

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

RESCUE AT MENRIK

By Alex Rosenzweig

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8810.10:

The *Avenger* is maintaining a patrol course through Quadrant 3 South. In the last eight days, all has been quiet. We are scheduled for another twelve days of patrol, after which we will be relieved and reassigned. At that time, the *U.S.S. Dace* will replace us here. The crew is using the quiet time to get in some serious relaxing. Morale is high, although this works better for us as a change of pace than as a full-time activity. I'm sure that in another ten days everyone will be champing at the bit for something more to do."

Switching off the log recorder, Rear Admiral Rosenzweig glanced at the sciences station. Lt. Commander Fillmore, who'd been listening to him record the log, nodded vigorously. Rosenzweig grinned at the science officer.

The ship's chief medical officer leaned against the rail to the admiral's right. "Nice touch, Alex," Commander Levy said. "If this crew got missions like this all the time, they'd go stir-crazy."

"I know," Alex replied. "I'd go stir-crazy."

"Yeah, you would."

The turbo-lift doors slid apart and Captain Lane strode onto the bridge. Stepping down next to the center seat, he handed Rosenzweig a report board. "I have finally caught up," he announced. "One nice thing about quiet missions: there's time to deal with paperwork." Smiling, the admiral signed the report board and handed it back to Lane. He could understand the exec's point. He had been an exec himself once, and the changes that had swept through the *Avenger* and her crew as two more training cadres left the ship—to be assigned to the heavy cruisers *Challenger* and *Intrepid II*—had resulted in huge masses of red tape. With new chiefs in more than half the ship's divisions, Lane had faced a huge challenge in dealing with everything as *Avenger's* new executive officer. Rosenzweig was proud of him.

"Congratulations, Captain."

Lane grinned. "Thank you. Anything happening?"

"Nope."

As if on cue, Fillmore looked up. "Admiral, something just drifted into sensor range."

Rosenzweig swung toward him. "Details?"

Fillmore shook his head. "Just a chunk of ice. Sorry, sir." He shrugged.

"Don't worry about it. If something more significant turns up, let me know."

"Aye, sir."

"See what I mean?" Rosenzweig said to Lane. Noticing Lieutenant Buonocore glancing back from the helm station, he added, "Maintain steady warp three."

"Warp three, aye, sir."

Lane nodded. "Yeah, I see what you mean." He leaned closer. "I'll do a few spot-inspections, to keep everyone alert."

"Agreed," the CO acknowledged. The captain headed for the lift.

The shift dragged on. Abruptly, the calm was shattered as Commander Wiener swung 'round from communications. "Admiral, I'm getting a signal from Starbase 22."

"On viewer," ordered Rosenzweig. The main screen shifted from the forward view to a head-and-shoulders shot of the base's commander. "*Avenger* here, Commodore. We read you."

"Good," said the commodore. He gazed straight into the pickup. "Rear Admiral Rosenzweig, have you ever heard of the Menrik Star System?"

Rosenzweig glanced toward Fillmore, who leaned over his console, pulling information from the library computer. A moment later, he looked up. "UFC-21072?"

"Correct," the commodore confirmed. "Menrik is a type G3 star orbited by seven planets. Planet IV is Class M. Preliminary surveys of the system had indicated an advanced, technological civilization on Menrik IV. Approximately two weeks ago, the light survey skiff *U.S.S. Monarch Butterfly* was sent with a crew of twelve to survey the planet and determine its suitability for contact. Reports were to be dispatched on a daily basis. However, it has now been four days since the last report. Further, we have been unable to raise the *Butterfly* on subspace radio. Headquarters has become concerned that something may have happened to them."

"And you'd like us to go take a look."

"Precisely, Admiral. You are to proceed to the Menrik System with all possible speed and attempt to locate and recover contact with the *Butterfly*. Any questions?"

"No, Commodore. We'll find her for you."

"I hope so, sir," the commodore replied. "Best of luck, *Avenger*. Starbase 22 out."

"Frequencies closed, sir," Wiener reported, as the main viewer returned to the angle forward.

