

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

THE MAROONED

By Alex Rosenzweig

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9011.13:

After picking up new personnel at Starbase 29, we have proceeded to the Danzrikal Star System. Eight planets orbit this Type K star, two of which are Class M. The inner Class M world supports a civilization rating F+ on the Richter Scale of Cultures, equivalent to Terra in the early 2000's. The outer planet is uninhabited. Our mission is to survey the outer Class M world and to observe the civilization on the inner one. Star Fleet expects an eventual colonization attempt, and wants to compare it to several other systems which have followed a similar pattern."

Rear Admiral Rosenzweig tapped the off-switch on the log-recorder panel and leaned back in the command chair. He idly traced the upswept control console housings on the front of the chair arms with his index fingers and gazed at the main viewer.

"Clearing asteroid belt," announced Ensign Cerrigone from navigation.

"Very good," the admiral responded.

"Make a sweep of the inhabited planet," instructed Executive Officer Lane, "cloak on. Then head for the outer Class M planet. Uncloak when we're out of range of the tracking systems on planet III." He glanced for confirmation at Rosenzweig, who nodded.

"Aye, Captain," Cerrigone answered, echoed by Ensign Naughton at helm.

The *Avenger's* commanding officer swiveled toward the sciences station. "Lieutenant Johnson, are the sensors ready for the sweep of Danzrikal III?"

"Aye, sir." The chief of social sciences was manning the station for this run, in order to direct the sensors for maximum data collection. It would be but a paltry sample on which to base a cultural analysis...but it would be more than they had. Given a choice, Johnson would've preferred a few hours in orbit, but given the planet's developmental level, Rosenzweig had deemed it safer to minimize the risk of contact. Johnson concurred with that logic, as Danzrikal III was still at a point where the Prime Directive applied. It was borderline, but Johnson, Rosenzweig, and Commander Fillmore all agreed with the interpretation.

"Good," replied the admiral.

"We're approaching Danzrikal III," advised Ensign Cerrigone. "Running a hyperbolic flyby."

"Maintain," said Rosenzweig. "Hold .1c."

"Cloak is stable," came the report from the engineering station, where Ensign Neltex held down the fort. Lane nodded.

"We're tracking EM communications on multiple bands," Ensign Calandra noted. "They're being recorded for later study," he added, as Johnson glanced over at him. The scientist gave him a thumbs-up signal.

The *Avenger*, fully cloaked, swept in toward Danzrikal III. As they approached, an array of satellites, space stations, orbiting vehicles, and the like came into view. A space shuttle-like vehicle ascended from the outer atmosphere and angled toward one of the

stations, while another began a reentry dive. The bridge crew watched the activity.

"A lot like home, isn't it?" said Rosenzweig.

Lane nodded. "But home's even more cluttered."

"They are a busy lot, aren't they?" commented Chief Engineer Shappe, as he stepped onto the bridge and gazed at the main viewer. "Is the cloak working all right?"

Neltex nodded. "All fine, sir."

"Haven't noticed us at all," said the rear admiral, pointing toward the viewer, "and that's just fine."

"Approaching perigee," reported Naughton.

"Very good, Ensign. Maintain course."

"Aye, Captain."

As the helmsman acknowledged Lane's order, Rosenzweig swiveled toward the sciences station. "Did you get what you needed?" he queried.

"Readings are still coming in," Johnson answered him, the chief scientist's fingers flicking over the control panels. "We'll probably end up tripling the existing data stock on this planet." In front of him, readouts flashed across the station's banks of viewers. Rosenzweig watched for a moment, then turned his attention to the ship's position display at the master situation station. As he watched, the blip representing the *Avenger* moved past the perigee point on the course graphic. Returning his attention to the main viewer, he saw the planet slide out of view. The external scanners quickly reoriented on it.

The minutes passed. Then Naughton spoke up. "We're on the last segment of the hyperbola."

"Plot a course to Danzrikal IV," Lane instructed. Ensign Cerrigone nodded.

".3c at the terminal point," added the admiral. "Decloak when we're out of range of planet III's tracking equipment." Getting affirmative responses from both Naughton and Neltex, Rosenzweig again leaned back in the command chair. The *Avenger* completed its sweep of Danzrikal III and accelerated toward the fourth planet. Just after Neltex dropped the cloak, Lieutenant Johnson stood up.

"I have all the sensor data stored," he reported, holding up a computer cart.

"On that?" asked Shappe, giving him an incredulous look.

"Not **just** on that," Johnson said with a smile. He indicated the cart. "Backup." Tapping the sciences station's intercom switch, he added, "Sciences relief to main bridge."

"You get that down to the lab," Lane told him. "I'll watch the station 'til somebody gets here."

"Aye, Captain." Johnson headed for the turbo-lift, and Lane sat down, his gaze quickly running across the console. He called up a series of sensor displays, smiling as multiple readouts played over the viewers.

"Enjoying it, Jon?" Alex queried. Jon nodded.

"Yes, actually. It's a lot faster than when I was a science officer. More efficient, too." He pointed at a readout. "It used to take three different steps to get that. I just did it in one."

"Yeah," Alex agreed. When they'd retrained on the new equipment last year, they'd all been impressed by it.

The lift doors slid open, and Commander Fillmore stepped onto the bridge. "Ahh," he intoned. "I see we're on our way to our main objective." He stepped over to sciences, displacing Lane, who gave up the seat with just a hint of reluctance. Fillmore immediately began laying his personal operating protocols into the console. "I'm starting sensor runs on Danzrikal IV," he announced a moment later.

Rosenzweig nodded. Turning his attention to the navigator, he asked, "ETA to Danzrikal IV?"

"About 2 and a half hours, present speed," Cerrigone replied.

"Thank you." Alex stood up. "Jon, you have the con." He winced momentarily at his unintended rhyme, and added, "Let me know if anything major happens."

"Naturally," the exec responded, smiling. Rosenzweig headed for the turbo-lift, and Shappe followed.

