiating tachyon particles."

"Well, I hope the shuttlebay has been magnetically protect-ed. Otherwise, the shuttle won't be."

"Chris, contrary to your belief, other people have thought about that ahead of time," Carlos said and flipped off the workbee's communicator with the complete and utter satisfaction of getting in the last word with Underwood.

The Commander looked over at Lieutenant Underwood, piloting the other workbee in tandem with his own, and saw him give a thumbs-up signal through the transparent aluminum cockpit windows. With that, the pilots pressed their respective acceleration handles forward and the workbees and the salvaged shuttle moved into the bay at 3 kph.

The workbees moved silently over the officers' and technicians' heads below them as they made their way to the maintenance bay. Banking the bees starboard, the two officers pulled the shuttle into the bay and giving automation a bad name, manipulated the workbees' arms in order to give the shuttle a very soft landing onto the deck. The landing went off without a hitch and the workbees exited the shuttle maintenance bay. As they completed their exit, a containment field sprang up around the bay.

Most of the officers in the shuttlebay left and went about their other duties. Only a handful, with gear still in place, advanced toward the maintenance bay. The Commander and the Lieutenant then lined the workbees up with the starboard hive module. Behind

them, the hangar doors closed and the two workbees slid effortlessly into the hive module's dock.

Meanwhile, activities were happening elsewhere aboard the ship.

An hour after the shuttle was brought in, Chief Communications Officer Lt. Commander Michael Klufas waved the Vice Admiral over from the center seat to the Communications station. Klufas had been off-duty and was called to the bridge for some detail work. More specifically, it was his job to try and access the computer aboard the strange salvaged shuttle by remote link.

Klufas, or Klufie, as his close associates referred to him, had just gone through several dozen frequencies and several dozen encryption algorithms already known and several dozen variants and finally accessed the shuttle's communications array.

This was when things became exceedingly difficult to deal with.

Michael was staring at part of the communications log. Although he couldn't access many of the shuttle's other systems, this one was providing, on its own, extremely valuable insight. Klufie began relating the information to the Vice Admiral.

"Alex, you're never gonna believe this! By this communications entry, this shuttle is in excess of 80 years new." He gave an agog look at the Commanding Officer as he conveyed this startling information.

"Eighty Years NEW?????" Alex said, looking worriedly at Klufie. "What exactly does that mean?" he asked.

"It means, sir, that the craft currently located in Shuttle Maintenance in shuttlebay 2 is not going to exist for another 79 years."

"Seventy-nine. I thought you just said eighty," Alex replied, with a perplexed inflection to his comment.

"Yes, sir. Eighty years."

"Not seventy-nine."

"No, sir."

"Commander," Alex put his hand on Klufas' shoulder, "could you please explain to me, in full detail, this whole thing again...?" The Admiral paused for effect. "...In Galactic Standard."

"Oh, you're confused by my... Oh, sorry, sir. When I said seventy nine years, I was referring to the construction date." Klufie swiveled and faced the Vice Admiral. "You see, Alex, though the shuttle is from eighty years in our future, apparently it was built only seventy-nine years in the future."

Alex stared at Klufas and rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Commander, we're getting on a needless tangent. Will you just get on with your report!"

Klufas noted Alex's expression of rising anger and decided he'd better get back to work. He turned the chair back, faced the console in front of him, and resumed his report.

"Vice Admiral, the reason I called you over here was because of this series of entries." Klufas pointed at the specific message intercept information. "This series is the length of message." He pointed to another series in the string of characters. "This series is the origin point. Incidentally, the shuttle isn't the origin of these communiqués."

Klufas triumphantly rested his hand on the console and used his index finger to point at a series of numbers halfway through the

string. "This, sir, is the proverbial "it"" Alex leaned down and took a look at the numbers the commander pointed out.

"18604741205" Alex read aloud.

Neuron levels increased and synaptic activity doubled in Alex's brain as the comprehension of what he just saw screamed in his head.

It was a message.

That in itself was not significant, but it was a message from a ship eighty years in the future, to the Avenger.

Alex went back to his command chair and tried to think of what to do next. What could he do? What was he supposed to do? One thought burned bright in his head: What the Hell was going on in the first place!?!

"Commander Klufas, alert the division chiefs to report to the bridge immediately," Alex called toward the Communications station.

"Aye, sir." Klufas opened the ship's intercom and started to page the appropriate officers to the bridge.

"Klufie," Alex spoke aloud, "include Lieutenant Underwood in that meeting. He was inside that thing. He might be able to give us more information on it."

"Aye, sir," came the response as he added the Lieutenant to the summons.

-----

The Whitewind-class cruiser bore down on the shuttle. It came upon the Ellesmere, and with a vengeance seemingly unparaleled, engaged in its attack.

The crew members inside the shuttle were nearly thrown from their seats as it rocked from the impact of disruptors contacting shields.

Counselor Carteris half yelled out, "Shields down to seventy-five percent. Their weapons are packing quite a punch."

"I'll say!" called a metallic voice from the back of the shuttle. "If this was a regular Class 7, our shields would be down to at least 36 percent by now!"

Juniper headed toward the back of the shuttle and activated an annular confinement beam that was positioned inside the door-frame of the aft section. Commander Arianna Quinn put the weapons systems on-line and returned fire.

"Good luck, Juniper!" she called out to the Security Chief when the field sprung alive behind her.

"Erin," Arianna eyed the woman next to her, "in twenty seconds, we're outta here!"

The Thanagarian officer grabbed the equipment bag off the deckplating and pressed the button labeled "Depressurize/Egress" on the floor. Three seconds passed as the various gases in the room were replaced by vacuum. Then a hatch opened and the dark, foreboding appearance of the hawk disappeared into deep space.

The hawkshape, nearly invisible in the surrounding blackness of space, clicked its taloned heels together twice and the boot mounted propulsion units kicked in, propelling her toward the Romulan cruiser, easily 30 times the size of the Ellesmere, hovering above.

It appeared like a vulture hanging in the sky, waiting for its prey to die so it could feed. Except this was no vulture, it was a predator with an arsenal that included disruptors, and the shuttle wasn't going to last long against them.

Looking out through the right optic port of her helmet, Juniper analyzed the shield frequency of the cruiser. The holographic display in the ether in front of her, allowing her to accomplish a wide variety of sensing and, interestingly enough, some offensive tasks as well, was only an illusion playing on her retina. An expensive illusion, but a useful one.

The workstation was designed to be of use to her alone and to be concealed. Thus had Thanagarian engineers put months of work into a retina-oriented workstation...an invention that was certainly paying itself off, Juniper noted, as she passed through the White-wind's shields without detection, thanks to the bit of technological innovation.

The hawkshape turned itself around and watched the shuttle's retreat. It had taken her only seven seconds to get to the cruiser and only five more to get inside the shields. The shuttle had roughly three seconds before it would make its escape, but Juniper had to make sure it did. It didn't really matter if she watched or not. The battlesuit's sensor absorption/reflective properties would make sure she went undetected by the enemy's sensors. As a matter of fact, she could probably go and stand in front of a viewport and no one would be the wiser.

The shuttle turned and warped away. It was an interesting phenomenon to see through the naked eye, albeit a little bright for Juniper's comfort. Secure in the knowledge that the shuttle was on its way, the hawkshaped security officer turned her attention back to the threat at hand.

As the officer manipulated the controls in her retina, the ship accelerated magnificently into warp flight. Juniper was unconcerned. She was on the interior of the warp field and would be carried along, like everything else.

She finished the adjustments to the workstation and she phased into a shadow of darkness and stepped through the exterior hull. The Shadow Units, used primarily for repairs or tinkering on warp engines aboard Thanagarian solazures (or, literally translated into Galactic Standard, "starships") while the Engines were in use, had other advantages as well, she mused as she emerged into the interior of the ship.

She entered and jumped the two officers walking in the corridor. Apparently they weren't going to be missed anytime soon, as she had caught them 'sneaking a moment to themselves'.

The Security Chief picked the limp bodies of the Romulan officers of the floor, confiscated their disruptors, and dropped the officers into the opening of a nearby crawlspace. She imagined what the Rihannsu would be smelling through the air ducts in the coming days, but stopped that train of thought. The Rihan ship didn't have that long an operational lifetime...not anymore. Setting her armor's sensors to medium range, she set out toward the aft-section of the ship.

Meanwhile, the two remaining persons aboard the shuttle Ellesmere were not exactly having a 'parade'.

The shuttle was cruising at warp 2 when Commander Quinn pressed the activation button for the other microcochrane drives installed aboard. The shuttle screamed as it made the jump to warp seven. It careened back toward its mother ship like adamantium through...anything. The situation was going pretty much as expected. Counselor Carteris managed the flight controls and engaged in evasive maneuvers. At warp seven, they would be at the

Weyrleader in under two minutes. Unfortunately, whoever was following them would be, too.

The two ships tore through space. The Whitewind cruiser closed the gap between itself and the shuttle and let loose a barrage of plasma torpedoes. The first three came in and exploded far enough away from the shuttle as to bear it no mind, but the next three were close enough to bring the shuttle out of warp.

"We've lost warp capacity!"

"Use impulse, then!" yelled the First Officer.

"I can't! All drive systems are fused!"

"Then we're screwed! Come on!" Commander Quinn yelled.

The two Commanders made their way back to the aft compartment and jumped out through the hatchway. The Romulan cruiser dropped out of warp, arced to port, and returned to the shuttle now floating in space. The Romulan Commander, seeing that the plans laid out by his superiors were in fact working out after all, locked his weapons on the shuttle.