"Thank you, Mr. Wiener. Lieutenant Abbott, plot course for Menrik. Mr. Buonocore, take us to warp six when you have the course." Getting positive responses from both men, the admiral nodded and keyed the log recorder.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental:

Pursuant to new orders received from Starbase 22, the *Avenger* is breaking off the quadrant patrol to go in search of the exploratory skiff *Monarch Butterfly*, with which Star Fleet lost contact four days ago. The skiff was surveying Menrik IV, which earlier reports indicated to have a technological civilization. Hopefully, nothing too serious has occurred."

"Coming up to warp six," Buonocore announced.

"ETA to Menrik?"

"Approximately 3.5 hours," Abbott answered.

"That'll give us a little time." Rosenzweig swung toward sciences. "Mr. Fillmore, pull out everything we have on Menrik IV. Mr. Wiener, announce a division chiefs' meeting in one hour."

"Aye, sir."

Rosenzweig and Lane entered the briefing room and sat down at the head of the table. Fillmore was at the computer station, and the other division chiefs were ranged around the table. Cups and computer-carts lay on the table, as the ship's most senior officers prepared for a brainstorming session.

The rear admiral glanced at each of them in turn: three Lt. commanders, three commanders, and a captain. Then he looked back to Fillmore.

"Bob, do you have the Menrik IV report?"

"Yes. The system was first surveyed by the *U.S.S. Ursa Minor* several years ago. They determined general system data and detected the presence of a civilization on Menrik IV. Upon closer examination, they got these results on the planet." He hit a switch and pointed toward the wall-viewer. The text and graphics of the report scrolled across the viewer, yielding a description of the planet.

Menrik IV was slightly larger than Earth, with a surface gravity of 1.02 g. It had an oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere typical to most Class M worlds. The climate was basically temperate, with the usual distribution of temperature from a hot equator to icy poles. The civilization was charted as technologically equivalent to Earth in 2000-2010 era, although political tensions among the planet's divided regions and nation-states more closely resembled Earth in the early 1980's.

"That's dangerous," Lane commented.

"It's where Earth might've been if the Eugenics Wars hadn't broken the East-West stalemate," responded Lt. Commander McHenry.

"Exactly," said Fillmore. "But there's more. They have an SDI system deployed, at least to a moderate degree."

"SDI?" asked Commander Wiener.

Fillmore turned toward the chief of communications. "It stood for Strategic Defense Initiative, and was proposed by United States President Ronald Reagan. The idea was to create a defensive system to protect the U.S. and its allies from attacks with ICBM's by the Soviet Union and its allies, who were working on a comparable system. They only got very rudimentary equipment launched before World War III. After the war, with the Americans and Russians no longer seeing each other as a threat, the focus of the system was limited to protection from attacks by Third World countries and lunatics like that guy in charge of Libya at the time—"

"Muammar Qaddafi," McHenry provided. "He was a topic in our security history class at the Academy, under a banner of dealing with terrorism."

"Okay," the science officer replied. "The SDI systems were maintained, but never saw the buildup their original designers planned."

"Could that pose a threat to the *Butterfly*?" asked Lt. Commander Shappe.

"I don't know," Fillmore answered. "If the ship was in or near the line of fire, with shields down, it's possible. Without knowing the strength of the system's weapons, it's impossible to guess how much damage it could do to the ship."

"So there's the situation," Rosenzweig said. "Our orders are to find out what happened to the *Monarch Butterfly*, and to extricate the ship and crew from the situation. Mike, see to it that our power is at full capacity." Shappe nodded. "And Judith, have sick-bay ready just in case we have casualties."

"Right," Levy replied.

"And pray that we don't," Lane put in.

"Just so," said the admiral. Finally, he turned to Commander Bell, who had been uncharacteristically silent throughout the meeting. "What's on your mind, Brenda?"

Bell looked at him, then at the others. "Has anyone given any thought to the potential cultural damage that could occur if the Menrikites find out who and what we are?"

"That's why we have to get the *Butterfly* out of there," Lane answered.

"And be careful that we're not caught ourselves," added McHenry.

"Right." Rosenzweig thought for a moment. "Brenda, make sure that mission support has us stocked for passengers, if need be. And see to it that ordnance is ready, in case we need them. No primitive SDI system is going to cripple us, if we can help it."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of it," Bell assured him.

"Good. Then that's it." He stood up. "Dismissed." They filed out of the briefing room.

Two hours later, the *Avenger* cruised into the Menrik Star System. Rosenzweig swiveled toward the communications station, where Wiener studied his readouts.