"Rec deck," the admiral told the lift. At Mike's reaction, he grinned. "Now the rec deck's not such a bad place."

"No, but try dealing with an allergy to lupines."

"It can't be that serious an allergy, or they wouldn't have put Re'ming'ton on board." At Shappe's expression, Alex went on, "Hey, I can check with Wendy." Doctor Romano could key up any crewmember's medical records, and Rosenzweig had access to all but the deep-psych ones. The admiral already knew that Re'ming'ton's presence wasn't causing Shappe any extreme physical discomfort. Still, the chief engineer had not developed any great love for the chief of recreation.

"Okay, okay," said Mike. "So Chaym may not be my favorite person on the ship."

"Okay. At least you admit it's not the rec deck. No more prodding." The lift slowed to a stop, and the doors slid open. Rosenzweig stepped out. "Sure you won't come along?" Shappe shook his head. Alex shrugged as the doors closed. "Oh, well," he said to himself. Turning, he walked down the corridor.

Arriving on the rec deck, the admiral gazed about, surveying the room. About twenty of the crew were scattered about, enjoying themselves. At a gaming console, Lieutenant Wells busied himself with annihilating imaginary Klingons. Other crewmembers sat in the pits, talking or playing at the light-cube tables. Rosenzweig took a leisurely stroll through the deck, exchanging smiles or greetings or waves with various crewmembers.

"Admiral!" Rosenzweig looked up to see Lieutenant Re'ming'ton leaning against the railing on the rec deck's upper level. He grinned up at her. "Wait a second," Chaym said, and made as if to climb over the rail.

"No!" exclaimed Alex. "Just because it's not that big a drop..." He shook his head. "I'm coming up."

"You worry too much," the Mohnan grouched. At the admiral's warning glare, she shrugged. "Oh, all right." She flicked her tail. Alex headed for the small lift. Riding up a level, he got out and met Chaym at the railing. She gazed at him. "Admiral," she said archly, "you must realize that a jump like that—" She pointed at the rail. "—would be perfectly safe for me."

"It's not the height," Alex told her. "It's the furniture, and the people. And, you have to set an example. Do it when we've got the deck cleared for zero-grav activities, okay?"

"Okay. Meanwhile, come into my office. I'd like to show you something."

Alex's right eyebrow went up. "Lead on," he said. Something in his expression caught Chaym's eye. She swatted at him with her tail.

"Hmph," she said in mock-disgust. "Come on."

As Rosenzweig followed her, he glanced across the level, noting several crewmembers in the reading area. Lieutenant Setak, the Vulcan physicist, was working at a computer terminal, while Ensigns Rhoades and Tesler used portable readers while sitting on the seats in the corner.

The two entered Lieutenant Re'ming'ton's office. "So, what are you going to show me?" Chaym turned around and gave him such a look that for a split-second he thought she was actually going to embrace him. But then she turned back to her desk and dug for a computer cart. Fortunately, they were good enough friends that a little innuendo-type humor wasn't a problem.

"This," Chaym said, with an expression of vic-tory. She held up a computer cart. "Remember that new program I devised for the holodeck?" Alex nodded. "Well, it's been going over very well. The new enhancements are making the images 27% clearer, and the crew are loving it. It's only a shame that we haven't been able to make tactile images yet."

"We will eventually," Rosenzweig conjectured. Tactile imagery was a common dream of the engineers and recreation specialists working on the holographic simulation areas. In existence since the late-2260's, these chambers were used not only to create environments, but to program simulated experiences, for recreation as well as training. In recent years, the term "holodeck" had begun to appear among the writings of the involved personnel. It wasn't common, but the admiral rather suspected it would be in a few decades.

"And you didn't think it was going to make that much of a difference," Chaym went on.

"Uh-oh," Alex said, having a feeling he knew where this was going.

"In fact, we had a small wager, didn't we?"

Alex shrugged and pulled out his ID card. He shoved it into the reader slot on Chaym's desk and punched in a code to transfer 50 credits to her account. She smiled.

"Thank you, sir."

"Last time I make bets on rec equipment with a rec chief," Alex muttered.

"Serves you right when you forget why I got assigned here."

"Well, I'm glad you were, even if it did just cost me 50 credits." Re'ming'ton smiled at him again, only this time it was a much warmer smile.

The intercom beeped. "Lieutenant Re'ming'ton?"

Alex shrugged as Re'ming'ton reached over and hit the desktop 'com switch. "Re'ming'ton here."

"Ensign Noyes, ma'am. It looks like we've got a problem in the HSA." That was another short form for Holographic Simulation Area. "Images are getting out of phase."

Re'ming'ton growled. She looked at Rosenzweig. "Oh, well. Sorry to run out on you, sir, but..." She shook her head.

"Go see to it," Alex told her. "I'll come back later. I suppose I should attend to some unfinished paperwork." He turned and left the office. Chaym looked after him for a moment, then reached for her tricorder and tool kit.

After an hour or so of reading and initialing reports, Rosenzweig leaned back in his desk chair. Wonder, who had been dozing on one side of the desk, looked up at him, blinking curiously. Standing up, he wandered over to his display alcove and gazed at the myriad of starships housed in the display cases there. His eyes lit on the small replica of the *Belknap*-class strike cruiser, and he wondered how the crew of the *Sovereign* were making out. He'd heard they'd taken some damage in an incident, but details were sketchy. The ship was being repaired back at Earth, and was expected to rejoin the rest of the 7th Fleet soon. Glancing at the *Federation*-class dreadnought brought the pending command-changes on the *Konkordium* to mind, and the *Enterprise*-class heavy cruiser reminded him of Admiral Ryan and the group training with him for assignment to the *Hood*. There was so much to think about when one had not merely a single ship, but an entire fleet to command.

Rosenzweig glanced at his wrist chrono. There was still more than an hour 'til arrival at Danzrikal IV. He looked back at his desk. No, he'd had enough paperwork for a while. It was time for a walk. Quickly, he debated destinations. He decided to simply tour the ship.