"Subcommander," the Commander of the Whitewind-class cruiser Dar'lock called to his weapons officer, "finish off the shuttle. We have other places to be."

As the subcommander programmed the firing sequence that would scatter bits of the shuttle to kingdom come, the shuttle was abruptly swallowed by an 'Aperture'. The Commander, sitting in the seat in the center of his bridge, turned to an enshrouded corner off to his left where an old Romulan officer sat, dressed in a Star Fleet uniform.

"Should we pursue them inside?" the Commander asked silver-tonguedly.

"No. They won't be able to interfere with our plans now, Commander." The officer stood from his chair and moved into the soft lighting of the bridge center.

Taking a breath and looking at the viewer, the Star Fleet Admiral watched a moment longer.

"Status of this gate?"

The sensor officer watched his console for a moment and turned to the Admiral. "All readings indicate that the tachyon levels are diminishing and nothing has remained, Prelate."

"Good, good. In this case, Commander," he rubbed his hands together, "let us finish what we started."

The prelate moved to the command center's aft doorway. He looked back, took in a breath, and exited into the corridor, the doors closing behind him. The commander of the Dar'lock shifted in his seat.

"All right, you heard Prelate Wongen! Make course for the Federation starship!"

The commander pounded his hand against the arm of the command chair and gave the order to disarm weapons and cloak. This was a good thing, considering the weapons were now non-functioning, courtesy of a certain Weyrleader officer, and weren't doing a damn bit of good on-power anyway. The ship cloaked and resumed its course toward the Federation starship Weyrleader.

Two officers floating in deep space watched as the cruiser moved away and jumped into warp. There wasn't much they could do but hope that they didn't end up meeting the same fate as their shuttle seemingly had. They waited in radio silence, hoping for a relatively expedient rescue.

-----

The senior staff, plus one Lieutenant, gathered on the bridge of the Avenger, called there by the ship's Commanding Officer. The Vice Admiral looked to make sure they were all in attendance. Sure enough, they all were. Except for Lieutenant Underwood. Fortunately, he showed up only a minute after everyone else had arrived. He explained that he had to change out of beachwear and that's why he was late. Alex didn't mind.

The officers stood in various places around the bridge and waited for the Admiral to tell everyone what this was about. The Vice Admiral shifted in his seat and paused 'til everyone fell silent. The Admiral lifted his gaze to the main viewer ahead of him. He was unnerved. Though the view was stunning, he knew that tachyon death awaited them all if they moved 100 kilometers forward on their present heading. The Admiral sighed. The visual display gave him no pleasure right now. Too much was going on and too much information obscured. Alex was looking for answers.

"I see that we're all here," Alex started. "First, you should know that because of recent events, I have notified Star Fleet about this phenomenon. And Velta II is now aware that we won't be arriving on schedule. The reasoning is that things are going on that are too mysterious to let lie. I trust you are all in agreement?" Alex looked around the bridge as everyone nodded, reinforcing the statement.

"Then," he began again, "I would like to hear all the information available about that shuttle in our maintenance bay." The Vice Admiral stood and stared directly at the Thanagarian Lieutenant. "Starting with you, Lieutenant."

"Why me?" Lieutenant Underwood replied.

"Because you went inside that thing. Therefore I assume that you should have some enlightening insights," said Alex, who drove his statement home with a disarming eloquence that threw Chris into a spotlight.

"Well, the shuttle's name is Ellesmere, and as far as we can tell it was blasted pretty well. The life support systems weren't working." He paused, then continued. "If they were, they would have kicked in when I shut the airlock."

"Interesting analysis," said the Vice Admiral. Rosenzweig looked away at his Chief Engineer and called over to Lieutenant Underwood, now behind him. "When the Chief is done answering my questions, I'll want ALL your observations, Lieutenant, not just the ones you choose to give me at your leisure."

Alex addressed his Chief Engineer now, in a more pleasant tone. "George, what's your analysis?"

"Hmm," came the Chief Engineer's response. "It's radiating tachyon particles like nothing I've ever seen. It looks like it's been attacked, but my crew can't get within 7 meters of it. The suits won't protect against that amount of radiation. Other than that, Michael got the communications logs...and those should be more enlightening than anything else."

Michael Klufas swiveled from side to side in his seat at the Communications console.

"...and Alex, we still haven't been able to access the visual, flight, or sensor logs. So we're still not getting anywhere. The only interesting thing was..." said Klufie.

Michael related to the rest of the Command Staff the finding in the shuttle's databanks of the received communiqué to the Avenger from eighty years in the future. Commander Bob Fillmore took

the floor as he developed a few thoughts into questions after Klufas' recounting of his discovery.

"Vice Admiral," he said to the Commanding Officer, "I want information on two things: one of these being how the Lieutenant," he shifted his gaze to Lieutenant Underwood and then back to the Vice Admiral, "survived going INSIDE the shuttle with no ill effects from tachyon radiation. The second thing is, how did the shuttle get here to our time?"

The Admiral thought these were good questions and began asking some of his own. "Lieutenant Underwood, just how did you survive the radiation? You should have been poisoned."

The Lieutenant stood still and related information on the Thanagarian homeworld. "Back when the planet was beginning to support life, Thanagar was bombarded with massive amounts of all kinds of radiation. All subsequent generations of life therefore became immune to the effects of certain radiations, tachyon particles being one of these."

Alex, satisfied with one small mystery solved, hoped to solve some more before his luck ran out.

"Can anyone tell me how the Ellesmere got here then?" he questioned.

"I can," said Chaym Re'ming'ton, polishing off her last hamster puff. She had come onto the bridge with the others, but had stayed in the background... 'til now.

The Mohnan officer stood up and walked down two steps to the command level. She leaned up against the railing surrounding the area and swallowed.

"O-kay," Alex said, wondering how Chaym, the Chief Recreation Officer and queen of flamboyance and insane weirdness aboard the Avenger, could have the answers he required, "Let's hear it."

Chaym relaxed and began speaking.

"It's very simple, really. Tachyons are the 'farthest reaching', if you will, particles currently known to exist. They reach beyond subspace, so they presumably have an effect beyond subspace."

"Reh? Ahem... Please go on, Chaym," Commander Maldonado said as he looked at her with unknowing eyes.

Wherever Chaym had hid her expertise in this field, Carlos had never found it. All he knew was that she was making sense, and in this exceedingly obscure mystery, he followed her explanation, which was the most exceedingly strange thing about this entire situation.

"It's very simple," Chaym looked at her fiancée with a grin on her lupo-felinoid face, sufficiently amused by the fact that she had stunned him. "The shuttle is from 80 years in the future. This is a given. The shuttle is giving off massive amounts of tachyon radiation. This is another given. These two phenomena are coupled with the 'Aperture' that stopped us here in the first place and began our investigation."

Chaym stopped for effect and looked around the room to see 'who got where she was going'. Only Lieutenant Underwood seemed to realize, because he immediately ran into the turbo-lift and was gone.

"Guys, get it together," she said, not believing that none of the officers around her could figure this out.

"These apertures brought this shuttle here! Think logically! I don't know how, but they did."

Alex smacked himself in the face. How could he not have put this together himself? This was the first time Chaym had ever real-

ly blown him out of the water. "Who needs a Vulcan?" Alex muttered sardonically as he turned his attention back to the view-screen. He sat for a moment and let Chaym's words sink past his skull and into his brain. Why was the shuttle sent back here? What significance did this point in time have? How did it relate to what was going on?

Alex cleared his mind of all the mounting questions and dismissed the other officers. "Carlos, go down and get Lieutenant rRham ho 'tzt 'Tzen. Tell him we may need him up here. And make it quick. Things are getting too weird."

Carlos moved quickly to the turbo-lift and the doors closed behind him. Alex turned to where Lieutenant Underwood had been standing. Suddenly, as if waking from a nightmare, the Vice Admiral bolted from the center seat, up the two steps and into the turbo-lift waiting for use. The doors closed.

"Shuttlebay Two", said Alex and off the lift went.

When Alex came to the maintenance area in the starboard shuttlebay, he saw Lieutenant Underwood inside the shuttle. Crew were standing around and staring with disbelief as the Lieutenant walked where none of them could without facing certain death.

The Commanding Officer stood and watched as Underwood moved out of view. He only wished he knew what Chris was up to.

Lieutenant Underwood slid into the pilot's station of the shuttlecraft and started a diagnostic sweep. The shuttlecraft was still on minimal power, but he didn't know why. Seconds passed and then the diagnostic results were displayed on the console in front of him.

"Oh...that's it?" Chris said disbelievably.

Underwood looked at a schematic of the drive systems and walked into the shuttle's aft compartment, which was still open. He noticed that the door was charred. Looking deeper, he noticed that there had been a forcefield emitter here. With this in mind he went further inside. He hadn't seen this technology in almost a year, and it was still a little awkward to remember where the power taps would be, but he found them.

He grabbed a toolkit from a panel underneath a display and rerouted the power system. The engines wouldn't be working for propulsion any time soon, but he had power restored. He ran back to the front end of the shuttle. In doing so, he tripped over an open hatchway. He looked down and saw that a small button was alight, displaying the words "Depressurize/Egress". This explained why the forcefield was where it was. He noted this and continued his motion.

Sliding into the seat beside the pilot's console, Chris quickly accessed the sensor logs. The system here was much more detailed, he thought, than shuttles of this type usually carried. Then again, so was the egress hatch and the forcefield, and the four additional microcochrane engines...this shuttle, he thought to himself, was built for a fight.