"Commander, see if you can hail the *Butterfly*."

"Aye, sir." A minute later, he shook his head. "I'm receiving the short-range distress beacon, but there's no response to us on any channel."

"Keep trying." Swinging toward weapons/defense, the admiral went on. "Ensign O'Toole, make sure we're cloaked when we get to Menrik IV. Activate it just before we reach the planet. There's no need to waste power on it before that, but I don't want us detected until and unless we need to take visible action."

"Yes, Admiral."

"Standard approach course?" queried Abbott. Rosenzweig nodded.

"Yes. Then plot standard orbit at 6,000 kilometer perigee."

"Aye, sir."

"Mr. Fillmore, do you have anything on the condition of the *Butterfly*?"

"Readings are just starting to come in."

"All right. Report when you've got something."

Lane arrived at Rosenzweig's side and handed him a report board. The CO scanned it. Nodding, he initialed the board and handed it back to the exec. "Looking good."

"All sections report ready," Jon said. "Anything on the *Monarch Butterfly*?"

"Not yet. Bob is running scans now."

"Do you expect a landing party?"

"Entirely possible. I'm not real sanguine about the idea, but if the *Butterfly*'s crew is on the surface, we'll have to rescue them."

"You're right. I'll alert stores for any supplies a landing team might need."

"Sounds good."

"Admiral?" Rosenzweig turned his attention to the science officer. "I have some information on the *Butterfly* now."

"And?"

"It looks like she did run into that SDI system. I think it caught the crew by surprise. The ship **has** been hulled. There is no life aboard."

"They're dead?"

"I don't think so. I'm not detecting the chemical signatures that bodies would leave. I don't think they're on the ship."

"Lifeboats!" interjected Ensign 1st Class Knapp. She swiveled toward sciences. "Commander Fillmore, check for the lifeboats."

Fillmore ran the suggested check, then nodded. "That's it. No lifeboats."

"That's how they got off, then." Lane stepped down next to the command chair. "Down to the planet?"

"Probably." Rosenzweig glanced toward the helm. "Mr. Buonocore, bring us alongside the *Butterfly*." Turning toward engineering, he added, "Ms. Knapp, when we get there, lock a tractor on that ship. We'll pull it into a higher—and hopefully safer—orbit."

"Do you want a boarding party?" Lane asked.

"Yes." The admiral touched his intercom switch. "Engineering. Mr. Shappe?"

"Shappe here, Admiral."

"Get three engineers ready for a boarding team. Choose your best people at analysis."

"Aye, sir."

Swinging around, Rosenzweig faced Fillmore. "Choose one officer from your division, too." Hitting the 'com again, he went on, "Security. Two specialists will be needed for a boarding party to the *Monarch Butterfly*."

"Security," came the reply. "Acknowledged."

As the *Avenger* came up to starboard of the skiff, Knapp activated the tractor beam. With the *Butterfly* secured, the much-larger heavy frigate pulled it up to the *Avenger's* original orbit. When the maneuver was completed, Buonocore turned back toward the admiral. "We're stable, sir."

"Good work, Lieutenant." He switched on the intercom. "Boarding party personnel, please report to Transporter Room 1." He switched off the 'com and turned to Lane. "Jon, do you want to see them off?"

"Sure, Alex," replied the exec. He headed for the turbo-lift.

The six members of the boarding party were clad in full environmental suits. Lane assisted Ensign Cordero in checking them out. Satisfied that all was well, the executive officer and transporter specialist went into the operator's booth. Activating the intercom, Lane spoke to the team leader, Lieutenant J.G. McCabre.

"What we want is as clear an analysis of that ship as you can get. See what you can find out about what happened. If the crew left any logs behind, get them. Beyond that, secure the ship so we can tow it back to base once we leave."

"Aye, Captain," McCabre acknowledged, his Scottish burr filtering through the lines. "We'll take care o'things for ye."

"Okay. Good luck." Lane turned to Cordero. "Energize."

"Yes, sir." Six masses of energy replaced the boarding party, then disappeared.

They rematerialized on the darkened bridge of the skiff. Ensigns Lubach and Csuti unlimbered tricorders and swept them around the chamber.

"Complete power-down," Lubach said.

"Aye," agreed McCabre. "At least they had time to secure the ship before they left. Mr. Csuti, check the logs?"