Starting with the science labs, he wandered through the *Avenger*. Most of the crew took his unscheduled "inspection tour" relatively for granted, familiar as they were with his habits. The few more recent arrivals were somewhat unnerved, especially at the sight of the fire-lizard riding on the admiral's shoulder, but the old hands calmed them down. Lieutenant Setak had by this time finished his reading on the rec deck, and was debating obscure theories with Lt. Commander DiMaio in the physics lab. The rear admiral listened for a while, then departed. In the portside hangar bay, Ensign 1st Class Hijiruach and Lieutenant Lai were walking around the shuttle *Talisman*, vigorously debating possible modifications to improve future shuttle designs. Off to one side, Ensign Rusnak was checking over one of the ship's assault pods, the "killer bees". In auxiliary control, Commander Bell was testing the effects of a new data processing protocol on the ship's computers. With her was Lt. Commander Buonocore, who called off responses to her signals as they appeared at the station where he sat. Finally, Alex's course led him to engineering, where Commander Shappe and Lt. Commander Padovan were discussing the results of a series of diagnostics that they had run on the main engines. (Now was as good a time as any, since they were flying on impulse power...)

"Is there a problem?" asked the admiral.

"No, none at all," Shappe hastily reassured him. "George and I were just deciding whether or not a bit of preventative maintenance is called for."

"Is it?" Rosenzweig fixed him with a look.

"Possibly," Mike replied. "But even if it is, it won't pose a problem. Ensign 1st Class Ciufu and his team are all ready to see to it."

"Good," Alex replied. "See to it I'm informed of any results."

"You will be, sir," Padovan said briskly, coming up next to Shappe. But before Rosenzweig could get out another word, the intercom beeped.

"Those things are always interrupting conversations," muttered the admiral. He stepped over to an intercom panel and touched the switch. "Rosenzweig here."

"Al? Jon here. We're on final approach to Danzrikal IV."

"Oh. Good. Thanks, Jon. I'm on my way up." Looking back at the engineers, he gestured at the intermix shaft. "Carry on, gentlemen." And with that, he headed for the bridge.

Arriving on deck one, and having sent Wonder back to his quarters, Rosenzweig immediately took a long look at the planet shining on the main viewer. It was slightly more green than blue, the effect of more of the surface being covered by land rather than water. Fillmore called off the results of his sensor scans, indicating an apparent lack of any intelligent life.

"Then this will be a good colonization-spot for the inhabitants of planet III," commented Rosenzweig.

"Yes," Fillmore responded, nodding.

Lane sidled up next to the admiral, who glanced at the exec. Seeing something in Jon's expression, Alex deadpanned, "Yes?"

"Al, ol' pal?" Lane began tentatively.

"Yes, Jon?" Alex was giving him no help, especially since the admiral thought he knew what was coming.

"What do you think of the idea of a little...aerial surveillance?"

"At closer range than from orbit, I gather." By this time, Fillmore was amusedly watching them.

"Right."

"Care to elaborate, Jon?" Alex pressed, although by now he **knew** he knew what was coming.

"How about the ERV?" Lane suggested. ERV (pronounced "irv"), was short for "Exec's Recreational Vehicle". That was Lane's term for the new duobee shuttle-pods. The duobees—2-person versions of the popular work bees—had multiple uses, including atmospheric work, external inspection, and fighter combat, depending on how the pod was fitted. Both Jon and Alex had been very impressed when they first read of them, and a group was quickly requisitioned for the *Avenger*, which was now home to five of them. Simply, Jon was proposing to go flying.

"All right," Rosenzweig said. "On one condition."

"What?" Lane asked.

Alex smiled. "I go, too."

Jon grinned, as well. "Done."

"Once we're settled in orbit and everything's secure, we'll go."

With a nod, Lane stepped across to Mission Ops 1 and sent a call down to the hangar bay, ordering that Duobee 1 be prepped for atmospheric flight.

As the *Avenger* settled into orbit, Fillmore continued to study the sensor readings. Combining the atmospheric, biological, geophysical, and oceanographic scans, he developed a large-scale, integrated analysis of the planetary environment. The planet seemed normal enough, although there had been a flicker of something anomalous in one spot on the smaller northern continent. Subsequent checks had not confirmed the anomaly, though Fillmore was not convinced there wasn't really something there. He mentioned that in his report to the admiral.

"So the planet is very similar to Danzrikal III," concluded Rosenzweig.

"Right," confirmed the science officer. "It's cooler, as you might expect, but not excessively so. It'll make a tempting target

for colonization. I'm surprised that there's only been one attempt to explore it. Maybe they don't have the resources for a second at the moment."

"Perhaps. All right. Bob, set up survey parties at strategic locations. Have them beam down in one hour. In the meantime," and the rear admiral shot a glance at Captain Lane, who nodded, "Jon and I will get you some aerial data." He stepped back to the command chair and thumbed the intercom switch. "Lt. Commander Buonocore to the bridge, please."

"On my way," came the response from the second officer.

Rosenzweig nodded, a satisfied smile crossing his face. Turning to Lane, he asked, "Ready?"

"Never readier," Lane replied.

"Good. Bob, until Steve gets up here, the con is yours."

"Aye, sir." Rosenzweig led the way to the turbo-lift.

Duobee 1 dropped between the *Avenger's* engine nacelles and toward the planet. Captain Lane adjusted the 'bee's thrusters and angled the craft for a suitable atmospheric entry. He glanced at the rear admiral to his right, watching him program a cartographic scan sequence into the computers. Trust Alex to insist that the flight have some useful result. He, Lane, just wanted to get out of the ship and—metaphorically—stretch his legs. The nicest thing about the duobees was that, fitted with the atmospheric stabilizer, they acted like small airplanes. You could **feel** what you were doing, which just wasn't possible on a shuttlecraft, even a small one. Jon dove the 'bee into the atmosphere, enjoying the vibration as the craft hit air.