Realization of the implications of this information hit home when he saw the sensor logs. Now displayed on his screen was a very large blip with very large readings, compared to the shuttle, that is. The Lieutenant accessed the visual log and checked the external sensors and saw the Whitewind-class cruiser. He played back the last ten minutes of the shuttle's visual logs and was truly

awed by the information he saw. On the screen, he saw a massive matrix form.

He tapped a few buttons on the screen and the screen split into two parts, with visual information progressing on the left and sensor information on the right.

"They built one..."

Chris slammed a clenched fist down on the console, nearly cracking it, and swore very loudly in Thanagarian. A few moments passed and Chris turned off the visual/sensor display. Once again, the panel displayed a schematic of the shuttle. The Lieutenant went over to the airlock and closed it.

Moving to the sensor position again, the officer sat down and programmed a sequence of codes into the computer. A few moments later, he moved to the airlock. "Computer, open airlock," he stated.

The computer chirped and opened the airlock. Chris stalked from the shuttle, the airlock closing behind him.

Stalking out of the bay, Chris brushed by Vice Admiral Rosenzweig and with an intonation akin to any one of the four horsemen of the apocalypse, stated, "You are not ready," and ran toward Engineering.

-----

The Whitewind-class cruiser Dar'lock moved deeper into the sector. It navigated through the tachyon fields and around the tachyon 'Aperture', coming upon the Federation starship U.S.S. Weyrleader floating in space 300 kilometers distant.

The crew of the Weyrleader didn't know that during their last layover, an emitter designed to radiate tachyons had been attached to the hull. The ship's sensors and technologies had been slightly altered to avoid its detection. Best of all, the independently powered device was activating the 'Aperture'. Weyrleader had inadvertently been doing it for days and this made it easy for the Rihanssu to locate them.

The Intrepid-derived spacecraft hung in space. The original plan hadn't worked, although evidence of some 'problems' was apparent as the Dar'lock came around the port side of the ship. The port nacelle pylon showed evidence of carbon scoring, but this had probably happened some time ago, as the damage seemed repaired.

The Whitewind-class cruiser banked portward, circling around the Federation starship, and widened its arc for the imminent attack. The cruiser turned back along the course pattern identified as the Federation ship's location and began vectoring to attack, but this attempt proved futile, as the Dar'lock refocused its sensors. The Federation ship Weyrleader was gone.

The Romulan commander screamed in rage as he stood and ran to his Engineering Officer. "Where did they go!?!?!"

The Romulan engineer sat and worked his controls. "All systems, even the cloak, are operating within specifications, Commander." The engineer paused thoughtfully. "They couldn't have detected our approach. And I can't detect them anywhere."

The Dar'lock's commander could not accept the news that the Federation ship had surely detected them coming in for the kill. He went back to his command chair and snarled an order to the Communications Officer to have the Prelate brought to the bridge. Minutes later, guards opened the door to the Prelate's quarters.

"Prelate Wongen, Commander Darnam wishes you to come to the bridge immediately. And I am afraid he insists."

The Romulan guard held his disruptor in plain view for the Romulan official to see quite clearly. Only an angry expression spread across the Prelate's face as he obeyed the guards' wishes.

They began their march to the bridge almost immediately. This time in Romulan uniform, the Prelate of the Romulan Empire, and spy of the Tal'Shiar, strode up to the bridge. On his way he thought he saw something in the shadows, as if they were alive, but he quickly banished this thought from his head. He had a bone to pick with the ship's commander, and he focused all his attentions on formulating a tirade of dialogue with which to assail the Dar'lock's Commander.

The apparition in the hallway, though, couldn't believe her eyes. She had seen his face before. More specifically, when she had patched him through via subspace to her Commanding Officer.

That was a Star Fleet Admiral in Romulan attire!

But realization set in. This Admiral was wearing not just any uniform; it had the silver birdlike signage of the Tal'Shiar. The Security Chief recognized the insignia on the collar as he walked by her. For a moment she jumped deeper into the shadows, as she thought she had been spotted, but he shrugged and walked by her. The look on his face betrayed his emotions. He was enraged.

Meanwhile, on the bridge of the Weyrleader, things were afoot. Captain Overland brought the ship into a wide arc. The plan was working, except for one thing: the 'Aperture'. It seemed like it was following them, because no matter where they went, it was there.

Chief Engineer Reij'dan noticed the peculiarity of the pattern for the first time, when the 'Aperture' shifted location. The Operations officer called off the location of the 'Aperture' relative to the ship and the pattern had seemed to emerge from nowhere. The chief noted that every 30,000 kilometers or thereabouts, the coordinates of the Aperture would change. He put his hypothesis to the test and plotted where the next few 'Apertures' would flare to life along their course.

He realized what was going on as a plasma torpedo came across their last coordinates at the last 'Aperture's' appearance. Reij'dan called town to the command deck. "Captain."

Captain Overland, seated in her command chair and concentrating on the duties at hand, didn't turn to face the Engineering station at the aft of the bridge.

"Let's hear it, Reij'dan," she said aloud, and shortly afterward called a course change to the conn station.

She wondered silently to herself how, whoever it was on their tail, had known where they were. She hoped someone would answer this question for her sometime soon. Reij'dan had impeccable timing.

"Sir, I don't know how, but every 30,000 kilometers or so, an 'Aperture' forms. Not only that, but sensors show an elevation in tachyon emissions as we approach each them. This leads me to believe that these two phenomena are interconnected," Reij'dan called to the Captain as the ship made yet another arc to avoid yet another 'Aperture'.

Christine sat still in her seat, watching the main viewer intently. "What are you saying, Chief? I don't have time to figure it out myself right now."

Reij'dan thought to himself and put things together. "Captain, simply put, every time we get near one of those things, it 'flares up' and then dissipates as we leave it. This is apparent because all the other 'Apertures' in this sector are blinking every so often and then going away just as suddenly. But the one we were waiting by earlier, it wasn't going away."

"Reij'dan, if this has anything to do with a way to defend our ship, I don't want to hear about it, just do it."

Christine looked over the right side of the command chair to the aft of the bridge. Reij'dan saw the look in her eyes and got up from his station and jumped into the turbo-lift. She heard him say, "Main Engineering" before the doors even snapped shut.

On the bridge, the situation achieved the title of 'mildly un-amusing' as the red alert lights flashed on and off. Thanks to her friends at Research and Development, Christine had managed to get a wonderful piece of technology smuggled aboard, and she kept it hidden in her quarters for a special occasion, or more specifically, in case of dire emergencies.

Christine remembered the look on Reij'dan's face as she walked into Engineering holding the device in her hands. She had walked over, put it in his hands, said three words: "Hook it up," and ran out of Engineering, back to the bridge. Christine pulled her attention from her memories, though, and snapped her attention back to the flying of the ship.

Reij'dan had been quite surprised to find the PADD on top of the device's carrier, which held schematics on how to attach the device, and he was absolutely dizzy from delight when he saw the container's label. It read "PhaseCloak Generator".

Reij'dan walked past the area in which the PhaseCloak had been installed and into the Engineering master control area, and pulled up a quick diagnostic of the Weyrleader. He had surmised that something on the Weyrleader, whether onboard or attached, was activating the 'Apertures'. At least now, he thought to himself, he had something to look for, and if he had to tear this universe another black hole to find it, by the Gods he was going to do exactly that.

While he was in the turbo-lift, he paged Lieutenant Lefler to meet him in Engineering, and she arrived a few minutes later. Her injuries slowed her down by an exponential factor, but she still managed to make it to her station in record time despite them.

"Robin, I need you to start a detailed scan of all onboard ship systems pertaining to emissions in the sub-subspace band."

"What will I be looking for, sir?" Lieutenant Lefler asked the Chief Engineer.

"Anything out of the ordinary, anything that doesn't add up." Reij'dan quoted an anecdote to enliven the mood and expedite the process. "And if you can do it in five minutes, I'll give you a bagel slicer, Absolutely Free!"

Reij'dan looked at the Lieutenant with an expression that seemed to challenge her to make a better counteroffer.

"Somehow, I don't think I'll be needing one of those... Ah, well, suppose I'll ship it off to Wes, wherever he's got to."

The Lieutenant sat down at the Engineering console that overlooked the warp drive unit. She called up a ship's schematic and started tracking down power usage by the power allocation tables. Then she checked all of the ship's systems that emitted any kind of

sub-subspace radiations. While Lieutenant Lefler was doing her job, the Chief Engineer scanned the outside of the ship, using the holographic visual monitors he and his engineers had installed prior to their departure from their last drydock. The holographic sensors ran a diagnostic and showed the outline of the ship on a small display sitting in front of Reij'dan on the console.

The three-dimensional view stood in the air, awaiting inspection. Reij'dan tapped at areas on the hologram, near any emitters that might be giving off non-kosher emissions. As he did this, he noticed one section of the ship that positively refused to be manipulated by the holographic sensing workstation.

At first, Reij'dan thought that there was a problem between the holographic sensors and the PhaseCloak device, but then Lieutenant Lefler confirmed that, although she couldn't detect any power to any kind of emitter that radiated sub-subspace emissions, she could detect an unusual amount of tachyon particles radiating from the hull in the location of the area of the holographic sensors that Reij'dan could not access. Whatever it was was located in the aft section of the ship, possibly hidden close to another emitter, so as not to be noticed.

Reij'dan slammed his fist down upon the station and turned the holographic display off. This was bugging him. He tapped his communicator.

"Main Engineering to Main Bridge."

"Engineering, this is the bridge," came a voice over the speakers. It was Lieutenant Dibbs, at the Ops station.

"Bridge, tell the Captain that whatever is turning on these 'Apertures' is on our aft ventral quarter."

"What?" came the response as the Captain's voice echoed throughout the main control alcove of Engineering.