"The logs?" McCabre and Ensign O'Rourke gave him dirty looks. "Oh! Right. Okay." He moved off toward the communications station.

McCabre turned to Lubach, Ensign Witcher, and Ensign Bates. "You lads take a gander around the ship. Let me know if you find anything useful."

"Yes, sir," said Bates. The three moved to the doors...which stayed closed. They looked at each other in confusion.

"Och, laddies," McCabre grumbled, "there's a power-down situation, remember? Ye're goin' ta have to pry the doors apart."

"He's right," muttered Lubach. "Okay, give me a hand." The men struggled with the doors, and ultimately dragged them open. They moved into the corridor beyond.

"Lieutenant?" Csuti's voice came over McCabre's helmet speakers.

"What is it, lad?"

"I pulled the last log entries." He handed the engineering officer a computer cart.

"Did they say what happened?"

"Yes. They'd dropped the shields to get a clear scan. As you know, the most delicate sensors on these ships can be degraded by the defense fields. When the orbital military system cut loose on them, they were caught by surprise."

"A momentary mistake..." growled McCabre.

"They decided that the damage was too much to handle, and they were losing too much air, so they abandoned ship."

"Witcher to McCabre."

Holding up a hand for Csuti to wait, McCabre switched reply-channels. "Yes, laddie?"

"It all looks like a pretty orderly evacuation, sir. Everything's secured, and the lifeboat access-locks seem properly cycled. As far as I can tell, they went by the book on it. Do the logs show where they went?"

"Mr. Csuti's waitin' t'finish his report. Collect anything y'think might be helpful in tellin' us what happened and get back up here. McCabre out." Touching the channel-switch control again, he continued, "All right, Mr. Csuti, go on."

"Thank you. The ship's CO decided that they'd have a better chance on the planet than in space, so they were going to program for a controlled atmosphere entry and aim for an uninhabited area. The coordinates are there, too."

"Good. Anything else?"

"Not really. They were in such a hurry that the captain wasn't spending time on lots of extra stuff."

"All right." McCabre looked over as the other members of the boarding party came back onto the bridge. "Anything else to report, gentlemen?"

"Only that if the hull is repaired and the ship repressurized, she should be perfectly usable. A little time in drydock and voilà, a new lease on life."

"Okay. If that's it, we'll go back to *Avenger*."

"Looks like that's it," commented O'Rourke, when no one else spoke. McCabre activated his suit's communicator.

McCabre, Csuti, and O'Rourke gave their reports at a debriefing session with Rosenzweig, Lane, Fillmore, Shappe, and McHenry. Reviewing the log, they took particular note of the landing coordinates for the lifeboats. Rosenzweig turned toward Fillmore.

"Bob, when you scanned the planet, did you detect any lifeboat beacons?"

"No. Then again, if they were damaged—or were shut off—we wouldn't. I'll scan the coordinates for the elements in the lifeboats' hulls."

"Good." Turning to McHenry, the admiral went on,

"Chris, I want you to get a surface team ready. Make it five persons. When we locate the skiff's crew, we'll need to go and get them."

"Aye, sir. I'll have them ready when you call."

"Okay. Anything else to report?" Everyone shook their heads. "In that case, we'll move on. Mike, we ought to have the materials on hand to do at least a jury-rigged repair on that skiff. Want to put a team on it?"

"We can give it a shot," Shappe replied. "I'll let you know when we're ready."

"Very good." Rosenzweig stood up. "That's it, then. Dismissed." He watched as the others, except Lane, filed out. The executive officer stopped near the door and turned back.

"Alex," he said, "what about the planet's situation?"

"It's borderline," Alex replied soberly, "but I think the Prime Directive would apply. I'm worried 'cause the international tensions seem so high, but if they're going to survive, they're going to have to get through this on their own."

"And if they don't?" Jon pressed.

"It's not our place to do it for them."

The exec nodded. "I hope they make it."

"Me, too. Let's go."

Arriving back on the bridge, Rosenzweig turned to Commander Bell. "Report?" he asked, as she vacated the center seat.

"All quiet for the moment. We've extended our cloak so that the *Monarch Butterfly* is within it. The Menrikites seem to have noticed that, but are more occupied with each other than with a strange object in orbit around their planet."

"With each other?"

"International tensions are getting worse. It's getting rather nerve-wracking down there."