"Easy, Jon," Alex admonished. "Don't get us killed before we have a chance to enjoy this."

"Me? Never." Still, Lane eased off on the dive angle. The admiral nodded approvingly. The 'bee dropped through a high cloud-bank, and both men fell silent as they gazed at the panorama spread below them. They were speeding over a quiet ocean, with a continental shoreline coming up ahead of them. Beyond the tidal swells and the ribbon of sandy beach, wide, softly rolling plains spread out, bounded by a mountain-chain to the north and a thick swath of forest to the southwest. Alex let out a low whistle. "Are we enjoying this yet?" Jon asked.

Alex paused a moment to turn on the scanners, then nodded. "Don't know about you, but I am."

Jon smiled. "Me, too."

Lt. Commander Buonocore sat in the command chair on the *Avenger's* bridge, watching the planet rotate slowly below them. Behind and to his right, he heard Commander Fillmore talking to the leaders of the landing parties. All communications with the landing parties had been routed to the sciences station. After all, they all wanted to talk to Bob, anyway, leaving Ensign Calandra constantly transferring the signals until Bob had suggested that they simply send the ground signals to him automatically. A little reprogramming of the consoles, and Fillmore had a backup incoming signals panel at his station. Periodically, Buonocore would also check the tactical station, which kept a running display of Duobee 1's position. Steve wasn't terribly comfortable with both Rosenzweig and Lane having gone. If anything happened to them, the *Avenger* would be out its two most senior officers. But they seemed to be happy enough with it, and he wasn't exactly in a position to argue with them. So, while Fillmore kept his eyes and

ears on the landing parties and Lane and Rosenzweig flew over the planet in a duobee, Buonocore watched over the ship.

Abruptly, a klaxon sounded. Warning lights flashed at both the sciences and tactical stations. Buonocore whirled toward sciences, where readouts flashed across the viewers. Fillmore's attention was fixed on a computer display.

"Bob?" asked the second officer.

"We were fired upon," said Fillmore after a moment's pause. "Pitifully low-powered laser. I doubt it even scorched the hull."

"Point of origin?"

"Working on it."

While Fillmore analyzed the sensor readings, Buonocore turned toward communications. "Mr. Calandra, get me Duobee 1."

"Aye, sir." A moment later, he reported, "Contact established."

"Duobee 1 here, *Avenger*. What can we do for you?"

"Admiral, the *Avenger* has been fired upon. We need you back aboard."

"Fired upon?!" Rosenzweig paused. "From where?"

Steve looked at Bob, who patched himself in. "Remember that anomaly I mentioned in the earlier sensor readings? It's confirmed itself. New readings show refined metal—"

"Not another probe," Lane interjected with a groan.

"No," Fillmore said. "We're also detecting a life-form, and power generation. Best guess is that the life-form matches the readings we have on the natives of Planet III."

"We could go investigate," Jon suggested.

"Uh-uh," said Buonocore. "You two get your butts back here, pronto." Almost everyone on the bridge gaped at Steve's forwardness, but Alex only chuckled.

"Yes, Dad. We're on our way back. Are any of the landing parties near there?"

"Affirmative," responded Fillmore. "Lieutenant Zulkowski's team is about 5 kilometers away."

"Very well. Beam down a security party and have them rendezvous with Zach. Then have them go investigate this. And tell them to be careful. Rosenzweig out." The channel cut off. A glance at tactical told Buonocore that the duobee was indeed heading back. Steve doubted that either Jon or Alex would be too happy with having their 'bee ride interrupted. He shrugged and touched the intercom switch.

"Security."

"Security. Romano here."

"Steve, scramble a team and have them in Transporter Room 2 in 15 minutes. Carry phaser II's."

As the duobee touched down in the *Avenger's* port landing bay, Rosenzweig signaled the bridge. While the bay repressurized, Buonocore summarized the situation. He finished by reporting that the security team was about to beam down.

Climbing out of the small craft, Jon glanced at Alex. "Do we fly again later?"

"Maybe," Alex replied. "But don't hold your breath. We didn't get very long, but at least we got something." He signaled the approaching support team. "Make sure the sensor data gets into the main computer," he instructed. Ensign Guido nodded an acknowledgement. "Let's go," Alex said, indicating the double-doors. Jon shrugged and followed him.

Three columns of sparkling energy coalesced into the forms of Lieutenant J.G. Francesconi, Ensign Vega, and Ensign Nicklas. A quick once-over told Francesconi that all was well. He couldn't help smiling as he thought, I have two stars on my team. Nicklas' first name was Antares. Vega and Antares. Blue and red. Then, banishing the thought from his mind, he got down to business. He flipped open his communicator. "*Avenger* from security team. We're down."

"Acknowledged," Calandra's voice responded.

"Now," said Stephen, "Lieutenant Zulkowski's party should be that way." He pointed past a grove of trees. "And they should be expecting us."

"Let's go," Nicklas responded. She strode off toward the trees. The others followed.

Ensign Mulholland saw them first. "Hello!" she called, giving the security team a friendly wave. Vega returned it. As the three new arrivals closed the distance, Zulkowski gathered the group together. Nine, all told.

"All right," the scientist began, getting the party's attention. "Our orders are to investigate the anomalous site five clicks from here. Apparently something there fired a very low-power laser beam at the ship. It did no damage, but," He grinned. "it sure got everybody's attention."

"Do we know what fired the laser?" asked Ensign Swetits.

"No," Zulkowski said. "Commander Fillmore did say that the sensors show a life-form much like the Danzrikal III folks, though." Swetits nodded. "Okay, then. Any questions?" There were none, and Zach turned his gaze toward their destination. "Let's move out."