"Sir," began the Chief Engineer, "something is generating tachyon particles that are triggering those damn things."

He waved in the air. "Out there."

"I don't want the details, Chief," the captain's voice called. "Just figure out how to shut it down, deactivate it, remove it from the hull...eat it. It doesn't matter. We don't need to be tracked."

A new voice came chiming in. "Chief, this is Lieutenant K'rkan, manning the Tactical station. I hate to tell you, but if we de-cloak while the unknown is out there watching us, we'll be sitting ducks."

Lieutenant Lefler perked up at this thought provoking response and tapped the Chief Engineer on the shoulder. "Sir, I have an idea. It would take far too long for us to go out and look for the hidden device on our hull, but what if we set up other emitters... using tachyon pulses?"

The Chief thought about the feasibility of the Lieutenant's idea. "You mean, if we made multiple targets, then maybe we could gain an advantage. Yes, you might be right!"

The Chief yelled up to the comm system in the ceiling, "Bridge, it would take too long to find the device on the hull, at least in this situation we sit precariously involved in. However," he went on, "Lieutenant Lefler just came up with an idea. I'll need to modify some of our class 9 probes so they can emit tachyon particles. If she's right, this should confuse whoever is out there..."

The speakers crackled.

"Lieutenant K'rkan here. The idea is sound; let us know when you have the probes ready."

The comm circuits closed as Chief Reij'dan mobilized his entire Engineering staff to the task at hand.

-----

Lieutenant Underwood ran into the engineering section of the U.S.S. Avenger. Specialists and officers would note that he ran to his station at the warp systems console with a passion. Officers gathered around as he started to reconfigure the ship's warp field into something they had never seen before and never thought possible. The alarm went off in Chief Engineer Padovan's office and he ran to investigate. He stopped at the Warp Systems station, the source of the disturbance to which the computer had alerted him.

He saw the Lieutenant and yelled at the top of his lungs, "What in hell are you doing, Lieutenant!?!"

Without looking up from the console, the Lieutenant called to generally anyone in the vicinity, "I am reconfiguring the warp field for optimum efficiency. What do you think I am doing?!" and continued with his work.

The Chief Engineer, not satisfied with the explanation, called security. Lieutenant Underwood finished reconfiguring the warp field as security arrived. The two security officers, under the orders of the Chief Engineer, removed the Lieutenant from his station and placed him in cuffs.

Lieutenant Underwood screamed, "You're not ready yet!!!" at the top of his lungs to the entire Engineering staff. "You have to recalibrate the shields and phasers as well, or we don't stand a chance!"

The Engineering staff watched the Lieutenant rant and rave instructions on what he wanted them to do. Nobody listened, however, until the Chief Engineer sat down at the Warp Systems station.

Initially, Chief Padovan was doing damage control, trying to figure out what the Lieutenant had done, when realization set in. The ship's warp field had been reconfigured to beyond peak efficiency. He brought up the warp speed scale chart on the screen and ran a diagnostic program. About this time, Vice Admiral Rosenzweig entered Main Engineering.

He had heard about the security situation from the bridge and, hoping that the Lieutenant now in custody knew what he was doing, personally had come to tell security to stand down, perhaps even to watch what was going on. Alex approached the two security officers and stopped. He looked at the young Lieutenant and saw the urgency in his eyes. He turned and shifted his glance to Chief Engineer Padovan sitting at the Warp Systems station.

"George, what's going on here? I heard you had a security situation."

The chief neither swiveled, shifted, or swayed in his seat as he kept muttering to himself, "Warp 19!?! Warp 19!?! Warp 19!?!"

Alex looked at the station and read the contents of the screen. At the bottom of the screen lay a figure and a translation key. In the final dialogue box were displayed the words "Cochrane limit 19.73891". Alex stood back, not believing what his eyes had shown him. He looked at the screen again and stepped back.

He turned to the security officers and bade them let the Lieutenant free. They did so and returned to their stations, confident that the Vice Admiral had the situation well in hand. In fact, however, this was not the case. The Vice Admiral was in the dark about a great many things and this seemed like a perfect opportunity to get answers, from someone he now knew to have them.

Alex pulled Lieutenant Underwood aside and stepped into the Jeffries Tube entrance, sealing the door behind them. Now sealed off from the rest of the crew, Alex politely asked the question.

"What the Hell is going on? And I mean the truth this time!" Lieutenant Underwood watched his Commanding Officer's expression change from bewilderment to determined persistence. "Damn it, Lieutenant, I mean now! All the information, every last scrap!" The Commanding Officer tried another approach, "Chris, let me in on what's going on here. Is the ship in danger? If so, you'd better spill the beans before it's too late!"

"What I am about to tell you is to be kept in the strictest confidence."

Alex listened intently to what Chris had to say. Both officers leaned against opposite sides of the Jeffries Tube as the topic of discussion unfolded.

"Vice Admiral, the things that have been occurring are the result of a technology that your Federation is not ready for."

The Admiral shifted his eyes. "That's rather vague."

The Lieutenant cleared his throat and began to elaborate.

"Alex, remember the shuttle we brought aboard?"

The Vice Admiral replied, "Yes."

"It's not from this time," Lieutenant Underwood remarked.

"We already knew that Chris," said the Vice Admiral.

"Sorry about that. It's just my way. Now forget that tangent and let me bring you up to speed." Lieutenant Underwood's eyes narrowed and his tone denoted seriousness. "The phenomenon we have termed the 'Aperture', is far more dangerous than any of which you know."

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig, obviously taken aback by this turn of events, listened and motioned for the officer to continue.

"The shuttle," Underwood continued, "is from the other side of the 'Aperture'."

He waited for this information to sink in to the Vice Admiral. It didn't, though.

"Admiral..." he began, "the 'Aperture' is a temporal phenomenon, but far more dangerous in that it is a synthetic anomaly." The Lieutenant opened his eyes and focused them into a dead stare.

"Synthetic? If this is so," the Vice Admiral said, "then who was it made by?"

"The sensor logs on board the shuttle gave me a visual of the phenomenon, taken as it passed into the 'Aperture'. It's design says mix."

"Can you clarify, 'mix'?" the Vice Admiral requested.

"It looks," clarified the Lieutenant, "to be part Federation technology and part Romulan in nature."

"How can you know that!?!?" asked the Vice Admiral, waiting for some grandiose answer on architecture from the Lieutenant. Engineers had a flare for that type of description.

"Because, in the interior anyway, the 'Aperture' gave off sensor readings indicative of Romulan technology...not to mention the label."

"Label? What label?" the Vice Admiral asked in disbelief.

"The label! Actually, it's more of a stamp...says 'Made on ch'Rihan'." Lieutenant Underwood looked at the Vice Admiral's shocked and dazed expression and started to pull the details together. "I could show you, if you like, but you'd have to wait for the radiation to die down. Unfortunately we don't have that sort of time right now."

"What...Who? Why not?" the Admiral asked, feeling totally perplexed.

"Because whoever attacked that shuttle in our maintenance bay can't afford to leave any witnesses behind," the Lieutenant explained.

"Witness to what?" Alex regained his composure and began to argue the opposite position. "If the shuttle is from the future, how is it that we are in danger? Nobody knows it's here, or anything about the nature of the 'Aperture'. And I find it a little hard to believe that the Federation and Rihannsu would shack up together, either."

"Admiral," the Lieutenant spoke, "remember the Khitomer Incident?" The Vice Admiral thought for a moment, realized what the Lieutenant was talking about, and nodded. "Exactly. Besides, it's not happening now. It's happening later, in the future," the Lieutenant stated cryptically.

"Future... So what's this got to do with now?" the Vice Admiral asked.

"Simple. You make reports, right?" The Lieutenant looked at the Vice Admiral as he nodded an affirmation. "I thought so. And even if you don't, the information is contained in log entries; personal logs, Captain's Logs, sensor logs."

"Yeess... And so...?"

"So, the logs that the shuttle holds are proof of what is going on. The Avenger's own logs are proof of what is going on...whatever that may be. At any rate, sir, there exists proof of a conspiracy, whether it is a conspiracy to come or a conspiracy that has been before."

The Vice Admiral caught on to the line of thought.

"I see what you mean, but that still doesn't mean anything is going to attack us. Most of what you are saying seems conjectural anyway. Besides, the only other people who know about this are the people at the Star Fleet Navigational Division. But they don't know what this 'Aperture' does, or is professed by you to do."

"Not now, sir, but they will. Remember, that shuttle is from the future. The damage it sustained is from the future. Meaning that the Federation, and the Romulans, have at least 80 years to figure out what this thing is."

"But the 'Aperture' can't exist now, in that case, because it hasn't been built yet!" the Vice Admiral explained, exasperated.

"But it will someday, and that means that an 'Aperture' could be taken back into the past. After all, suppose the shuttle wasn't the only craft to make the transition through time. Suppose someone or something else came back, too. They couldn't exactly activate the gate from 80 years or more in the past, could they?"

"You mean they brought the 'Aperture', as we know it, back in time?" Alex pulled at his beard. "If the Federation or the Rihannsu did that, then why now?"

"Because whoever came back would need a way to get home. Heck, if we didn't run across it now, it might have never have been found out." The Lieutenant cracked a smile and shifted his gaze directly up the Jeffries Tube. "Gods, I love this universe!" he exclaimed. Then he shifted his line of sight back to the Admiral.

"I'd rather be safe than sorry. We should be ready just in case I'm right. The gate is here already! That means that something is here, or will be here soon. Either waiting to finish us off, or preparing to finish us off. Whatever the case may be, it has to end now, or the course of future events could change drastically."