Rosenzweig glanced toward Fillmore, then Wiener. The chief of communications spoke first. "We have their language translated, sir. I almost wish we hadn't. Their official bands are clogging with increasingly more threatening messages."

"We're gonna have to get in there, grab the *Butterfly's* crew, and get out fast," Lane said, "before all hell breaks loose down there."

"Agreed," said the admiral. "Mr. Fillmore, have you been able to locate the crew?"

"I think so," the science officer replied. "They're not near the lifeboats anymore. I think the crew must've camouflaged them so they wouldn't be found."

"General Order One," interjected Bell.

"Yeah. The crew themselves have been moved to a bunker about thirty kilometers away."

"Any difficulties with going in and getting them out?" Rosenzweig asked.

"Two," answered Fillmore. "We can't just snatch them out with transporters, not only because they're under guard, but also because the concrete-like stuff they used has an ore which is fouling the transporter signal. Ensign Cordero has been running target scans, and the data he's getting back is...uh... strange. Neither he nor I would recommend using the transporters under these conditions. In addition, they're near what looks like a battlefield, or at least what may soon be a battlefield. Combat groups from one nation-state—the ones who have the skiff's crew—are being approached by troops from a neighboring nation-state."

"ETA for the second state's troops?"

"Five or six hours."

"That's it, then. We have to move now."

"What about the repair team?" Lane asked.

"That'll wait 'til after the rescue. I don't want to leave anybody on the *Monarch Butterfly* while we drop back to a lower orbit." Rosenzweig focused on Buonocore. "Lieutenant, drop our orbit back to a 1,000 kilometer perigee. Ensign Knapp, release tractor beam." He touched his chair-arm intercom control. "Security, get your surface team to Transporter Room 1." He stood up. "Captain, the con is yours."

"Admiral," Lane said. Alex looked back at him. "With respect, I should lead the landing party. You're not expendable, and it's going to be dangerous down there."

"I think I can handle it, Jon."

"It's not a question of whether you can. You shouldn't. Regular landing parties are dangerous enough. This is too risky."

Rosenzweig gazed at his friend. From the background, Bell added, "He's right, sir."

The admiral shrugged. They'd outflanked him. "Okay. The job's yours, Jon. Be **careful**." Alex did not like sending his crew into danger, particularly into danger he wouldn't take on himself.

"I will," the captain replied. He headed for the turbo-lift.

Reaching the transporter room, Lane found the security team gathering and Ensign Cordero prepping the system. Lieutenant Davila was in charge of the security group. They wore full armor and looked prepared,

"We're still waiting for Ensigns Brown and Kelly," Davila reported to the executive officer, as Lane hooked on his communicator and phaser.

"Give them another couple of minutes, then page them."

"Right."

Moments later, though, the two young men arrived. Everyone moved to the platform.

"No admiral?" Ensign 1st Class Krell asked Ensign Eskinazi.

"Guess not," the other man replied. The young Klingon specialist shrugged. An expatriate from the Empire, Krell tai Kanrak had wandered through the Triangle before entering the Federation and joining Star Fleet. His early Imperial training had served him well as a security officer.

"Rear Admiral Rosenzweig is staying aboard ship this time," Lane explained. "Everybody ready?"

"Let's go," replied Davila.

"Mr. Cordero, energize."

Six columns of light appeared on a dusty plain dotted with scrub vegetation. The light faded, to be replaced by Lane and the security team. Davila opened his tricorder and swung in a circle, scanning the area. To one side, a group of concrete-and-glass structures stood, while a group of low, windowless buildings nestled close to the ground on the other side.

Davila pointed at one of the low buildings. "I'm reading nine of the crew in there."

"What about the other three?" Lane asked, pulling out a pair of binoculars. Punching in a mag-increase code, he zoomed in on the bunker Davila had indicated.

"Still scanning," the lieutenant replied.

The executive officer again scrutinized the bunker. "I count two guards on this side."

"There's no way to tell how many'll be on the other side," commented Brown.

"cept by goin' there," Kelly put in.

"I have the others," Davila said abruptly, pointing at one of the taller buildings. "All three are on the second floor."

"Recommendations?" Lane asked him.

"Split up," answered the assistant security chief. "You take three of the team and hit that building." He pointed to the bunker. "I'll take the fourth and go after the other crewmembers."

