

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

## AS FREE AS MOUNTAIN WINDS

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### CHAPTER 1:

"I'm not too sure I like this," Lt. Commander Bob Fillmore said, as he and Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig entered the rec room.

"Don't you appreciate the honor the *Avenger* is being given?" chided Rosenzweig, as he headed for the food processors. He ordered a mug of tea and sat down at a table.

"Just what is this so-called stargate supposed to do, anyway?" asked Fillmore. He ordered several twinkies and a large glass of Jolt Cola, then joined the admiral.

"That's disgusting," Rosenzweig said, gazing at Fillmore's snack. "What would Doctor Levy think? You're supposed to be on a diet."

"Is she here?" replied Fillmore sarcastically. He made exaggerated looking-around motions. "Besides, she has the whole ship on a diet."

"Well..." Rosenzweig replied. "Anyway, the stargate is supposed to be the latest advance in space travel. From what I understand, it's a sustained warp between two fixed points in space."

"But why do we need one?" Fillmore asked between chews. "We have warp drive."

"I haven't got the slightest idea. It's probably for the benefit of ships without warp drive. This could give them a much greater range."

"Fighters," Fillmore commented.

"True," Rosenzweig answered. "System defenses would be greatly improved, and we wouldn't have to work as hard."

"Since when do we work hard?" Fillmore joked.

"Bridge to Admiral Rosenzweig," came Captain Jon Lane's voice over the intercom speaker. Rosenzweig got up and walked over to a wall unit.

"Rosenzweig here."

"We've come into the 15 Lyncis System, and are approaching the entry point for Project Threshold."

"Project Threshold. Cute name," muttered Fillmore from behind the admiral.

"I'm on my way," Rosenzweig answered. He turned to the chief science officer.

"Do you want to come along?"

"Why not?" Fillmore replied. "With all this stargate talk, I'm beginning to feel like Buck Rogers."

Rosenzweig gazed at Fillmore, comparing him to Gil Gerard, the actor from the late 20th Century videos that Fillmore had been watching lately. He said nothing.

A few minutes later, Rear Admiral Rosenzweig and Lt. Commander Fillmore stepped from the turbo-lift onto the bridge.

"We're receiving a message from Admiral T'Sal," the communications officer announced.

"Put it on the screen, Commander," Rosenzweig said, as he took the center seat. Captain Lane moved to sit on the railing, and

Fillmore took the science station. Moments later, Admiral T'Sal appeared on the main viewer. She looked middle-aged for a Vulcan, with long brown hair draped back in a pony-tail and gray going up her temples. She wore a white lab coat with the insignia of a full admiral on her chest, just above her Star Fleet insignia. Behind her was the circular control room of the stargate installation. She spoke in the solemn, official tone that most Vulcans seemed to use.

"Admiral Rosenzweig, due to the nature of this test, you are ordered to beam aboard the *U.S.S. Challenger* for its duration. You will then rendezvous with the *Avenger* at the egress point."

"I don't understand," Rosenzweig said, disturbed. "Is there a danger?"

"Danger exists in many scientific endeavors," T'Sal responded.

"I'd prefer to share this danger with my crew," Rosenzweig shot back, trying to remember the fact that T'Sal outranked him.

"Illogical," she replied flatly. "I sympathize with your desires, but I am merely relaying the wishes of Star Fleet Command. Despite the fact that I am the designer of this project, my authority in this matter is severely limited."

"I've read all the paperwork HQ sent me," Rosenzweig said, remembering all the documents he'd waded through. "The procedure will only take a few seconds, and there is very little chance of anything going wrong. Isn't Star Fleet Command being illogical?"

"Bureaucracies are rarely logical," T'Sal commented, "and if, as you say, the procedure will take only a few seconds, then you will not miss much. Admiral T'Sal out."

Rosenzweig slapped the arm of the command chair, realizing that he'd yet again lost a battle of logic with T'Sal. It had been like this ever since he'd met her at the Academy. They'd been in the same astrophysics classes.

"Better do as she says," Lane advised. "I'd hate to think of what could happen if we were going through and it malfunctioned."

"What could happen?" inquired Fillmore. Lane responded with a loud clap. "Sounds like fun."

"Okay," Rosenzweig said. "I can take orders, too. Jon, you have the con." He got up to leave. Before he went into the turbo-lift, however, he turned to the two men, concern showing on his face. "Good luck."

"Personal Log, Stardate 8807.06, Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig recording:

The *Avenger* is about to test 'Project Threshold', becoming the first starship to enter a 'stargate' mechanism. All previous tests were done with either unmanned probes or single-person craft. I have been ordered to leave the *Avenger* by Admiral T'Sal, the project coordinator, and I await beam-over to the *Challenger*, the support ship on this end. The stargate is quite remarkable. It will transport the *Avenger* from here to the egress point just inside Mars' orbit in the Sol System, a distance of about 60 parsecs. The trip will be

instantaneous, and they will only have to use impulse power.

I am troubled that the device is being tested over such a great distance. I hope Admiral T'Sal knows what she's doing."

Captain Lane, now back in the center seat, watched the stargate on the viewer. It consisted of two parabolic antenna-structures and control facilities behind each of them. Off to one side was an *Enterprise*-class starship, which Lane knew was the *U.S.S. Challenger*. He also knew that at the egress point, the same formation was being replicated, using the *Konkordium*.

"Captain," said Lt. Commander Doctors, "the transporter room reports that the admiral has just beamed over to the *Challenger*."