The Admiral studied the Lieutenant's expression, and went over his last few words. "You seem so sure of yourself, you seem so convinced that things will happen the way you told me. Have they already? That would explain how you significantly upgraded the warp drive to function at unbelievable speeds...You're from the future, aren't you?"

"Admiral, don't be silly. Just because I am a wizard in propulsion and theoretical science and a great many other things doesn't mean I am from the future. If I was, don't you think I'd stay there... where it's SAFE?"

The Vice Admiral raised his finger and started to embark on a discussion of this topic when Underwood interrupted him by opening the door to Engineering. "Time is short, Vice Admiral. Red Alert sounds in order, doesn't it?" With his last words hitting home, the Lieutenant darted away and into Engineering.

Three hours later, all hell broke loose.

-----

In deep space, no one can hear you scream. This was the thought in the mind of Captain Christine Overland, commanding the U.S.S. Weyrleader. She sat in the command seat, in constant vigil, waiting for the right time. Waiting for either the end, or a new beginning.

It was coming up on the sixth hour since they had engaged the PhaseCloak device and the plush environment on the bridge barely calmed Christine. She knew the ship couldn't stay Phase-Cloaked forever. That sometime, one ship or the other would have to decloak and then prove who had been the wiser.

Luckily, they had detected the distress beacon of the shuttle Ellesmere before the other ship had come into range. In the two hours since, the Weyrleader's sensor pallets had been tuned to their utmost sensitivity. The main viewer displayed the sensor analysis on a direct feed from the navigational array, the panoramic vista that she so enjoyed replaced by the haunting presence of a distortion barely visible and barely moving, barely, but noticeably, following their every move.

They had found the device giving away their location five hours and 33 minutes before, but there was no way to get to it without giving the Weyrleader's EXACT location away. As it was, the Weyrleader had a 30,000 kilometer buffer zone to work with, and this suited them just fine.

The ship that followed watched the tachyon 'Apertures' flare up as they passed by them. The Weyrleader would have left this sector and the danger behind. Unfortunately, the emissions of the attached tachyon emitter on their ventral aft section would also give away their coordinates in open space.

This was one time when Captain Overland wished counselor Carteris was onboard. Unfortunately, her whereabouts only added to the rising tension. The Counselor, First Officer, and Security Chief had been sent on a mission earlier in the customized shuttle Ellesmere. As if to compound the problems aboard, when the distress signal came in from the Ellesmere and suddenly disappeared, things went from bad to worse, as the Captain's fears were confirmed.

She hoped that the shuttle's three crewmembers survived whatever fate had befallen the Ellesmere, but unfortunately she could not afford to go and search out survivors at present...the Weyrleader was otherwise occupied.

The ship slipped forward into the arc that would bring them back toward the distortion. Hopefully, she thought, Engineering would come through for them. By the strangest coincidence, as soon as the Captain had finished this particular thought, the bridge speakers came alive.

"U.S.S. Weyrleader, this is your opponent speaking. You have two minutes to immediately show yourselves, or we will kill the survivors from your doomed shuttle."

The Dar'lock's Commander motioned for the communications officer to close the channel. He hoped that his bluff would work and allow him and his crew to complete this mission and get on with the other things it had to do. Just then, the doors at the aft of the Romulan cruiser's bridge opened and admitted the prelate and the two 'accompanying' guards with him.

The Prelate of the Tal'Shiar stalked forward, away from the guards, and approached the ship's Commander.

"What is going on here!?! I should have YOU thrown in the brig for this mistreatment, Commander Darnam!!!"

Commander Darnam motioned to the guards, and shortly thereafter, Prelate Wongen was sitting quietly, flanked by two Romulan Guards with disruptors trained on him. The Commander stood and moved to the location of the prelate. Looking at him squarely, the commander slapped the back of his hand across the Prelate's face.

"YOU HAVE BETRAYED US TO THE FEDERATION!" Darnam pulled his anger under control. "And that is one thing on a long list of things you won't be doing from here on out...like living."

The Commander, feeling satisfied, moved back to his chair and reseated himself.

"Guards! Take the Prelate to Airlock 5 and blow him out into the void." Commander Darnam turned and squinted his vision toward the Prelate. "I do not take well to traitors. Goodbye, Prelate."

The two guards took hold of the Prelate. He didn't give much trouble as he was considerably old, even for a Romulan. The guards marched him off the bridge and the aft doors slid closed behind them.

Moving down through the corridors, the Romulan Prelate again saw the movement of the shadows and his thoughts sank into darkness, as he thought the universe surely mocked him. The two guards threw Prelate Wongen into the airlock. They closed the door and watched him as he sat in despair. They took pleasure from his pain and the knowledge of what was about to happen. However, they hadn't taken into account one very important thing. The shadows.

The Security Chief slashed out at the guards' necks as they turned to confront the shadowy form approaching them. The Shadow of the Hawk removed the head of the guard nearest the controls to the airlock. His head rolled on the deckplates, but did not bleed as the bloodways had been cauterized by her Phase-Sabre. She turned and deftly removed the other guard's hand but not before he got a shot off from the disruptor he held.

Green energy spewed forth from the disruptor and winged her in the right side. Luckily, her battle suit absorbed most of the energy, or she would have been disintegrated. However, she didn't go

unharmful, as she felt the blood oozing from a wound in her right side.

Collapsing to the ground, she slapped the airlock door control. The interior door opened and the Prelate praised the gods he believed in. 'Darnam is going to pay', he thought to himself, as he stepped over the hawkshaped form. He picked up the discharged disruptor, lying next to the now unconscious and handless guard, and made his way back toward the bridge area.

On board the Weyrleader, things were again afoot. The tachyon emanating probes were retooled and ready for launch.

Seven probes tore into deep space, six with their preprogrammed objective of randomly engaging the 'Apertures', the seventh charged with the awesome task of removing an effectively invisible emitter from the ventral aft section of the Weyrleader. This last probe was the longshot, but hopefully the other probes would raise enough of an eyebrow so as to let this particular one go unnoticed.

Inside the ship, a smile crept onto the Captain's face. She stood and walked to the Ops station. "Dibbs, keep your eye on the course of our 'opponent'."

Stepping back to her seat, she slid into place and spoke aloud to the rest of the bridge crew. "I want you all to know that I think that last transmission was a bluff. If it was the truth, our 'opponent' would have probably been more specific about who the survivors were, or how many. Again, this is pure speculation, but I do think it's a bluff." The Captain shifted her weight to her right arm. "Meanwhile, Conn, I want you to begin random course patterns comparable to those of the probes we have just launched."

Captain Overland called upward into the ceiling of the bridge, "Engineering, this is the Bridge. As soon as the seventh probe has completed its mission, I want you to send it away from the ship toward an 'Aperture'. As soon as it comes within five thousand kilometers of its target, transfer the probe's control to the bridge."

The Bridge speakers came to life with the acknowledgment from Engineering of her orders. Now all that remained was a slim bit of time.

-----

The object came in fast and with the agility of a striking cobra. The alert sirens aboard the Avenger flared to life, waking its crew and sending them to battle stations. The shields flew up and held at 10 times their normal strength, and the weapons systems armed and were 10 times as deadly as before. All the other modifications made by the Engineering crews, under the supervision of Lieutenant Underwood, came alive exactly as the Lieutenant had claimed. Hopefully the crew could compensate for the increase in the ship's efficiency.

The ship came closer and Avenger's sensors reported the ship as being of an unknown type, but armed to the teeth and ready for a fight. Underwood, manning the Engineering console on the bridge, the Chief Engineer thinking it fitting, watched the main viewer as the ship came forth into battle. Though its class of ship was unrecognizable to the other officers, the Lieutenant remembered exactly what the ship was, and more importantly, what it was capable of. The small, agile craft came within weapons range and opened fire on the Avenger. At this range, it was possible to see the registry of their enemy.

"U.S.S. Gryphon NCC-74210," Vice Admiral Rosenzweig spoke aloud as the strange kind of what he could only term phaser bolts slammed into the shields of his ship.

Thrown from his seat at the time of impact, the Vice Admiral climbed back to his chair and ordered the counter-attack to begin. The Avenger banked on its starboard-side and engaged its impulse drive. It moved out of the Gryphon's firing arc and turned to attack. The U.S.S. Gryphon turned immediately, much too soon for the Avenger to compensate, and began firing at the Avenger's aft shields.

"Shields holding at 85 percent, Admiral!" Lieutenant Underwood called from the Engineering console as the Avenger fired back.

The megaphaser units engaged and locked onto the enemy. Charging only momentarily, they delivered beams of phased energetic death toward the other ship. The enemy called U.S.S. Gryphon took the blast and continued firing, but at half its original speed. The Gryphon was slowing; this was good. Now, at least, the Avenger stood a better chance of survival.

The Avenger feigned banking to the starboard and followed around to port at full-impulse. The Gryphon, overanticipating, went at high impulse to the starboard side of the Avenger. The heavy frigate, however, had ideas of its own.

The Avenger's actions had thrown the ship into a controlled spin, and the weapons sights, under the expert operation of Tactical Officer Stephen Becker, released a deadly salvo of photon torpedoes that annihilated the port shielding of the enemy...effectively shaving off the outer-hull coatings of the U.S.S. Gryphon. In response, the Gryphon angled so that their vulnerable point was protected, and released a retort back at their adversary.

The shields of the Avenger were battered by the pyrotechnic display released from the Gryphon. Lieutenant Underwood grabbed onto the bridge Engineering console for dear life as he watched the shielding indicator move from eighty-five percent efficiency to just forty-nine percent efficiency. The forward shields of the Avenger buckled under the stress and several key deflector relays exploded outward from the ship. Avenger was now, as Lieutenant Underwood had once heard someone say, in deep s....