"Okay." Lane counted off specialists. "Eskinazi, Kelly, Krell, with me." Drawing phasers, the four loped off toward the bunker.

"All right, Mr. Brown," said Davila, turning his attention to the remaining ensign standing near him. "Let's go get those others out."

As they approached the bunker, Lane held up a hand. "Anybody see a third guard by that building?"

"No," responded Kelly, "but there could be guard posts on the other side."

"All right. Mr. Kelly, you and Mr. Eskinazi try to go around the building on the far end and see if anyone is there. Call in with whatever you find."

"Aye, sir." "Yes, Captain." Both guards nodded and crept off toward the left.

"We," Lane told Krell, "will try to stun these two and get as close to the building as we can."

"G.O. One in effect?" asked the specialist. Lane nodded. "Then no shooting the guards from 50 meters away."

"Right," said the exec.

The four officers moved in. A few minutes later, Lane's communicator beeped. He flipped it open. "Lane here."

"Captain, this is Eskinazi. We've gotten around to the other side. We see one guard."

"Okay. We want this quick, so move in and stun the guard. Don't forget General Order One. Try not to let anyone see you use your phasers."

"Yes, sir," Eskinazi replied.

"Ready?" Lane asked. Getting affirmative replies, his next order was decisive. "Go!"

It took only a few moments. Charging in, Lane and Krell stunned the first two guards from point-blank range. They hunkered low against the side of the bunker, edging toward the door. Eskinazi and Kelly were less fortunate. A slip on a flat rock brought Kelly to his knees. Scrambling up, he chased after Eskinazi.

"Scott!" he cried in a loud whisper, concentrating on following the other specialist. But he failed to watch the ground. He accidentally kicked a stone, sending it flying through the air to strike the bunker near the third guard. Reacting instinctively, the Menrikite sprayed a volley of machine-gun fire across the field. Diving, Eskinazi hit the ground, rolled, and came up with his phaser in his hand. A quick glance did not find anyone nearby, and the specialist fired. His aim was true. The beam struck the Menrikite guard, who collapsed.

Holstering his phaser, Eskinazi looked back over his shoulder. "Oscar?" There was no reply. "Hey, Kelly!" Turning back, he didn't see his companion. Then a reflection caught his eye. Following it, he found Kelly lying in a depression, the side of his head covered in blood. He'd been hit. Kneeling, Eskinazi felt for a pulse. There was none. "Damn it, no!" Slingsing Kelly's body over his shoulder, he raced for the bunker.

Lane and Krell were crouched near the door when Eskinazi rounded the corner. Seeing Kelly, the captain asked, "What happened?"

"He made a mistake. He accidentally kicked a rock, and the guard shot him before I could get a stun shot off."

"Damn." The exec flipped open his communicator. "Avenger, come in."

"We read you," answered Wiener.

"We have a casualty down here. Mr. Kelly's been killed. Bring him home."

"Turn on his communicator. I'll alert the transporter room and tell the admiral."

"Okay, Gabe." Lane activated Kelly's communicator. "He's ready. Lane out."

On the bridge, Wiener turned toward Rosenzweig. "Sir, we've had a casualty."

Rosenzweig swung around to face the communications chief. "Who?"

"Ensign Kelly. We're getting ready to beam him up."

"What about the others?"

"All okay, sir."

The admiral nodded, his expression dark. "Very well."

The three backed away, and the transporter beam took Kelly. After he disappeared, Lane indicated the bunker.

"We have nine Star Fleet officers in there, and we have to break them out."

"Question: Is the door locked?" Lane looked at Krell, who had asked the question. Then, moving to the door, he carefully tried the knob.

"Yes."

"Burn it!" said Eskinazi. Lane shot a look at him, but Krell was nodding.

"All right." The exec motioned the two specialists to either side of the door. "I'll cut through the door and we'll go in. Remember not to fire unless there're guards in there, so we don't hit any of our own people."

"Aye, sir," Krell answered. "Let's go."

"Ready," the captain went on, "set, go!" He leveled his phaser, cutting carefully through the lock assembly. When he finished, he kicked the door open and leaped through, the two guards on his tail. Seated on beds ranged around the room's perimeter were the nine crewmembers from the *Butterfly*. The skiff's CO looked up.

"Boy, are we glad to see you! Captain-?"