"Acknowledged," Lane said crisply. "We should be receiving the all-clear from Threshold Command any minute now."

"Why are they making such a big deal about this, anyway?" asked Fillmore. His skepticism was becoming highly evident to the bridge crew.

"I don't know. This is the biggest thing R & D's come up with in a long time," Lane answered. "Let them have their fun."

"Yes," Fillmore agreed. "I think the last thing they got involved with was...Genesis?"

Lane did not want to be reminded of Project Genesis.

"Sir," Doctors announced, "Threshold Command has given us clearance for departure. We can enter at any time."

"Navigator," Captain Lane ordered, "set course for stargate...uh...passage. Helmsman, one half impulse speed."

"Aye, aye, sir," came the replies. "Setting course." "One half impulse."

Then, at Ensign Toland's commands, the *Avenger* slowly moved forward.

Lane leaned back in the seat, wishing he had something to prop his feet up on. "Thou shalt be as free as mountain winds: but then exactly do all points of my command."

"The Tempest?" Doctors asked.

"I guess," Lane replied. He hoped the quote was appropriate. His knowledge of Shakespeare was severely limited.

From an observation deck on the *U.S.S. Challenger*, Rear Admiral Rosenzweig could see the *Avenger* slowly make its way toward the stargate. Then, hearing footsteps, he turned to see Captain Robert Vosseller, the *Challenger's* commander, walking into the room.

"Looking good, huh?"

"It's moving too slowly," Rosenzweig replied. "Jon's taking his sweet time."

"You're nervous," Vosseller said.

"I have a right to be," Rosenzweig answered. "It's my ship."

"It was my ship, too," Vosseller commented. "I'm sure Admiral T'Sal knows what she's doing."

"There's a danger. That's why I'm here. I'd rather face the danger with my crew."

"Well, you can't," Vosseller answered, "so you're going to have to be content to watch from the sidelines on the *ol' Challenger...sir*."

They watched silently as the *Avenger* approached the stargate. It was a sight strange in its simplicity. The ship went between the disks and...

...disappeared.

## CHAPTER 2:

The stargate control room was a large circular chamber surrounded by observation windows. A raised platform ran along the room's diameter, and technical stations were placed along the rim of the chamber and adjacent to the platform. The room was mayhem. Admiral T'Sal paced along the platform, oblivious to the noise of the alarms, watching as the technicians frantically worked to determine the fate of over 300 people.

\*Humans would call this 'All hell breaking loose'.\* she thought. \*One can only hope...\*

"Admiral T'Sal, we are receiving a message from the egress point. They confirm that the *U.S.S. Avenger* did not, repeat, did not come out! They did not exit the gate!"

T'Sal turned. Her expression was blank and her eyes lightly closed as she tried to maintain the ancient disciplines.

"Acknowledged," she said. "Can the engineers find out what is wrong?"

"Negative," the technician replied, her fingers working the controls of her station. "They say everything's working fine."

"Illogical," T'Sal retorted. "Everything is not working fine. Please bring up the warp envelope configuration."

On the technician's screen, a computer-synthesized image of the warp envelope generated by both stargate points appeared. A small stationary blip near the center indicated the position of the *Avenger*.

"At least they're still with us," the technician commented.

"Fascinating," Admiral T'Sal said, mostly to herself. "They are not moving. They should **be** moving, but they are not. Logic would indicate that this is the problem."

\*Brilliant deduction!\* the technician thought.

"Ma'am, we are receiving a communication from the *Challenger*. It's the admiral."

T'Sal stopped, closing her eyes slightly. She stepped off the walkway and walked over to the station. "Put him through."

"What the hell's going on with my ship?!" Rear Admiral Rosenzweig's image exclaimed. "I just heard she isn't through yet!" Rosenzweig's concern was written in his expression, along with equal parts of anger and frustration.

"My!" T'Sal commented mildly. "Subspace radio has gotten very fast these days."

If it had been an attempt at levity, it didn't work. "Don't change the subject!" snapped Rosenzweig.

"The *Avenger* has been delayed, due to technical difficulties beyond our control," T'Sal said. "She should be through—" She was interrupted by the first technician.

"They're moving!" the tech whispered.

"—Any minute now," T'Sal continued, her voice not missing a beat. "You may rendezvous with her at any time."

"Fine. Rosenzweig out." He switched off the wall 'com. "Bureaucratic puppet," he muttered under his breath.

"Don't be so hard on her," Captain Vosseller said. "She did design the thing. She would be the one to face a board of inquiry if something happened."

"Something **did** happen!" Rosenzweig growled. Then, calming down, he added, "Well, I suppose even Vulcans have asses to cover."

"Even Admiral Sally."

"I don't think she likes being called that. Let's get this ship to the egress point..." Rosenzweig paused, then waggled his eyebrows. "...Before I commandeer her."

"Yes, sir!" Vosseller reacted, saluting mockingly. With *Challenger* having been so recently commissioned, a comment like that from Rosenzweig, even as a joke, hit close to home.

At the egress point, the *Avenger* awaited her commander. She looked as if nothing had happened, except for being surrounded by a swarm of work bees and other service craft. Soon after the *Challenger* arrived and pulled alongside the heavy frigate, Admiral Rosenzweig materialized in the transporter room.

"Welcome aboard, sir," Captain Lane said. He stood in front of the platform, with Lt. Commander Fillmore behind him.

"Thank you, Jon," Rosenzweig answered as he stepped off the platform. "Are we clear to leave?"

"All clear, sir," Lane responded, "and ready for your orders."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. We must have had some trouble getting out."