The turbo-lift doors split and Lane led the way onto the bridge. Rosenzweig proceeded straight to the command chair, relieving Buonocore and getting a report. Fillmore looked over and commented that Lieutenant Zulkowski's party was on its way. Settling into the command chair, Alex gazed at the viewer, which showed the planet rotating below them. Glancing back at the Master Situation station, the admiral quickly assessed the location of the landing parties. Suddenly, there was a reddish spark near the planet's limb.

"They've fired again," said Fillmore.

On the surface, a shaft of red light flickered through the clouds above the landing party. "They're firing again!" exclaimed Ensign O'Donnell, pointing upward.

"Hurry up," Lieutenant Francesconi urged them on. The security specialists picked up the pace. Zulkowski muttered imprecations under his breath as he pushed to keep up with Francesconi. The others followed.

"Beam was slightly more powerful than before," Fillmore reported. "But that may just be a function of a better firing angle at us, given our orbital motion. The beam didn't appear any more intense."

"Damage?" Fillmore shook his head in response to Lane's question.

The intercom beeped, and Commander Shappe's voice crackled over the speaker. "Engineering to bridge. What's going on?"

Rosenzweig tapped his 'com switch. "Bridge. Someone or something on the planet's surface is firing on us."

"Firing?!"

"Yep. Very low-power laser."

"Who? Or what?"

"We don't know yet. Lieutenants Zulkowski and Francesconi are leading a landing party to find that out." He glanced at Master Situation. "And they should be just about there."

Climbing over the last ridge, Francesconi held up a hand. The others stopped. He crept up to the top of the ridge, with Nicklas and Vega on his heels. Zulkowski followed, warning, "Try not to be too belligerent, all right?"

"Yes, of course," said Francesconi, glancing back at the scientist. Then he returned his attention to what lay beyond. A large, barrel-shaped piece of equipment was pointed into the sky, in what the young security officer determined was the general direction of the *Avenger*. Other equipment was scattered about, near what looked like a landing-craft of sorts. A hatch stood open in the side of the vehicle, but there was no one around.

"Automatics?" asked Nicklas, looking the scene over.

Francesconi shrugged. "The sensors detected a life-form."

A sound alerted them to the exit of a man from the craft. Both starship crewmembers ducked down...but not fast enough.

"All right," the man said (or, at least, what the translators said). "You can come out now."

"It **is** the Danzrikalian language," commented Zulkowski from behind Francesconi. "He's obviously from the third planet."

"Commander Fillmore did say there had been an exploration of the planet," put in Ensign Roth. "But there weren't any follow-ups. Does this have something to do with that?"

"Maybe," Zulkowski replied thoughtfully.

"I'm really not up to climbing up that hill, but I will if I have to," said the Danzrikalian in an exasperated tone. He stood, hands on hips, gazing up the incline to the summit of the ridge. "Look, if you're here because a laser beam hit your ship, then I'm your man." He pointed at the barrel-shaped equipment. "And that's your laser. If not, then I'm just very lucky. Now, are you going to come out, or do I have to climb up after you?"

Zach threw up his hands. "Mr. Francesconi, call the ship and let them know we've contacted the source of the laser beam. I didn't figure for a first contact this way, but I guess that's how we'll do it." As Francesconi pulled out his communicator, Zulkowski stood up and waved to the man. Checking his translator, he called, "Hello!"

"Well," said the man with a grin, "I'm glad you decided to show yourself. Tell the others to come out, too. Really, I'm not going to hurt you. I have a pretty good idea of who you are, and assuming I'm correct, hurting you is the **last** thing I'd want to do."

Zulkowski motioned for the others to follow, and started down toward the man's encampment. "If you know who we are, then you have the advantage of us," he commented.

"I doubt that I've got much of one," the man replied, eyes on the nine Star Fleet officers. "I know you're space explorers. I know you came here in a very advanced vehicle. And, I know you're not native to my homeworld, Haraelig, nor to this one. He indicated his dusky blue skin.

"Haraelig?" asked Ensign Evaris.

"The world in the next-inner orbit from this one."

"And what is your name?" Nicklas asked the man.

"I am called Tarmain Del Shreik. I was the reconnaissance specialist on the first exploration attempt of this planet from Haraelig."

"Why are you here?" asked Zulkowski. "We didn't see any ships in orbit that looked capable of interplanetary flight."

"There isn't anything...now. I was here—with the lander—when a freak accident occurred. The mother ship was hit by a stray meteor while in orbit." He pointed upward. "The impact threw the ship out of orbit and away from the planet's orbital plane. It was going too fast for the on-board engines to compensate. The ship, and all aboard, were lost."

"So you were stranded here," concluded Zach.

"Yes," Del Shreik confirmed. "I've had limited contact with Haraelig, but the mission had been a frighteningly expensive endeavor, and there has not been the money to mount a rescue mission. Even those who advocate the further exploration of Basheer—this planet—for its own sake and for the resources that exist here fight an ongoing uphill battle to secure government commitment for another mission. And until there is another flight, I'm here."

"Does your homeworld know that we're here?" Francesconi queried.

"Yes, unless they failed to get my last five signals. Anything unusual is a benefit to the argument that someone should come back here. And since I **want** somebody to come back..." Del Shreik shrugged expressively.

Zach and Steve looked at each other, then back at Del Shreik. Zulkowski pulled out his communicator.

"Let me get this straight," Rosenzweig said. He sat in the command chair, with Lane and Buonocore standing next to him. Zulkowski and Francesconi were reporting from the surface. "You're telling me that a reconnaissance specialist from the only exploration mission sent out by the people of Danzrikal III was stranded here two years ago when the ship was destroyed by a meteor. He has sent signals to his people, telling them that an alien ship is in orbit around this planet, and expects that they're by now fully aware of us."

"That's about it, Admiral," Zulkowski's voice responded.

"Stand by, Lieutenant." Rosenzweig switched off the 'com. "Oh, joy," he muttered exasperatedly. He looked at the exec and 2nd Officer. "Why does this keep happening to us?"

"Just lucky, I guess," Lane said. Alex shot him a dirty look.