"Captain Jonathan Lane, executive officer, *U.S.S. Avenger*. Fleet sent us out when they lost contact with you guys. And you are...?"

"Commander Duncan Maffei, commanding *U.S.S. Monarch Butterfly*. Captain, three of our crew aren't with us. We're not sure where they are."

"We have people going after them. Are you and your crew-members here okay?"

"Yes. The natives don't exactly understand who we are, but they have decided we're not an immediate danger to them. That's why there are only three guards." He paused. "Where are the guards?"

"Out of the way, for the moment," Lane replied.

By the door, Eskinazi put in, "I wouldn't recommend hanging around for very long, though, sirs."

"Agreed," said Maffei. "We want out of here."

"Are the guards still unconscious?" Lane asked. Krell peered out the door. Pulling his head back in, he turned toward the exec.

"Yes. Looks like it."

"Good. Okay, everybody outside. Eskinazi, Krell, cover them." The group hurried to follow Lane's instructions. A minute later, though, an ensign from the *Butterfly* ran back in.

"Captain! Commander! An advance guard of attackers is within an hour of here!"

"Don't worry," said Lane. "We should be gone by then." He and Maffei followed the ensign back outside. Flipping open his communicator, he signaled the ship.

"Progress report, Jon?" Rosenzweig said, leaning over his 'com pickup.

"The first nine from the skiff are with us here. Any word from Mr. Davila?"

"None yet."

"Damn. Admiral, request beam-up for the skiff's crew. Ensigns Krell and Eskinazi and I will go after Davila and Brown."

"Hurry up, Jon. Our sensors are tracking a small group of combatants ahead of the main force. I don't want you people down there when they show up."

"Me neither, Alex. We'll be in touch. Lane out."

"*Avenger* out." Alex double-tapped the intercom switch. "Transporter room..."

Lane, Krell, and Eskinazi backed away from the *Butterfly*'s crew. Moments later, the nine glowed and vanished as the *Avenger*'s transporter beam caught them. The executive officer glanced at the others.

"Stay low, and let's head toward that building." The others nodded. As they started out, Lane again opened his communicator. "Lane to Davila."

"Davila here."

"Lieutenant, where are you?"

"In the building. Our tricorder readings tell us the three crewmen from the skiff are close, but there're Menrikites all over the place, and it's slow going."

"Do you need help?"

"No." Davila's voice was emphatic, and Lane could imagine a sharp headshake accompanying it. "The more people in here, the slower it'll be."

"Okay, but hurry if you can. We've got an attack group closing in on us here, and the admiral does not want us in the middle of a war."

"Not that I blame him. We'll do our best. Davila out."

"Lane out." Closing the communicator, the executive officer turned to the specialists next to him. "Let's get out of here."

Krell had his communicator out first. "*Avenger*, come in."

"*Avenger*."

"Three to beam up, these coordinates."

Slipping out of a stairwell, Davila consulted his tricorder. "That way." He pointed down the corridor.

"How far?" asked Brown softly.

"Tricorder says about fifteen meters straight-line."

There was the sound of footsteps behind them, and they ducked back into the 'well. Two more Menrikites walked by. After they'd passed, Davila and Brown edged back into the hall.

"Clear now. Let's go." The lieutenant led the way. Reaching a corner, he again studied the tricorder. "Turn right. Then third room on the left."

"Are they together?"

"Yes."

"Sir, is there enough of that ore-stuff in this building to screw up the transporters?"

"Good question." Davila switched modes on the 'corder and swung in a slow circle. "Hmm. Borderline. Try another approach." He pulled out his communicator and flipped it open. "Davila to *Avenger*."

"*Avenger* here," Wiener answered promptly.

"Call down to Mr. Cordero and have him see if he can get a transporter-lock on us."

"Stand by, Mr. Davila." A moment later, a click indicated the switching channels.

"Mr. Davila?"

"Yes."

"Cordero here, sir. The answer is yes. The lock isn't 100% clean, but it is within safety margins."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. It's double-checked and verified. The structure of the building you're in is a lot less dense than the bunker's."

"Good. Keep this channel open. When we yell, energize."

"Aye, aye, Lieutenant."

Returning the still-activated communicator to his belt, Davila looked at Brown. "Let's go." The two men bolted for the door. They tried to pull it open.

"It's locked," Brown muttered.