Rosenzweig looked at his exec. There was something peculiar about Captain Lane, about the way he stood, the cast of his eyes...

"Jon," the admiral inquired, "are you feeling all right? You look...different."

"I feel fine, sir." Rosenzweig turned his attention to Lt. Commander Fillmore, who had been uncharacteristically silent throughout the exchange.

"How about you?"

"Ditto!"

"Huh?" Where had Fillmore gotten that word?

"I feel fine, too, sir," the science officer said. "How do you feel?"

"Knock it off!" Rosenzweig said, getting frustrated with the entire conversation. "I'm going to the bridge." There was no reaction. Rosenzweig shrugged and walked out of the room. As he walked down the corridor toward the turbo-lift, he thought, \*Wait a minute! Getting out?\*

In the transporter room, Lane and Fillmore stood silently for several seconds after the admiral left.

"He knows," Fillmore said. "He suspects."

"He is concerned. That is all."

"For them?"

"Yes," Lane replied. "For them."

### CHAPTER 3:

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8807.06, Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig recording:

It has been several hours since the *Avenger* went through the stargate. We are now on routine escort duty, accompanying merchant vessels through the Sigma

Belladonna System, an area noted for heavy pirate activity. This may be rather boring stuff after what this crew has just been through, but I for one welcome the change. I have given Captain Lane the center seat while I take this opportunity to catch up on some paperwork. The crew seems to be acting normally, but I cannot help feeling that something is very wrong."

Captain Lane leaned back in the command chair and stared silently at the main viewer, absently slapping his left hand against the side of the chair-arm. His expression and attitude were of pure boredom, an attitude reflected among the other members of the bridge crew. The bridge was plunged into an eerie silence. On the main viewer were three merchant freighters, the forward part of the convoy in the center of which the *Avenger* flew. Lane turned his attention to Lt. Commander Fillmore at the sciences station.

"Sensor status?" he asked. "Any pirates about?"

"Negative," was the reply. "All scans read clear of unidentified traffic."

\*Damn!\* Lane thought. \*I feel like shooting something.\*

\*What the hell...?\*

"Weapons officer," he finally said, "lock photon torpedoes on the nearest freighter. Put it on the main screen."

"Yes, sir!" answered Ensign Colon, placing the target acquisition readout on the main viewer. The nearest freighter was framed by intersecting crosshairs.

"Why not phasers?" asked Fillmore.

"Because photon torpedoes are a lot more fun." Lane steepled his fingers and leaned forward. "Now, at my signal, fire torpedo tubes one and two."

"Acknowledged."

The turbo-lift doors opened and Rear Admiral Rosenzweig walked onto the bridge. He immediately noticed the freighter on the viewscreen.

"What the hell...?!"

"Oh, Admiral," Lane said, swinging around in the command chair. "Come to watch us blow up that whimpy freighter?"

"Are you out of your mind?!" Rosenzweig yelled. "Ensign, belay that torpedo order immediately!"

"Belay that belay," Lane said mildly. "You may fire when ready."

"NO!"

Unable to reach the weapons station in time, Rosenzweig lunged for the helm and jabbed at several controls. The *Avenger* banked slightly to the left just as the torpedoes launched. They barely missed the freighter, exploding harmlessly in space. The other freighters, their captains not wishing to deal with a berserk starship, scattered.

The admiral was then grabbed from behind by what seemed like the biggest security officer he'd ever seen.

"Don't arrest me!" he exclaimed. Pointing at Lane, he went on, "He's the mutineer!"

"Take him to the brig," the captain said, stifling a chuckle, "where the others are."

Rosenzweig was half dragged, half pushed off the bridge. The turbo-lift doors closed and the guard said, "Brig." A few seconds later, Rosenzweig glanced down.

"Look at your boots. Disgraceful!"

"What?" the guard said, looking down as well.

The guard's distraction was what Rosenzweig needed. He slammed the bigger man against the wall of the lift. Grabbing hold of the guard's phaser, he stunned him. Fearing that the lift might be monitored from the bridge, he allowed it to stop at Main Security. Stepping out of the lift, he cautiously walked up the corridor. He noticed something odd. All the corridors—the one he was in and the connecting galleries—were empty.

\*Strange. This place is usually buzzing with activity. Well, this whole ship is strange.\*

Following a noise from farther along the corridor, Rosenzweig came across a holding cell packed with crewpeople. It was a standard cell, with the internal separation fields turned off to allow for more room. For some reason, everyone had been locked in the same cell.

"I'll get you out," the admiral said, his hand reaching for the field control.

"No, don't!" said one of the ones in front. "They'll only lock us up again."

"What happened?"

"I don't know," she continued. "A bunch of the crew sort of went crazy. The next thing we knew, we were being herded in here."

"I'll have to get help, then," Rosenzweig told them. "Sit tight. Don't go away." A muffled groan was heard from someone within the cell. "Sorry," the CO said, moving back down the corridor.

"What do you mean, he escaped?!" Captain Lane yelled into his intercom. "Of all the stupid, lame-brained..." He sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Find him. Get every available being you can find to assist! Now!"

"You're being too hard on him," Lt. Commander Fillmore said. "Ever since the transition..."

"If we are going to retain these bodies, we are going to have to get used to it!" Lane retorted. "You go down and lead the posse. I don't think we need you at the scanners for a little while."

Lane got up and went to a storage locker, pulling out a phaser and setting it to kill. He handed it to Fillmore, who was getting up to leave.