"Opinions, gentlemen?"

Fillmore looked up from sciences. "We've only got a few choices. We can cart Mr. Del Shreik all the way home, announcing ourselves in the process. We could leave, abandoning our friend until his own people can recover him. Or, if his lander is still spaceworthy, we could put it in a tractor beam and carry it back to Danzrikal III, dropping it off where the Haraeligites can easily recover it. They'll still know that somebody did something, but they won't actually have to deal with contact yet."

"It'd be safest to just leave," Lane commented. "Minimize contact."

"Jon," said Buonocore, "it's not as though Del Shreik got just a glimpse of us. He's having a cheery conversation with nine of us down there, and he's sent at least five messages about the *Avenger* home already."

"Steve's right," Rosenzweig added. "They presumably know we're here. The question is whether or not we think they're ready to handle a first contact." The admiral stood up. "We'll have to find out. Mr. Buonocore, the con is yours. Jon, Bob, the main briefing room. Bob, have Lieutenant Johnson and Doctor Romano meet us there."

"Aye, sir," Fillmore replied. As he hit the 'com switch, Lane and Rosenzweig headed for the turbo-lift. Buonocore returned to the center seat.

"Well, Mr. Johnson," the admiral said, after he had summarized the situation, "it looks like we have another Prime Directive quandary. The question, as always, is, now that we've blundered into this, can we—indeed, **should** we—extricate ourselves from it with some modicum of grace? More specifically, is Danzrikal III close enough to the borderline of G.O. 1 applicability that we could stretch it into a first contact?"

The younger man thought about it. "The planet is an F+ on the Richter Scale. They are politically unified. Divisions are more in the arena of ideologies and viewpoints, rather than among nation-states. Free expression is more-or-less permitted, and a lot of idea-exchange takes place."

"What are their ideas about extraplanetary life?" asked Lane.

"Like most civilizations at this stage of development, they think a lot about it. Many of them are convinced of its reality, while others think it's just poppycock. I suspect, sir, that this particular issue is being hotly debated about now, assuming that Mr. Del Shreik has in fact sent pictures of the *Avenger* back home."

"Do you think they're ready for first contact?" asked the admiral.

Romano leaned forward. "From what I've read, all the debates about extraplanetary life seem sterile. Even the ones that believe in it don't seem to have confronted the ramifications of it. Most of their science fiction has alien life looking like them."

"Well," interjected Fillmore, "we do."

"**Most** of us do. What about Mr. Neltex, or Ms. S'net, or Ms. Re'ming'ton?" Fillmore shrugged in response to the doctor's question. There wasn't much he could say.

"What about ideologies?" queried Rosenzweig, pressing the question forward. "If we go in and make first contact, will we promptly be the targets of enlistment attempts for everybody-and-their-younger-sister's ideological battles?"

Johnson returned the CO's look. "Bluntly, sir, I think so. The theory is that a common reaction is, 'Here's this highly advanced civilization. They're way beyond us technically, so they must be way beyond us in everything else. Let's try to get them to support our point of view, which'll make **us** look **really** good.'" He grinned. "Of course, the problem is that the tracking of cultures' philosophies, or ideologies, is not nearly so straightforward. Look at the ideological differences between us and the Klingons, for example, despite how relatively advanced **we** both are, technologically, especially relative to these people."

"There," said Lane, looking satisfied.

Rosenzweig gazed at him, then turned toward the wall viewer, calling up an image of Danzrikal IV. He spent a long moment staring at the planet. Then he turned back to the others. "No first contact."

"What about Del Shreik?" Romano asked him, a concerned expression on her face.

"If he can make his lander spaceworthy, we'll bring him into orbit around his homeworld, then withdraw. Somebody should be able to pick him up."

"I thought you said no first contact," Lane said.

"I did," Alex answered.

"If we just drop him into orbit and back off, there's no actual contact involved," put in Fillmore.

Lane looked toward Johnson, but Bill was nodding in agreement. The exec shrugged, giving up. "All right. I'll go have Mike rig the tractor beam."

"Good. I'll meet you on the bridge." Rosenzweig turned his expression to the others. "Thank you, everyone. Let's go get this taken care of."

Returning to the bridge, the rear admiral had Ensign Calandra get back in touch with Zulkowski on the surface. The *Avenger's* landing party and Del Shreik had been discussing the pattern of exploration in the history of Haraeligit civilization. Intentionally, they had carefully avoided bringing the Federation into the conversation, although it was getting difficult. Del Shreik knew a put-off when he saw one, and was beginning to get impatient with them. Consequently, it was with a sense of relief that Zach pulled out his communicator in response to its beep.

"Zulkowski here."

"Mr. Zulkowski," Rosenzweig's voice came through, "ask Mr. Del Shreik a question, if you would. Is his lander still spaceworthy?"

The scientist relayed the question to Del Shreik, who smiled broadly. "Yes, actually," he replied. "Even after two years, I haven't needed to actually tear down its structure. And it's held up very well, all things considered."

Getting that answer, Alex grinned broadly. "Excellent. Have someone run a check on its structure. Issue: Can it withstand a tractor beam?"

"Aye, sir." Zulkowski pointed at O'Donnell. "Ensign, go get us that answer."

As O'Donnell jogged over to the lander, Del Shreik leaned toward Lieutenant Francesconi. "Is your vessel's commander proposing to take me home?"

"It seems so," Francesconi replied.

A few minutes later, O'Donnell came back. "It **will** survive tractor handling!"

When the information was relayed back to the *Avenger*, there was a pause. Everyone held their breath. Then Rear Admiral Rosenzweig asked, "Would Mr. Del Shreik be interested in a ride home?"

"Oh, yes!" Del Shreik cried in response. "Yes, indeed!"