"STATUS REPORT!" the Vice Admiral called from the center seat of the seriously disarrayed Main Bridge. He listened as his officers called out the rise in damage. If Avenger didn't find some way out of this battle soon, the condition would reach critical and that would be the end.

"George!" the Vice Admiral called to his Chief Engineer, "get working on those shields!"

In response to the order, Lieutenant Underwood stood from the station and Commander George Padovan sat down and began to work magic at the console. Lieutenant Underwood watched intently as the Chief Engineer pulled power from the warp systems and charged the secondary shielding generators on the outer hull. The shields came back up from forty-nine percent to seventy-percent of nominal and the Lieutenant was duly impressed. Seeing that this battle seemed now to be in capable hands, the Lieutenant excused himself quickly and made his way down to help out in Engineering.

Another salvo of phaser bolts slammed into the Avenger's shields. Most of the forward section of Deck 8 exploded as the

phaser bolts breached the forward shields and turned that section of the outer hull to swiss cheese.

The Gryphon turned away from the Avenger to regroup its resources for the attack that would surely cripple Avenger. However at that moment, the Gryphon disappeared.

-----

Security Chief Juniper Dey fought to regain control as she sifted through the cloudy mist of her thoughts. She didn't know how long she had been unconscious, but she thought it was a wee bit too long. The interior of the Whitewind-class cruiser Dar'lock was on fire! The corridors echoed the sound of the alert sirens and Juniper guessed that the officers aboard had been too busy with other things than to go casually walking by her location...an assumption that proved true as she found that she hadn't been discovered yet.

She heard what sounded like disruptor fire from the direction she knew the Romulan bridge to be in. She stood and melted into the shadows, the battlesuit now serving as a bandage as well. Switching her retina-workstation to infrablue, she scanned the area not more than twenty meters away to see just what in hell was going on. What she found was astonishing, yet poetically just. Secure in the knowledge that things were really starting to work out in the universe, she made her way toward the cruiser's shuttlebay.

When Juniper arrived at the shuttlebay, she found it remarkably deserted. She began to wonder why, until the cruiser shook to what seemed its very foundations. Realizing that this was no time to stand around considering where the Romulan officers who were supposed to be manning this area were, she quietly thanked her Gods and ran toward the scout vessel located next to the egress doors.

She slipped a peek inside to see if there was anyone there. There wasn't.

Another barrage of what felt like photon torpedoes ravaged the cruiser. Juniper was thrown into the pilot's seat by the blast. Setting her retina-workstation to translate mode, she flicked the door control to close. The pressure door in the side of the scout ship's hull sealed closed. She operated the controls that would remotely open the shuttle bay doors, but after three tries and no success, she gave up and decided to use a more brash measure.

The main viewer on board the U.S.S. Weyrleader showed the bridge officers that their attack had hit home as the Whitewind-class cruiser decloaked, surely from the phaser barrage that they had just delivered to the cruiser's aft area.

Captain Overland tightened her grip on her chair and gave the order to politely, yet firmly, pound the living hell out of the cruiser with the Weyrleader's extensive supply of photon torpedoes.

As the photon torpedoes were unleashed upon their target, the main viewer aboard the Weyrleader showed an altogether interesting phenomenon. Increasing the magnification of the lower right-hand quadrant of the viewer, Captain Overland saw the scout class Romulan craft ram its way through what must logically be the shuttle bay doors and move away at high velocity. Captain Overland gave the order to cripple the scout craft when a short message came over subspace and popped up on the Ops panel.

Lieutenant Dibbs whipped his head around and called to the captain, "SIR! The craft, it's Lt. Commander Dey! She says she's going to pick up Commander Quinn and Counselor Carteris! They're all alive, sir!"

Captain Overland took in this information, and with deep satisfaction told the Tactical Officer to resume the attack on the White-wind-class cruiser and to avoid annihilating the scoutcraft.

-----

The Avenger circled the area where the Gryphon was last reported located, nursing its wounds and looking out for trouble. Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig was determined to end this situation one way or the other.

Commander Carlos Maldonado was contemplating the Vice Admiral's command fitness.

Commander George Padovan was dreaming of ripping apart the person or persons responsible for conducting the attack that so severely damaged Avenger.

Engineering was in a flurry as personnel ran around trying to get the shielding systems repaired. Damage control parties were down on Deck Eight, trying to seal the breach in the hull. If one were to objectively view the interior of the Avenger, the description given could be compared to that of a gutted fish. However, if the Gryphon came back before even minimal repairs were completed, even the gutted fish description wouldn't hold water.

The Security Division deployed themselves on the outer hull of the Avenger. Their job was to protect the ship during the time the shields would have to be relieved of power. Equipped with arm- and foot-braced phaser cannons and mobile photon torpedo launchers, 43 security officers moved out along the outer hull of the ship and into defensive positions.

In deep space however, there were mixed emotions brewing.

-----

The U.S.S. Gryphon, Valiant-class warship, under the command of Captain Simone Des'Jarden, while cloaked, slowly circled the Avenger in a counterclockwise motion.

The main viewer displayed the Avenger Security crew on top of their ship, fanning out into defensive positions. Simone thought the display was an interesting way to defend the ship, and made a mental note that it was something her crew might be able to use later.

The Gryphon had already lost 5 crewmembers during the attack from a ruptured plasma conduit near the outer hull. Contrary to Simone's belief, the megaphaser units aboard Avenger were a match for the Gryphon's weapons systems...at least when pieces of hull plating were missing.

Captain Des'Jarden sat in the center of the Gryphon's bridge and contemplated her orders. She had been told that the Maquis had commandeered the starship Avenger and that it was their job to gain control of Avenger back. The crew had also been told that the Maquis were using some type of temporal gate they had discovered, quite by accident, to bring the Avenger and presumably other ships they were stealing back in time...out of reach of the Federation hands, so as to build up their arsenal.

However, the people on top of the Avenger's hull seemed like Star Fleet personnel, rather than Maquis terrorists. The strange thing was, the personnel were using, oddly enough, antique environmental suits and weaponry. This gave the Captain something to

think about. Still, the Avenger wasn't answering the Gryphon's hails, which sanctioned the Gryphon's actions as per its orders.

Simone sat in the center seat and decided her next course of action.

-----

The Avenger moved in its clockwise motion around the last known coordinates of the Gryphon. The shielding systems were close to being repaired; the estimate of nine hours for repair was more or less accurate, and in that time they had seen neither hide nor hair of their opponent. Avenger scanned deeply into space and found that they couldn't see a thing. The entire bridge crew was nervous and were starting to feel like a wolf caught in a bear trap.

"Sir, " came the Science Officer's voice, "I think we are being scanned."

Commander Carlos Maldonado considered the implications. He turned to the Communications Officer.

"Have Vice Admiral Rosenzweig report to the bridge immediately."

"Aye, sir."

Carlos sat back in the center seat to await his Commanding Officer's arrival. However, scant seconds later, a short message came through.

It merely stated, "Stand by, Avenger."

-----

On the bridge of the Romulan cruiser Dar'lock, the bombardment of weapons fire on the outer hull had become only cursorily significant. Disruptor fire lashed out from the weapon of the Prelate as officers were mowed down in its wake. Corpses littered the bridge as Commander Darnam watched his fellows and friends die before his eyes.

Prelate Wongen had lost all control and Darnam could hear him muttering something above the sounds of the dying. The Commander ran from his command seat and toward the aft of the bridge, hoping to make it to a disruptor locker located there. Unfortunately, that action, Darnam thought, was obviously visible as he crumpled nearly a hand's-length away as a result of a disruptor hit to his right calf.

Darnam maneuvered his way into a sitting position and grabbed at the disruptor locker's release lever, his thoughts trundling through his head like a snowy slush. He was amazed he was still alive, as the disruptor should have disintegrated him, but Darnam, after a long moment's repose, concluded that the disruptor the Prelate carried wasn't set to full power...luckily for him.

Through the slushed haze in the Romulan Commander's brain came a voice, old and haggard, but ablaze with untamed hatred. He tried to stay conscious to listen to what he could now identify as the ramblings of the Prelate of the Tal'shiar.

"You're an idiot, Darnam!" cried Prelate Wongen in the general direction of the Romulan Commander. "I have given you EVERYTHING you needed, even a way to safeguard this place! And you throw it away!"

The Prelate, obviously oblivious to the fact that the Dar'lock wasn't going to survive the pounding the Federation starship Weyr-leader was loosing upon it, stalked toward Commander Darnam and thrust the heel of his booted foot into his ribs. He repeated this action until the greenish hue of Romulan blood spewed forth from the Commander's mouth.

"Still dangerous, aren't I, Darnam?" the Prelate taunted. "I am a very dangerous enemy indeed. You should have considered that before you tried to have me shoved out an airlock! Now... I will show you just how dangerous I can be!"

The Prelate shoved the heel of his boot into the left side of Darnam's face. More blood flowed. The Prelate, seemingly unsatisfied with the effect, repeated the gesture of 'good will' until more than a generous amount of the greenish-hued mixture expelled itself onto the deck-plating. The Prelate, feeling Darnam's end near, rushed to get in the last words that Darnam would hear before the end of his life.

"Darnam! I set EVERYTHING UP! You vile betrayer! I sent you to destroy Captain Overland, but NO! You can't even shut one woman up! Can't even take out ONE Federation starship! You imbecile! You've almost ruined everything!"