"Do not hesitate to use this," he advised. "The Rear is going to be a pain. If he gives you any trouble—"

"Don't worry," Fillmore said, holding the phaser menacingly. "I know what to do." He left the bridge, chuckling maniacally.

Lane returned to the center seat. Sitting back down, he activated the intercom. "Security chief, this is your captain. Send teams to the transporter rooms and hangar bays. If the admiral shows up, shoot him. Lane out." He then turned his attention to the helmsman. "Mr. Toland, maintain course and speed. Let's see if we can find those freighters."

Throwing caution to the winds, Rosenzweig ran down the corridor. Occasionally, he could hear the sounds of pursuit. Avoiding the turbo-lifts altogether, he headed toward the lower decks. \*If I know Jon, he'd have people at the transporter rooms and hangar decks. That means only one other way off this ship.\* He found an access ladder and started to climb down. Down the corridor, Fillmore turned a corner, followed by about a dozen security guards.

"There he is!" he cried, firing off a phaser shot. It struck part of the ladder well, narrowly missing the admiral. Rosenzweig looked

back, mouthed something, and slid down the ladder. At the ladder's top, Fillmore gave orders dispersing the squad.

Scrambling down the ladder, Rosenzweig landed in an access corridor. The sign on the wall, TO EMERGENCY PODS, indicated that he had reached his destination. He went in the direction shown on the sign, and soon saw another one saying, EMERGENCY POD LAUNCH BAY. He climbed into a pod, closing both hatches behind him.

The pod was a capsule roughly four meters long and two meters in diameter. At the front of the pod, two chairs were mounted at a control panel. Behind them was a bench for other passengers, each place marked by restraints. Rosenzweig sat at a forward control station, offered a silent prayer that no one on the bridge was monitoring the pods, and pressed the control marked ACTIVATE LAUNCH SEQUENCE. The panel confirmed and the pod was launched with a hard jolt, its tiny engines firing to set it on a course away from the *Avenger*.

Rosenzweig couldn't see the starship turning to follow.

#### CHAPTER 4:

"*Konkordium* Log, Stardate 8807.28, Captain Jennifer Levine recording:

We are in the Sigma Belladonna System, investigating a report about a merchant fleet being fired upon by the *U.S.S. Avenger*, which was escorting them at the time."

"Captain, we're picking up an object. It looks like an escape pod."

"Put it on the screen, Mr. Kindle." The helmsman acknowledged, and the object appeared on the main viewer as a tiny dot. Levine turned toward the communications station. "Anything?"

The communications officer touched controls on her panel, then listened to the transmissions on her earpiece receiver. "I'm picking up a faint transponder broadcast. It seems to be an *Avenger* pod."

"Life forms?"

"One, Captain," answered Lieutenant Chernesky from sciences.

"Beam it into Cargo Bay 4. Have a medical team standing by. I'll be on my way down. Commander Peterson, you have the con." She got up and left the bridge.

In Cargo Bay 4, the escape pod materialized on the transporter platform. After it had been decontaminated, Captain Levine, Chief Surgeon Ferrucci, and a paramedic team moved in. They stood by as two security officers tried to open the pod's hatch. After several attempts, they were successful.

Rear Admiral Rosenzweig was at the hatch opening, supporting himself with a handhold. He was pale. His hair and beard were mussed and disordered. In sharp contrast, his uniform appeared wrinkle-free. The xenylon-based Star Fleet uniforms were effectively permanent-press.

Two of the paramedics took him by the arms and gently escorted him out of the pod, but let go when he violently motioned them off. He stood in front of the aisle formed by his rescuers, who stood in two lines. His gaze fixed on the *Konkordium's* captain and chief medical officer, who stood next to each other at the head

of one line. He walked over to them, a dazed expression never leaving his face.

"Jen...Marcy...where am I? Heaven?"

The two exchanged slight smiles. Levine turned back to Rosenzweig. "No, Alex," she said softly. "You're on the *Konkordium*."

The admiral looked levelly at her, a small smile now crossing his face. "Close enough," he said. His eyes closed and he pitched forward in a dead faint.

Rosenzweig was placed on the waiting stretcher and the medical team immediately headed for a turbo-lift to sickbay. The security team remained behind to supervise the disposition of the pod. Captain Levine followed the medical personnel to the lift. She stood by as Doctor Ferrucci scanned the rear admiral with her tricorder.

"How is he?"

"Fine, all things considered," Ferrucci answered. "He's weak and dehydrated. All he needs is some food and exercise."

"And a change of uniform," Levine interrupted, fanning her face with her hand.

"Well, it has been twenty days," the doctor replied. The lift stopped and the medical team headed down the corridor toward sickbay. Once there, Rosenzweig was placed on a diagnostic bed and a medical technician gave him a nutrient shot. Ferrucci studied the diagnostic panel at the head of the bed.

"Give him a standard saline breakdown and keep him under observation. I want him on solid food as soon as he is well enough to eat." She then motioned Levine into her office. "He's been through a lot," she said, as the door slid shut. "He may need a psychoscan."

"Alex? That's ridiculous," Levine said. "All he needs is rest and care."

"I'm sure we'll be able to provide him with plenty of that. Do you want him in your quarters?"

"I think the admiral will be a lot more comfortable in his own," the captain replied. She leaned over Ferrucci's desk and touched the intercom switch. "Computer, this is Captain Levine. Reactivate Rear Admiral Rosenzweig's quarters, and place a new uniform in the synthesizer receiving slot." She switched off the 'com.

"Is that it?" Doctor Ferrucci inquired.