"Stand back." Davila drew his phaser and focused the beam. Carefully, he cut the lock assembly out of the door. It hit the floor with a hollow clunk.

"Hello?" came a voice from inside the room, as Brown swung the door open.

"Hello," Davila replied. The people inside smiled as they saw officers wearing Star Fleet uniforms enter the room.

"No more interrogations?" asked a woman wearing lieutenant's insignia.

"Nope," answered the assistant security chief. "*Avenger*. Stand by."

"Lieutenant, someone's coming," warned Brown.

"Damn. Debriefing aboard ship. Energize."

As the last remnants of transporter-glow faded into nothingness, two Menrikites burst into the room. They looked at each other.

"Where in Nafshem did they go?" asked the first one. His companion shrugged.

Eight hours later, Commander Maffei stood on the *Avenger's* bridge. At his station, Commander Wiener listened attentively through his earpiece receiver to the planet's radio networks. He turned toward Rosenzweig.

"It's escalating."

"I'm tracking mobilizations all over the planet," Fillmore reported.

"ICBM's, too?" the admiral asked.

"Yes. They've armed enough megatonnage to overwhelm each other's SDI systems, which'll definitely be enough to trigger nuclear winter."

"We saw it coming," Maffei said, "but we couldn't step in without violating the Prime Directive."

"You were right," Lane told him. "If we have to step in to save them, they won't learn how to make their society work on their own."

"Mightn't they?" asked Buonocore.

"On some occasions it might work out," the exec responded, "but there's no way to tell if the lesson's been learned. And we're not wise enough to go tinker with some other planet's society under normal circumstances. They must stand or fall on their own."

"Just so," commented Rosenzweig.

"Sir?" It was Wiener again. "I've just picked up three separate threats from various members of the planet's 'nuclear club'."

"Oh, no," said Ensign Knapp.

"They're launching," Fillmore added, the very tonelessness of his voice betraying his feelings. There was a funereal silence on the bridge as the viewer showed the legions of sparks rising from the planet's surface. Several flares marked hits by the defending SDI units, but they were all too infrequent.

"Can't we do **anything**?" asked a frustrated Ensign O'Toole.

Rosenzweig shook his head. "No. I'm sure you remember the case of James Smithson from your Federation history courses."

"Yes, sir." Smithson had been court-martialed for violating the Prime Directive in a similar situation on a different planet. Rosenzweig had no intention of making the same error. He knew all too well the phrase, "Those who fail to learn from history..."

The bridge crew watched as the first missiles completed their ascent and began to fall back toward the surface. Even here, periodic hits by SDI defense units destroyed warheads, but it wasn't enough.

"And so we see the futility of what Humankind wanted to do back in the late 20th Century," Lane said solemnly.

"Just as it doesn't here, the technology to do wouldn't have existed there—and then—either," Fillmore added.

"Admiral," interjected Maffei, who was still watching the viewer, "the beginning of the end." He pointed. Several sparks reached points on the surface, blossoming into flares of actinic white, followed by mushroom clouds.

"Alex," asked Jon, "is there any point in staying any longer?"

The admiral shook his head. "No. From here on out it's a deathwatch." He touched his intercom switch. "Engineering."

"Shappe here."

"Mike, how much will carrying the *Butterfly* with us restrict our speed?"

"If we go faster than about warp five, the mass of the skiff will start to strain the tractor generators."

"Okay. Thanks. Bridge out." Looking toward Abbott, he ordered, "Lieutenant, plot us a course for Starbase 22. Patch to helm when ready. Mr. Buonocore, warp four when ready." Swinging toward engineering, he added, "Ms. Knapp, make sure that the tractor-links to the *Butterfly* are secure."

"Aye, sir."

"We're set, Admiral," Abbott reported.

"Take us out, helm. Warp four at terminal range."

"Yes, Admiral." The *Avenger's* impulse engines sent a low rumble through the ship, and the heavy frigate pulled away from the planet, towing the *Monarch Butterfly* with it. After several minutes, Fillmore swung 'round from sciences.

"We're clear of gravity well."

"Okay, then." Rosenzweig glanced at Lane, knowing they both would carry the memory of a civilization's self-destruction. "Mr. Buonocore, ahead on course, warp factor four."

"Aye, aye, sir." Buonocore touched controls at the helm, and the *Avenger* leaped outward toward the distant stars.

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