Another kick impacted on the right side of Darnam's head. Darnam feigned loss of consciousness as the last few kicks slammed into his head. He could barely think, his body was numbing, but he wasn't going to let Wongen, the traitorous scum, get away with his plans.

"Darnam! You disgusting slime-devil! Say goodbye to your life and hello to oblivion!"

The Prelate raised his disruptor and aimed it at point blank range at Commander Darnam's head.

Darnam heard the Prelate press the disruptor's firing button. Moving aside at the last possible instant, Darnam caught the Prelate off-guard and threw him off-balance. The Prelate landed hard and Darnam could hear him scream in agony. Darnam looked back, and through bloodied vision, saw the Prelate crawling toward his disruptor which had fallen a meter away from him.

Darnam seized the opportunity and drew the very last of his strength to hurl himself on top of the Prelate.

"This day, we both die, traitor!" Darnam yelled wildly, "But I'll make sure you die before me!"

The last words Darnam would ever speak rang in the ears of the Prelate Wongen as he felt the Romulan Commander's teeth ripping into the blood-carrying vessels in his neck. This was not a clean or terribly easy line of attack, but teeth were Darnam's only weapon now and with his last vestige of life, he watched as the lifeblood rapidly depleted from the now dead Prelate. And as Darnam's vision clouded and his eyes closed for the last time, the Whitewind-class cruiser Dar'lock exploded into a brilliant wave of pulsing energy on the vast background of darkness called space.

The energy passed through space and blinded both the eyes and sensors of the ship and crew of the Weyrleader. The brilliant energy display cascaded and dispersed nearly as quickly as it came.

The Dar'lock, ship and crew, were no more.

-----

Back in 2294, however, two ships moved in circles about each other.

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig arrived on the bridge. Commander Maldonado stood and took up a position by the command chair. Alex, not bothering quite yet to take the center seat, stood, hands fixed on the surrounding railing. He looked at his Executive Officer and asked him to fill him in.

Carlos explained that they had just received a message, presumably from their opponent, that stated only the two words 'Stand by'. Carlos went on to explain that the signal was quite

strong and was a text message only. He also told his Commanding Officer that the Avenger had been scanned seconds prior to the arrival of the message.

Alex considered the implied meaning of the last two of Carlos' points. They were scanned and then the message came through. This situation was becoming stranger and stranger by the moment. If it was their opponent, obviously something had not gone according to their plans, or surely they would have dissected the Avenger and her crew by now in this weakened state.

The Vice Admiral turned to the Communications station and toggled the switch that would allow him to communicate to the security team on the outer hull.

"Security Chief Csuti, come in."

"Vice Admiral, this is Csuti. What's going on?"

"Listen carefully. Belay my previous order. I want you to fire at the Gryphon only if it first fires on us."

"WHAT!?!?! You saw what that thing did to us the first time! I don't think that the dec..."

"BOB! I am the Commanding Officer aboard this ship. Until that changes, you will follow my orders. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. That's all for now," Alex finished.

Alex toggled the comm switch and moved to the center of the bridge. Taking up a standing position ahead of the center seat, he watched the main viewer intently. Without turning his head, he asked Carlos to please make a check of all sensor scans recorded during the previous battle. If another attack was imminent, hopefully they could find a weakness in their opponent's systems.

Turning back toward the Communications station, Alex gave the order, "Open hailing frequencies."

-----

Aboard the Gryphon, Captain Des'Jarden was startled at the unexpected hailing channel opened to her vessel. She was even more startled when she read and reread the message, which was sent in the same text format that she had used.

Simone reread the message again. There was nothing else to it. No 'We Surrender' or anything of the kind...generally something Captain Des'Jarden was not used to. What intrigued her even more was who sent the message. She turned and had one of her officers quickly access the Gryphon's data banks and call up information on the Avenger, circa 2294. More startling to the Avenger's crew, however, was the fact that, contrary to all popular opinion, the starship Gryphon decloaked in plain view with shields down ten seconds later.

A message, this one with sound and full visual contact, came through and forced itself onto the Avenger's main viewscreen... unbidden.

"This is Captain Simone Des'Jarden of the U.S.S. Gryphon. May I speak with your Commanding Officer?" the woman on the viewscreen asked. "It is of utmost urgency."

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig stood up and walked toward the viewscreen. He looked at the red-haired woman before him. She had long, flowing, reddish-auburn hair, and was dressed in a uniform that he had never seen before. The uniform he saw had a medium gray coloring the shoulders and seemed to be a kind of pull-on jumpsuit. The rest was black, except for the wine-red mock turtle-neck which she wore underneath. This turtleneck carried four pips.

Alex guessed that these denoted rank and filed the information away for future use.

"I am Vice Admiral Alexander Rosenzweig, the Commanding Officer of the Avenger," the Vice Admiral replied.

An officer on the main viewer, Alex noticed, looked at a display panel and back to the area where the Gryphon must have had their viewer set up. He did this a few times and then stood, walking over to the Captain. Alex noticed him whisper something in the Captain's ear and he returned to his station. The captain of the Gryphon stood up and approached the main viewer.

"Vice Admiral, I apologize for the Gryphon's attack upon your vessel. Apparently somewhere along the line, our information was mangled. We thought your ship...well, the Avenger in any case, had been commandeered."

Alex looked back at the viewscreen. "Commandeered? By whom? What's this all about?"

The Gryphon's captain looked at the Vice Admiral displayed on the Gryphon's main viewer. "By a group of terrorists known as the Maquis. You see, we had orders from Star Fleet Command to regain control of Avenger from these terrorists. We tried to hail your ship, of course, things have gone quite wrong...as you can tell."

"Yes, I can," said the Vice Admiral. "Perhaps you'd better beam on board and tell me the whole story."

The Gryphon's captain considered this offer for a moment and decided that it was indeed in everyone's best interests to do so.

"Very well, Admiral." Simone retook her seat in her command chair. "We shall beam over immediately." With that, the communications channels were closed and the tension lifted from both crews.

Security Officer rRham Ho 'tzt 'Tzen stood in vigil as Vice Admiral Rosenzweig and Commander Maldonado entered the confines of the Avenger transporter room. Also located here was Transporter Specialist Garcia and Lieutenant J.G. Underwood.

The Vice Admiral informed Ensign Garcia to send the Avenger transport coordinates to the Gryphon. A few moments later, the Gryphon signaled their transport readiness. Ensign Garcia operated the controls and soon three persons materialized inside the transporter chamber.

rRham tensed and kept a tight grip on his phaser rifle, in case this beam-over was just a ruse to gain control of the Avenger. rRham, being very paranoid about everything under the sun, was occasionally correct in his assumptions, and this was his only reason for being here.

Lieutenant Underwood looked at the figures materializing on the transporter pads and held tightly to something concealed in his right hand. He moved over to stand behind his two superior officers and waited.

Commander Maldonado watched the three officers as they stepped down from the transporter chamber with great curiosity; it wasn't every day that he met people undoubtedly from another time.

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig extended his hand in a gesture of good faith to the captain of the U.S.S. Gryphon. She took his hand and they shook their hands together in tandem. "Alex Rosenzweig," Alex stated.

"Simone Des'Jarden," Simone said as she released her grip. The Vice Admiral followed suit.

"This is my Executive Officer, Carlos Maldonado," Alex stated, gesturing to his first officer.

Carlos took the opportunity to make a good first impression and shook Simone's hand. "Glad to have you aboard."

"I'm sure you are, Commander," Simone said, with a tone that belied her nervousness.

Alex continued his introductions. "This is Lieutenant Underwood. He is most responsible for our being here to greet you after the pounding we took."

Taking the initiative, Underwood strode up and introduced himself. "Lieutenant Chris Underwood, at your service!" He extended his hand, and when the Gryphon's Captain extended hers, the Lieutenant slid something into her hand with a deft maneuver.

At first, Simone didn't know what it was she had just received, but she took it in stride; she had had more strange things happen to her than to be upset by the Lieutenant's exchange. She turned to the last two officers and introduced herself before Alex could do the honors.

"Simone Des'Jarden," Simone stated as she shook the hands of the two officers who, in turn, stated their names to her.

Simone turned and looked back at the Vice Admiral. She gestured back at the two officers still standing on the transporter pads. Both officers came down to join the rest of the group.

"Vice Admiral," she started, "this is my First Officer, Commander John Winterfeld, and my Chief of Security, Lt. Commander Stephanie Wilsey."

Both officers shook the hands of all the Avenger officers, and took up position behind their Captain. Alex thought that, in the interests of putting together the many pieces of the puzzle that had landed in his lap, they should all retire to the Main Briefing Room, and so the officers of the Avenger and Gryphon exited the transporter room and made their way to the forward area of Deck Two.

-----

The U.S.S. Weyrleader moved through the remains of the Dar'lock at half impulse. Dust and debris flashed against the ship's shields as they went. The ship scanned for life signs but could detect none. On the bridge, and indeed everywhere on board the Weyrleader, spirits were high, except for Captain Overland's.

"Open a hailing frequency to Juniper. Tell her to come back to the ship immediately."

Lieutenant Dibbs angled his head about to face the captain. "Do you want her to abandon her search for the Commanders, sir?"

"No, but the Weyrleader can do that job much more effectively. Now, please send the order."

"Aye," came the Lieutenant's response.

Captain Overland sat in her command seat and looked at the main viewer. She took a deep breath and the thought 'I hope you're all right' dashed through her head. She gave the order for the Weyrleader to come around and start making sensor passes for life signs along the general course of the shuttle Ellesmere before things had gotten shaky.

On board the scout class shuttle, Security Chief Dey received her captain's order and, after plotting a return course to Weyrleader, engaged the engines.