"I was thinking of a complimentary bottle of wine, but that would be pushing it."

"That would be pushing it," the doctor said, nodding in agreement.

A nurse appeared in the doorway. "He's coming to now."

"Finally!" the doctor said. "Let's go see him."

As they entered the main ward, they saw the admiral sitting up on the bed, his head in his hands.

"How do you feel?" Levine asked him.

"I feel like my head's going to have a force chamber explosion."

"What happened?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden, my crew went crazy. I had to abandon ship. How long...?"

"We figure you were in the pod for about 22 days."

"Twenty-two days," he repeated. Then realization dawned. "My ship...in that time...oh, gods!" He started to get up from the bed. Two med-techs promptly restrained him.

"Calm down, Alex," Doctor Ferrucci said. "It can't be that bad."

"You don't understand!" Rosenzweig answered frantically. "It's that stargate! It's made them crazy! They're dangerous!"

Just then, Commander Peterson's voice came over the intercom speaker. "Bridge to Captain Levine."

"This is Levine," she replied into a desk 'com.

"We're picking up the *Avenger*. She's hailing us."

## CHAPTER 5:

"I'm on my way," Levine answered, starting toward the door.

"I want to go with you," Rosenzweig announced.

"You're exhausted!"

"I don't care!" he retorted agitatedly. "You'll need my help in dealing with them. I know it."

"Well..."

"Do I have to make it an order?"

"You're in no condition to give anybody orders," Levine responded, with a glance toward Ferrucci. The doctor nodded. "But if it makes you feel any better..." She waved him up. They both hurried out of sickbay.

Moments later, Captain Levine stepped from the turbo-lift onto the bridge. Rosenzweig followed right behind, doing his best to straighten his hair. On the main viewer, the *Avenger* seemed to stare at them from an annoyingly close distance away. The captain reclaimed her seat from Peterson, who went back to the communications station. After a brief smile at the executive officer, Rear Admiral Rosenzweig took a position right behind the command chair, a place that was all too familiar.

\*Strange,\* Levine thought. \*Why didn't they come alongside? Why are we staring nose to nose?\*" "Carol," she said aloud, "patch us through."

The bridge of the *Avenger* appeared on the viewer. Its normally clean appearance was marred by an accumulation of debris from half-eaten food containers, cups, etc. Levine could practically feel Rosenzweig wince behind her. Several of the crew had forsaken their uniforms for non-standard clothing. Ensign 1st Class Abbott, in particular, had replaced his uniform jacket with a loud, red Hawaiian shirt. Captain Lane sat in the command chair, wearing a twenty-day growth of beard and a security helmet he'd somehow acquired. Lt. Commander Fillmore stood behind him, still in uniform but munching from a bag of potato chips.

"So, Jennifer, glad to see you again," Lane said, smiling. "I see you rescued the Rear. Good. It saves us the trouble."

"No problem," Levine answered, trying not to sound suspicious. "We were in the vicinity, answering a distress call from some freighters."

"Freighters?"

"Yes," she replied. "Freighters like the ones you were escorting. What happened to them?"

"Oh, those freighters!" Lane said. "They called us off, and since regulations prohibit us from escorting another vessel without its consent..."

"What are you saying?!" the admiral exclaimed, stepping to Levine's side. "Jon, you fired on those ships!"

"You see, Jennifer," Lane explained matter-of-factly, "he's been like that ever since the experiment. We tried to confine him, but he

escaped and stole a life pod. We've been looking for him ever since."

"Jon," Rosenzweig growled, "you're the one who's acting crazy!"

"Now, Captain," Lane said mildly, "do I look like a madman?"

\*I'm not going to answer that!\*

"Since," the *Avenger's* exec went on, "it looks like Admiral Rosenzweig is going to be with you for some time, why don't you lower your shields so we can beam over some of his personal effects? I'm sure the admiral would appreciate that."

Levine glanced over at Rosenzweig, who was shaking his head vigorously. "That's a good idea!" she said brightly. "Contact us when you're ready. Levine out." She motioned to Peterson, and the viewer switched back to the forward angle. Rosenzweig grabbed the command chair and swung Levine around to face him.

"I didn't want him to think we were on to him," the captain explained. "I think he's so addled he doesn't know what the hell he's saying. Besides, we'll make sure he lowers his shields before we lower ours—"

"And disable him before he fires on us!" Rosenzweig finished. "Jen, if we weren't on duty I'd kiss you."

Levine glanced at him. "Maybe off duty," she joked. Rosenzweig's eyebrows knitted in consternation as he realized what he was saying.

"Shouldn't've opened my mouth," he muttered.

Back aboard the *Avenger*, Captain Lane leaned against the weapons/defense station, watching Ensign Colon check the power allocations to the weapons systems. "Set phasers at full power," he directed. "Target banks one and two on the *Konk's* bridge. The moment they lower their shields..."

"Boom!" Lane and Colon said together, giggling. The captain returned to the command chair and put his feet up on the crate he'd gotten from one of the cargo bays.

"Janet, contact the *Konkordium*." The dreadnought's bridge appeared on the main viewer. "We're ready now," he said. "Just drop your shields and we'll beam the stuff right over."

Levine put up a hand. "*Avenger*, procedures do dictate that you drop your shields first."

"Ah..." Lane said, completely startled. Anger was beginning to flare, to boil...

"Star Fleet regulations specifically state," Levine continued, pausing for effect, "that a starship initiating a transporter beam must lower its shields first."

Lane swung toward Doctors, making a throat-cutting gesture. The transmission cut. The screen switched to the fore view. "Colon!" he yelled, "fire phasers as instructed!"