Rosenzweig exchanged smiles with Buonocore. He swiveled toward the sciences station, then turned as the turbo-lift doors split, admitting Lane and Shappe onto the bridge. The chief engineer went quickly to the engineering station, relieving Ensign Neltex. The Edoan moved to the propulsion systems station. Mike quickly ran a systems check, then hit the intercom. "Shappe to Padovan. Power up the tractor beam. Have Chris monitor the equipment."

"You have but to ask," the filtered tones of the assistant chief engineer's reply came back. Shappe smiled. As a series of indicators shifted from yellow to green, he nodded. Turning to look at the admiral, he said, "We're ready when they are."

In response, Rosenzweig reestablished contact with the landing party. "Have Mr. Del Shreik secure the site and board his vessel," he instructed. "When he's set, you'll beam up and we'll get underway."

"Aye, sir," acknowledged Francesconi. "You'll probably be pleased to know that we've already started, and should be ready in about an hour."

"Acknowledged, Lieutenant. Advise when you're ready." Signing off, the admiral smiled. He turned toward the helmsman and navigator. "Mr. Cerrigone, plot us a course to Danzrikal III. Mr. Naughton, prepare for half impulse power."

Getting those acknowledgements, Rosenzweig looked up at the executive officer. "What is it, Jon?" he asked, seeing the concerned look on Lane's face.

The captain shook his head. "I can't help thinking that we're stepping over the line here. I hope Star Fleet agrees with you."

"So do I, Jon, but I think they will. Yes, there are times when upholding General Order 1 requires us to be heartless, much as it pains us. I don't think this is one of those times. They **do** know we're here; they just don't know anything about us. And, with the exception that we are friendly and compassionate, I intend to keep it that way."

"All right," Jon surrendered. "Let's get it done."

"Exactly," Alex agreed.

It was just about an hour later that Zulkowski signaled from the surface. "Admiral, Mr. Del Shreik is ready. His lander is secure, and his communications system is operational."

"Good. Get your party together and beam back up here. As soon as you're clear, have Mr. Del Shreik launch. Once he's in orbit, we'll grab him with the tractor beam and take him home."

"All right." Zulkowski paused, as a thought occurred to him. "Admiral, should one of us ride up with him, to make sure everything is okay?"

Both Lane and Buonocore vigorously shook their heads. Alex agreed with them. "Negative on that. Just be ready for beam-up. I'm alerting the transporter room." Double-pressing the intercom switch, he continued, "Transporter room."

"Ensign Wolf here," came the reply.

"Ensign, prepare to beam up the landing party."

"Yes, sir."

The next report from the transporter specialist was that the landing party had beamed up. Rosenzweig glanced over at Fillmore. "Bob, have Lt. Commander DiMaio and Lieutenant Wetter debrief Zulkowski and his people. Also, has the lander launched?"

Fillmore looked toward a viewer. "The lander is...airborne. And I will have the party report to the briefing room." The science officer turned his attention to the intercom.

Rosenzweig swiveled to face Calandra. "Tie us in to the lander. Be sure the universal translator is on."

"Aye, sir," acknowledged the communications specialist. A moment later, Del Shreik's voice came over the speakers.

"Receiving you, *Avenger*."

"Are all of your systems functioning?" asked the admiral.

"Yes. Everything is running fine. How long will the trip be?"

Alex glanced at Bob, who held up two fingers. "Two hours, approximately."

"It took eight weeks for us to make the trip," Del Shreik responded. "I am looking forward to being home."

"You're almost there," Rosenzweig said. "I'm going to transfer you to our chief engineer, who will give you approach instructions."

"Understood," answered Del Shreik. At engineering, Shappe nodded to show that he'd heard.

For the next few minutes, Shappe guided Del Shreik into a stable position aft of and slightly below the *Avenger*. Once the lander had reached the appropriate position, the chief engineer hit a switch. "We've got him," he advised.

"Viewer aft," ordered Rosenzweig. Calandra nodded, and the angle changed. There, enveloped in the tractor beam, hung the lander.

"Is the beam stable?" asked the CO. Shappe nodded. Indicating the power-level graphic on a viewer, he answered, "Fully stable. She'll handle impulse power with no problems."

"Good." Rosenzweig glanced at the helm specialist. "You have that course?"

"Aye, sir," answered Naughton.

"Very well, then. Take us to Danzrikal III. Half impulse."

"Yes, sir. Half impulse power." Ensign Naughton tapped a series of commands into his console. A low rumble ran through the ship as the impulse engines cut in. Smoothly, the *Avenger* broke orbit and arced away from Danzrikal IV.

"On course, sir," reported Ensign Cerrigone. "ETA, as predicted, is two hours."

"Very good," the admiral acknowledged. "Maintain course and speed." He rose and turned to Fillmore. "Bob, why don't we go check in on that debriefing?" At the science officer's nod, Alex turned to Jon. With a flourish, he gestured to the center seat. "The bridge," he said grandly, "is yours." With that, he and Bob headed for the lift.

Once in the turbo-lift, Alex closed his eyes briefly. A moment later, with only the barest of pops, his bronze fire-lizard appeared in the lift and settled onto his shoulder. Wonder cheeped curiously, then relaxed as, a moment later, the science officer's brown appeared as well. Bob gazed at his little friend, communing with him, and the admiral couldn't help but smile.

And so it was that the two fire-lizards got to see the debriefing. Both Wetter and DiMaio looked up in surprise when Rosenzweig and Fillmore entered. It was unusual for fire-lizards to be allowed in areas where duty activities were taking place. It was Zulkowski who asked the question.

"Taking a break, sirs?"

"It'll be two hours 'til we reach Danzrikal III," answered Rosenzweig. "We thought we'd see what you had found."

Zach nodded, and returned his attention to the animal life he'd been explaining to Wetter.