Two days passed and the Weyrleader was about to get underway to return to Earth, with the hopes of shedding a little light on

the full situation Weyrleader and her crew had uncovered. On the bridge, Captain Overland sat and with a smile entered her last log entry before the trip home.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 51412.08.1203:

The U.S.S. Weyrleader is about to leave the Delgadi Triam Cluster and head for the Sol System for debriefing. Considering the nature of the phenomenon and the information we now have compiled, this is a dangerous area to remain in. Just as dangerous, however, is the existence of the synthetic Apertures in this sector of the Cluster.

The U.S.S. Gryphon, under the Command of Captain Simone Des'Jarden, was very helpful in filling in the holes in our information. The Gryphon also confirms one of my other fears as well, but also lays that same fear to rest. With her relayed information, and the information from my Security Chief, we have concrete evidence that there are a good many concealed dealings going on in Star Fleet Command. The dealings of Star Fleet Admiral Tuto Wongen, who was also revealed to be a spy from the Romulan Empire by Security Chief Juniper Dey, will be investigated thoroughly, I have been assured. But somehow, I think that many of his tracks may have been covered already. In any case, Wongen's death has been properly noted and, at least, he will never have the opportunity to needlessly endanger this ship or its crew ever again.

On the up and up, however, Lieutenant Robin Lefler is steadily recovering from injuries incurred during a previous crisis aboard Weyrleader. Also recovering is my Security Chief, as she was wounded by disruptor fire aboard the Romulan cruiser Dar'lock, now since destroyed, during a tactical mission of our combined devising. I am assured by our CMO that she will make a full recovery.

More good news to note. Commander Quinn and Commander Carteris were picked up yesterday and return to duty tomorrow. They are both, along with Lt. Commander Dey, being given commendations for their bravery during the aforementioned tactical mission. Other than this, ship and crew are functioning well. Of course, losses were incurred during this entire situation.

The loss of Lieutenant Rondar is a sad blow to my entire crew. However, we take solace in the thought that he is now in a better place and he is at peace. His body will be returned to his family as soon as we arrive at Earth, where they will be waiting to take his body back to his homeworld for burial. I fully intend to attend the funeral, if duty permits.

The other loss, though, pales in comparison. The type-seven customized shuttle Ellesmere was lost and is presumed destroyed. It was used in the aforementioned tactical mission. We will be requesting the assignment of another type-seven shuttle from Star Fleet upon arriving in the Sol System.

Last thing to report is that the Weyrleader will be docking at Earth Station McKinley during debriefing for re-

pairs to the port and aft sections of the ship, incurred from this mission. The Avenger probe will also come with my senior staff and I as proof, corroborating our account.  
End Entry."

The Captain tapped the button that ended her log entry and gave the order to engage the drives on the previously laid in heading for Earth.

"Aye Captain," came the voice of the Conn Officer, from his station on the right forward of the bridge. "Course heading laid in and engaged at warp 5."

The starship Weyrleader pivoted upon its axis and rotated as smoothly as adamantium through water. The starship's nacelles began to brighten as electroplasma pulsed into the warp coils and the coils glowed a brilliant bluish hue. The nacelles kicked out a blinding flash of pure and searing white energy as the Weyrleader dropped into warp flight...on a course with destiny.

-----

On the Avenger, things were getting underway, as well.

The joint crews of the Gryphon and the Avenger had expedited the repairs on Avenger, making it possible for Avenger to return to drydock for repairs at warp flight instead of the five month impulse flight it would otherwise take. The crews had enjoyed each other's company. However, it had been two days, the work was nearly completed, and the Gryphon had to be getting back to its own time. Most of the Gryphon's crew were back aboard their own ship. The last fifteen crewmembers planned on beaming back to the Gryphon in ten minutes, and were cleaning up their equipment.

On the bridge, Vice Admiral Rosenzweig and Captain Des'Jarden were in a rapt discussion on the viability of precasian flower seeds in sub-zero temperatures, when Simone's Security Chief stepped from the turbo-lift.

"Captain Des'Jarden, as per your orders, nearly everyone is back on the Gryphon. Fifteen of our crew, including you and me, are all that remain. Also, we have a little over nine minutes 'til we beam out, sir."

"Thank you, Lt. Commander Wilsey." Simone stood up from the Navigation station and continued, "Please advise Commander Winterfeld to recheck the repairs on the ruptured starboard plasma conduit and to run another level one diagnostic on the subspace communications programs so we're sure the backup took hold."

"Aye, sir. Anything else, Captain?"

"One last thing; have the Gryphon lay in a reciprocal course to the gate."

"Yes, sir," replied the Security Officer, and she stepped inside the turbo-lift and was away to tend to her orders.

Alex took the initiative and stood from the command chair. "Simone, may I escort you to the transporter room?"

"I'd be delighted," replied Simone, as she walked up the stairs and into the turbo-lift, the Vice Admiral close behind. Alex spoke the deck number and the turbo-lift was off toward the transporter room.

An hour later, the Vice Admiral made his way back to the bridge. The Gryphon had gone, back through the 'Gate', there was little to do now but head back to Rhadamanthus II for drydock repair. The other thing he had to do was the paperwork.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9407.09:

The Avenger is headed back to the Rhadamanthus II Drydock facility for extensive repair work following the incident in which Avenger became involved. Ship and crew are in flight readiness, with a few crewmembers recovering in sickbay. Unfortunately, six officers were killed during this incident. Upon docking, their bodies will be returned to their families.

The 'incident' that befell Avenger, however, cannot be discussed in this log entry. I will, however, be required to report this matter to Star Fleet Command upon docking at Rhadamanthus II.

Other information reports that the ship's phenomenal weapons and shielding upgrades have reverted to their normal states. Apparently, whatever Lieutenant Underwood had done to them, the uprating became regressive. No logs on the phenomenal increase in overall hardware efficiency are on record...presumably as a result of the efficiency regression.

The Avenger should make drydock in about three days and we'll take this matter up from there.

End Entry."

The Vice Admiral tapped the End Entry button on the log console. He sat back and gave the order to engage at warp factor seven on the reciprocal course to Rhadamanthus II.

The heavy frigate Avenger turned on its axis and began the long flight back to drydock.

-----

Back in 2374, aboard the starship Weyrleader, Security Chief Juniper Dey, now recovering from a disruptor wound, had a visitor. Christine Overland walked into the sickbay to check on her friend. It was Beta Shift, and now she could finally spend a little time with her close friend.

"June, hi!... How are you feeling?"

"Awh... Nice jabbing pain in my side; other than that, I'm fine."

A pained look came across her face as she laid her head back down on the biobed, where it should have stayed in the first place. "How are you?"

"Just fine." A puzzled expression came to her face. "Actually, I feel intrigued."

"Intrigued?" Juniper, eyes now partially open, asked, "Why intrigued?"

"Because this came for you." Reaching into the pocket of her red plaid sun-dress, Christine produced a small, palm-sized crystal. She proffered it to Juniper, who carefully and lovingly began to roll it around in her left hand.

A few seconds rolled past and Christine figured that if Juniper wasn't going to let her in on what it was, then she was going to run ahead and ask anyway. "Juniper, that crystal was beamed aboard by the Captain of the U.S.S. Gryphon."

"The ship that was briefly in the past..." Juniper's head lolled to the left to face Christine, "It makes sense now."

"What makes sense?" asked Christine, "What is it?"

Juniper laid her left hand down, with the crystal fitting neatly in her palm.

"It's a letter, Christine." Juniper looked up at her friend and smiled. "It's a letter from home." Finishing her sentence, Juniper Dey fell into a peaceful slumber.

-----FINIS-----

© 1994, 1995, 2294, 2295, 2374, 2375 by Chris Underwood aka the Author of many wild and strange things up to and including copyright notices, parables, log entries, and stories of exceptional length, complexity and loss of reason. I could really go for a peanut butter and mustard sandwich right now but unfortunately I'm all out of bread...so I CAN'T HAVE ONE! This copyright was written because I got to the end and saw that there wasn't one and so I decided to put the darn thing in anyway seeing as how all my friends, who are too numerous to mention and whom can't remember their own names sometimes yet somehow expect me to remember mine and their names ...blah blah yackety schmackety. If you found this story to be of some value, then please look for other titles by the author or you may solicit him to write short stories, poems, essays, term papers, etcetera for you for a fee...yes, a fee...does it look like I want to do things for free...? Well, actually, yes, I do, but money makes the earth go round you see... Well actually I thought the Earth turned because of its gravitational forces and the coforce of the gravitational pull of the Sol system's star, whipping it around in elliptical circles all the eons long. Well if this copyright isn't amusing enough for you, I apologize and will attempt to do better...WRITE ..I mean RITE...OH.umm...RIGHT...yeah that's it!...RIGHT NOW! Geez. I AM A GAZELLE AND WILL NOT BE MOVED EXCEPT BY A CULMINATION OF EMISSIONS FROM A TACHYON PARTICLE CANNON! There are you happy now? I just died..oh no..I suppose I should have paid that life insurance policy and...THIS IS A TEST OF THE AVENGER BROADCASTING SYSTEM. IF THIS HAD BEEN AN ACTUAL EMERGENCY, THE RED ALERT SIRENS WOULD BE BLARING AND THERE'D PROBABLY BE SOME COMMOTION GOING ON SO WHY ARE YOU TAKING ANY NOTE OF THIS PEDANTIC WHINING TONE??? WHY DOESN'T SOMEONE GRAB A PHASER AND SHUT THIS STUPID MESSAGE UP ANYWAY..I MEAN <ZAP> ...Thank You Silent Bob.