"But, sir, their shields aren't down yet."

"FIRE THOSE PHASERS!" he screamed, striking the chair-arm with his fist to emphasize the order. Unfortunately, he'd hit his fist a little too hard. The pain began to calm his anger.

Aboard the *Konkordium*, the bridge personnel saw the *Avenger* fire its phasers. The bridge lights dimmed as the shields absorbed the attack and power was diverted to reinforce them. The *Avenger* flew over the *Konkordium* and sped off into the distance. Levine and Rosenzweig stared into the viewer for a long moment, until Levine broke the silence on the bridge. "They're gone. Carol, send a dispatch to all ships on or near the *Avenger's*

projected course. Advise them of the situation, but warn them to take no aggressive actions unless absolutely necessary. Good god, they could be...anywhere."

"They could be," the admiral said thoughtfully, "but they're not."

"You know where they're going?"

"Yes. I think I do."

## CHAPTER 6:

"Well?" Levine pressed. "Don't keep us in suspense. Where are they going?"

"I don't actually know where they're going right now," Rosenzweig said, "but I know where they'll eventually end up."

"And?"

"Navigator," Rosenzweig ordered, "set a course for Sol System. Helmsman, warp factor five."

When the navigator just stared back at them, Levine spoke. "Like he said."

The navigator plotted the course, and the *Konkordium* set out toward its new destination. Rear Admiral Rosenzweig began to feel the weight of fatigue on him; he was beginning to feel drained and hungry.

"We're not following them?" Levine asked.

"We'll never catch them at warp speed. We won't need to. Trust me."

"I reactivated your quarters," Levine said. "It'll take a couple of hours to get to Sol. You'd better get some sleep." Rosenzweig nodded absently and left the bridge.

Ignoring the stares of passing crewmembers, the admiral eventually reached his quarters. He did not need to be told where they were; he'd been on this ship many times before. The cabin was just as he remembered it: a standard VIP stateroom, with an a sitting room and an adjoining bedroom and head. The bed had even been turned down, and a fresh uniform and a pair of pajamas awaited him in the synthesizer slot. He removed his old uniform and shoved it into the laundry receptacle. With a low hum, the device swallowed up the clothing, sending it on its way to the ship's main laundry units. Rosenzweig turned toward the sonic shower unit, then stepped through it to the water shower and jacuzzi beyond. He took a long, warm shower. He then got into the standard-issue black pajamas that had been provided for him and climbed into bed.

For the first time in what seemed like a long while, he was happy. Of the several thousand ships in Star Fleet, the ship that had rescued him was the *U.S.S. Konkordium*, a ship almost as dear to him as his own *Avenger*. Here, he was in an environment he preferred almost-almost-to that of his own ship. To be with Jennifer, Carol, the others... Of course, when it came down to personal choice or duty, duty always won out, but that didn't stop him from enjoying good fortune when it came his way.

Thinking happy thoughts, he went to sleep.

He was awakened by the intercom, with an ensign informing him that Admiral T'Sal had beamed aboard from the stargate facility, the ship was on a direct course on impulse power for Cait, and everyone was waiting for him in the main briefing room.

Rosenzweig got up, dressed quickly, and—after grabbing a tuna sandwich and tea from his food processor—headed for the briefing room.

When he arrived, he found T'Sal, Captain Levine, and Doctor Ferrucci seated at the table. T'sal stood up to greet him, bowing slightly. "Admiral Rosenzweig, you are looking well."

"Thank you," he replied. He swallowed the last bite of his sandwich and placed the cup of tea on the table. "You all know why you're here," he began formally. "The crew of the *Avenger* are acting irrationally...to say the least...with the exception of myself and several others who were locked up when I found them. I believe that Project Threshold is the cause of the behavior."

"Are you sure?" Ferrucci interrupted. "Did they ever show signs of irrational behavior before?"

"Not like this. There might've been isolated instances of eccentric behavior, but now almost the entire crew has gone of the deep end at the same time."

"The stargate is not at fault," Admiral T'Sal stated. "We checked every system as many times as practicality would allow, given the time constraints and the theory of diminishing ret—"

"I understand that," Rosenzweig broke in. "What exactly did happen?"

"Well," T'Sal began, "when the *U.S.S. Avenger* entered Threshold's Spacewarp Combined Spatial Continuum Manifold, it experienced a momentary operational impasse resulting in a delay—"

"In simpler language..." Ferrucci interjected, strongly suspecting that not even T'Sal understood the mess of jargon that she'd just recited.

"When it got in, it got stuck."

Rosenzweig, finishing his tea, asked, "How long was it... 'stuck'?"

"Approximately 5.37599 standard minutes."

"Approximately?" the doctor inquired. T'Sal, interpreting the question as sarcasm, ignored it.

"And it wasn't the stargate's fault?" pressed the rear admiral.

"Unlikely," T'Sal answered. "The stargate was at optimum working status at the time of the transition. The fact that the *Avenger* made it through at all is evidence. Any malfunction in the system would have destroyed the *Avenger* or..."

"Or what?"

"Trapped the *Avenger* in a 'pocket universe'."

"A pocket universe?" Levine queried.

"Yes. The combined space warp created by both installations is basically, and for all practical purposes, a pocket universe."

"Maybe the minds of the *Avenger's* crew were taken over by an unknown alien force!" Levine abruptly exclaimed.

The others favored her with skeptical expressions. Then Rosenzweig's turned thoughtful. "She may have something there," admitted the frigate's CO.