The trip, as it turned out, took just under two hours. Ensign Cerrigone had, while they were en route, adjusted the course and made use of a stray asteroid's gravity to eke out just a little extra speed. Meanwhile, Rosenzweig and Fillmore had left the debriefing and gone to visit Lt. Commander Romano in sickbay. The doctor's gold fire-lizard was sprawled across the desk, asleep, when they entered. Soon, though, all three of the creatures were cavorting merrily while their Human friends discussed the results of the bio-scans of Danzrikal III's native life-forms. The information would be

necessary when the First Contact Office decided that the next steps toward contact were due to be taken. When the intercom bleeped, all three lizards spun in its direction, pausing to make sure it wasn't another of their number coming to join in the fun. Seeing that it wasn't, they returned to their game. Romano leaned over and touched the 'com switch.

"Romano here."

"Wendy, is Alex there with you?" asked Captain Lane.

Rosenzweig sat forward. "Here, Jon."

"We're approaching Danzrikal III. You wanted to be on hand for the drop off."

"Yes. Thank you. I'll be up in a minute." He stood up. "Coming, Bob?"

"In a minute, Admiral," answered Fillmore.

"I'll see you topside," Alex told him. "Wonder, let's go back home now." A small cheep of protest told the rear admiral that his fire-lizard wasn't terribly pleased with that idea. "I'm sorry, but you have to." Accepting, Wonder winked out. Rosenzweig headed for the lift.

Arriving on the bridge, Alex took the center seat back from Jon. "We're approaching critical range," the exec told him.

In a quick glance at the tactical station, Rosenzweig assessed the orbital situation. Then he turned toward engineering. "Mike, prep the cloaking device."

"Aye," responded Shappe. Then, "Ready."

"Engage," ordered the CO. The *Avenger* shimmered and seemed to vanish. While a starship's sensors could penetrate the cloaking device, it worked fine against old-style radar and microwave tracking devices. These days, cloaks were usually used in this kind of mission, and rarely else.

"How's the tractor?" asked Alex.

"Fine," Shappe replied. "We're ready to release at close approach."

"Good." Swiveling toward communications, Rosenzweig went on, "Tie me in to Mr. Del Shreik."

"Yes, sir," answered Calandra. "Ready, sir."

"Mr. Del Shreik, are your systems continuing to function all right?"

"Yes, Admiral. Everything seems to be working fine."

"Good. We'll be releasing you in a few minutes. Stand by."

"Will do." The admiral put the Haraeligite on hold, and glanced back toward sciences, where Fillmore had arrived on the bridge and relieved Ensign Maldonado.

"Bob, any indication that we've been detected?"

"None at all," responded Fillmore. "With any kind of luck, this operation should be nice and smooth."

"Critical range in two minutes," Lane advised.

"Ready to release," Shappe chimed in.

Rosenzweig reopened the channel to Del Shreik. "We're about ready to let you go. Stand by."

"Ready here," Del Shreik answered. "And...thank you."

Rosenzweig smiled. "You're welcome." As the ship passed the predetermined point in space that the sciences staff had determined as the critical point, Commander Shappe tapped a control. The tractor beam cut off.

"All right, Ensign," the CO said calmly. Naughton activated a programmed course-change, and the *Avenger* arced smoothly

away. The lander's thrusters fired, and the craft sped toward the planet.

"He's signalling his home base," Calandra reported. "They're calling it a miracle. An orbital transfer vehicle is being scrambled to pick him up."

"Very good," replied Rosenzweig. He turned back to Fillmore. "Did we get enough on Danzrikal IV?"

The science officer ran a quick scan of the memory banks. "Enough for Fleet to get started. They'll need more, but we should wait to see the long-term effects of our actions today."

"All right. Let's go. Mr. Cerrigone, plot a system-departure course. Mr. Naughton, warp three at terminal range."

The two ensigns responded, and the *Avenger* headed outward.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9011.13:

We are proceeding out of the Danzrikal System, following the return of a stranded space explorer to his homeworld. We do not expect any serious repercussions from this act, except that one man will know that there are friends out among the stars. Meanwhile, we are proceeding toward our planned rendezvous with the *Konkordium* and *Tai Shan*."

Some hours later, Alex, Bob Fillmore, and Wendy Romano were walking near the rec deck. They were discussing the likely public reaction to Del Shreik's return. The consensus was that he would be a sensation for a short time, but that the whole thing would fade away soon enough.

"Until they face a full First Contact," Romano opined, "they're not going to pay that much attention. When it comes, even if they are convinced that someone's out there, it'll still turn their world on its head."

"You're probably right," said Rosenzweig. He looked up and saw that they'd reached the rec deck. "Coming in?" he asked.

"All right," they agreed.

"Good. Let's see if there's a decent view." The Admiral led the way into the recreation area. He glanced across the room, noting that the pair of ports on the starboard side were unoccupied. "There," he said, pointing. He strode in the direction of the ports.

He had gotten about halfway through the deck when someone called, "Admiral." He turned, seeing Ensign Marascio standing by the information alcove. Smiling, he took a step in her direction. He only took one.

WHOMP!

Abruptly, Alex found himself staring at the ceiling. He realized that he was doing so from a horizontal position...flat on his back. Sitting straddled on top of him, wide-eyed and grinning from ear to ear, was Lieutenant Re'ming'ton. She took a deep breath and looked down at him. "Hi, sir," she said brightly. She made no move to get up.

"Why, Lieutenant," Alex said, "I didn't know you cared."

"Why, Admiral," Chaym replied, "is that a phaser in your pocket, or are you just glad to see me?"

Alex realized at that moment that they were ringed by about 25 of the crew, wearing expressions ranging from uncertainty to broad grins. He also realized that crewmembers were not the only observers of the situation. Three fire-lizards, one bronze, one brown, and one gold, gazed curiously over Bob and Wendy's shoulders.

About 6 possible replies ran through his mind. He discarded them all. Chaym still wasn't moving, for all the world looking as though she honestly expected an answer to her last question. Alex's eyebrows knitted.

"Lieutenant," he said, in as official a voice as he could manage, "get off me."

She thought about it for a minute. "Ohh...all right."

Laughter echoed through the rec deck as the *Avenger* journeyed onward.

-----FINIS-----

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