"Indeed," T'Sal concurred. Her own expression had changed barely milliseconds after Rosenzweig's. "Since the Threshold was not malfunctioning at the time of the incident, the only logical explanation is the interference of an outside force...a force possibly motivated and intelligent."

"That would explain a lot," the rear admiral followed up. "Jon did say something about getting out."

"Excuse me?" Levine said.

"When I beamed back aboard the *Avenger*, Jon said something about them having trouble getting out. That statement has been bothering me."

"It must have been a slip on the aliens' part," Ferrucci theorized. "They were obviously masquerading as though nothing had happened, trying to pass themselves off as the real crew."

"But why?" Rosenzweig asked, addressing the question to the room in general. "T'Sal, you said they may have motivation. What could it be?"

"It's hard to say," T'Sal responded. "Without direct observation or a comprehensive interview, one can only speculate."

"Well, speculate, then. It's your stargate."

"Conquest, greed, revenge, freedom..."

"Freedom?" asked Levine.

"They are from a closed universe. Perhaps when the *Avenger* intruded, they—what is the phrase?—'hitched a ride'."

"Oh, gods," Rosenzweig muttered under his breath. "Jon should know better than to pick up hitchhikers."

## CHAPTER 7:

"Bridge to Captain Levine...or Admiral Rosenzweig...either of you."

"Rosenzweig here," the admiral said into his intercom unit in the briefing room, smiling as he did so.

"We are at the Project Threshold egress point, per your orders. The coast seems to be clear, but we're reading a distant sensor blip headed this way."

"Thank you, Commander Peterson," Rosenzweig said, with a rather self-satisfied smile. "What is their ETA?"

"About ten minutes. They're taking their sweet time."

"They would be. Keep me informed. Captain Levine will be on the bridge shortly. Rosenzweig out."

"So, the *Avenger* comes," Admiral T'Sal said, as she and Rosenzweig followed Levine out of the briefing room and toward the transporter complex.

"Yes, as I predicted," the rear admiral replied. "You know your part of the plan?"

"Yes. We did review it for several hours, you know. I still think it is irrational."

"This whole episode has been irrational, but it has to work."

They entered the transporter room and Admiral T'Sal stepped onto the platform. A moment later, she shimmered out, to rematerialize aboard the Project Threshold station.

"Get me the bridge," Rosenzweig said to the transporter specialist. The ensign nodded and hit a switch.

"Bridge here," came the sound of Captain Levine's voice through the intercom. She was already at her station.

"What's the *Avenger's* status?"

"She's just hanging there, 50 kilometers off our starboard."

"I don't like this..." the admiral muttered.

"RED ALERT; RED ALERT," the computer-voice announced, intoning above the alarm klaxons and the flashing red lights. As if on cue, a five-person security squad trooped into the room, phaser rifles in hand. They wore what looked like modified versions of the standard security armor, with heavier breastplates and yokes and detachable visors. Filing in front of Rosenzweig, they stood at attention until he signaled for parade rest.

"What's going on?!" shouted Rosenzweig into the intercom. An incoherent exclamation had come through from the bridge.

"The *Avenger* is firing on the stargate installation!"

"Sensor sweep. Any sign of damage?" There was a pause while the science officer ran the required scans.

"Not much," Science Officer Cichon reported, "besides some damage to the outer hull and scattered explosions in the corridors. There's no sign of fatalities."

"I'm maneuvering the *Konkordium* into the line of fire," announced Levine.

"NO!" the admiral cried. "Fire a shot across her bow; try to draw her fire! Jen, you can't change our position 'til we're beamed aboard! Is Carol at engineering?"

"Peterson here," the exec responded.

"Do you have the cart?" Rosenzweig said, hoping to be heard over the alarms. "You know what to do?"

"Yes," Peterson answered. "The cart is inserted into the transporter override computer-link. When the program is activated, our shields will be lowered and the *Avenger's* prefix code transmitted to lower their shields. At the same time, you and the boarding party will beam over to recapture the *Avenger*." There was a pause. Then, "Sounds risky."

"It is risky!" Levine interrupted stridently. "It's too crazy to work!"

"Crazy is the only thing we've got right now," Rosenzweig replied, trying to keep his voice calm. "Just remember your part, too."

"Alex, you don't have to do this!"

"I know."

"You **don't** have to lead the boarding party!"

"I know."

"Any slight disruption in the transporter beam, any slight miscalculation of the coordinates, and you could be killed!"

"I know."

"Alex, I..." Levine's voice stopped as she tried—and failed—to find the words to express her thoughts.

"\*I know.\*"

"Okay, here we go!" Rosenzweig said, as he and the security guards stepped onto the transporter platform. "Set phasers to stun, and be careful."

"Transporter coordinates are set," reported Ensign Tremaine from the operator's booth. "Energizing now."

## CHAPTER 8:

Beaming into the dark is quite unnerving, someone once said. Now Rosenzweig knew why. They seemed to be in a large, open area, but he wasn't sure where it was.

"We should've brought lanterns," he muttered.

The area was lit up from behind him as the security troops switched on their helmet illuminators. "We're in the hangar bay, sir," Ensign 1st Class De Barbieri said.

"We were supposed to be in the transporter room. Let me check with the *Konk*." The admiral opened his communicator, setting it for a tight-beam, scrambled signal. A short signal would not be detected, he thought, and given the condition of *Avenger's*

crew, who cared? "Captain Bligh to mothership. Come in, mothership."

"Alex, is that you?" Levine's voice suggested a mixture of curiosity and worry. "Why are you talking like that? Is that stuff contagious?"

"Just trying to ease the tension," Rosenzweig replied. "What are we doing on the hangar deck?"

"Hangar deck? Just a minute; I'll check." There was a pause. Then, "Ensign Tremaine said the *Avenger* must've moved slightly during the beam-over. You're lucky to be alive."

"Any more 'luck' like this, and I'll reserve myself a space on Tantalus V. Rosenzweig out." He turned his attention back to the security team. Pointing, he said, "The access corridor is over there." One of the guards walked out in front, followed by the whole party.

The doors did not part for the rear admiral and the boarding party. They were locked tight.

"Maybe we should blast our way in," suggested Ensign Sparan from the back of the group.

"Why don't you just shut up and let the man work," another specialist said. "It's his ship!"

"Knock it off, both of you," the admiral growled. "I'll get this door open if it's the last thing I do!" \*Okay, now, Alex,\* he thought, \*can the dramatics. You're home now. Show these jarheads what kind of leader you are.\* He found a wall-intercom unit and switched it on. "Computer," he whispered, "open corridor access to hangar bay one."

"WORKING," the computer-voice came back. "UNABLE TO COMPLY WITHOUT PROPER IDENTIFICATION. PLEASE IDENTIFY YOURSELF FOR VOICEPRINT ANALYSIS. AND...HAVE A NICE DAY."

"Computer, this is Rear Admiral Alexander Rosenzweig, Commanding Officer, *U.S.S. Avenger*. Open this door immediately!"

"WORKING. RECORDS SHOW THAT REAR ADMIRAL ALEXANDER ROSENZWEIG IS NO LONGER IN COMMAND OF THIS VESSEL. CURRENT COMMANDING OFFICER IS CAPTAIN JONATHAN LANE."

\*I'll kill him,\* Rosenzweig thought. \*I don't care if he is operating under some outside control, I'll kill him!\* He turned toward the cadre of security guards, some of whom were already snickering at his expense. The snickering promptly stopped. He stepped to one side and indicated that Sparan's idea was now in effect.

The door slid open after a well-placed shot into the control circuits. The boarding party moved through in single file, with Rosenzweig in the lead. The corridor was empty of people, but not of garbage. In fact, the whole ship seemed to be littered with what looked like the remains of a twenty-day long party.

A state of red alert existed here, too, and the boarding party gave up trying to be too quiet. The admiral motioned for them to follow him, and led the way to the brig. He found the cell he was looking for, but...

It was empty.

"Damn," he growled. Looking at the guards, he went on, "This place had been stuffed with at least sixty people."

"Perhaps it was another cell?" one guard suggested. Rosenzweig shook his head.

"No. I noted the cell number before I escaped. This is it." His feeling of concern was increasing. He fought it down. As the force field was off, he walked into the room and looked around, seeking

any small detail that might help explain what had happened. He found none, and walked back out, puzzled. "Anything could've happened to them, considering the crew's mental state. We'd better get to the bridge immediately."

They went back to the level's main corridor, moving toward the central turboshaft. After several minutes of stealth, one of the security specialists swore he could hear music. As the music grew louder, its source came into view. A conga line, made up of about a dozen people, snaked its way out of one of the rooms, utterly ignoring the admiral and his boarding party. The Spanish music to which the line danced was coming from the lead man's audio-cube player. When the line had passed, Rosenzweig and the security squad exchanged puzzled looks and shrugs. They moved on.

As they made their way forward, the *Avenger's* CO analyzed everything he observed, trying to find a pattern in what was happening. He wasn't having much success. There just wasn't any pattern that he could recognize. He desperately wanted to find someone who was rational, but no one seemed at all rational. In fact, there was no one else to be found. He couldn't even locate any more examples of the "madness" to study. \*Perhaps everyone's in his or her own quarters,\* he thought, \*doing one thing or another. That's all fine and dandy, but this ship is on battle alert!\*

They finally reached the turboshaft. "This lift leads to the bridge," Rosenzweig informed the squad behind him. "There's no other quick way in."

"We could divide and send people up through the emergency ladder, sir," offered De Barbieri.

"No," the admiral replied. "There's no time. The *Konkordium* is probably being fired upon by now. I need her fully operational." He touched the switch to summon the lift, and the doors parted. "Now keep alert. We'll be in a tight area, and things may get tricky."

The group got onto the lift, and three of the specialists positioned themselves in front of the door. The elevator went into motion.

Then it stopped.

## CHAPTER 9:

The doors opened onto the bridge, which seemed to be in the worst state of disorder of anywhere on the ship. Garbage, mostly meal boxes and cups, was scattered about. Captain Lane and the bridge crew were dressed much as they'd appeared earlier, although Lane had somehow acquired a cape to go with his "ensemble".

"What do you mean, I'm doing a lousy job as commander?!" Lane was yelling, pointing an accusing finger at Lt. Commander Fillmore. They were head to head, standing in the command module facing one another. The other members of the crew leaned back at their stations, enjoying the altercation.

"I mean," Fillmore replied, "that we could be kilometers away from here by now, having some fun, but you wanted to come back here and blow this thing up!"

"Don't you understand?!" Lane yelled back. "As long as the Threshold is in operation, our freedom is threatened!"

"But they have to **find** us first! You know, maybe I should be in command."

"You?!!" Lane cried. "In command?! You couldn't find one little admiral with a whole security team!"

"It's not my fault!" Fillmore protested. "He's small and wiry, and he knows more about this ship than both of us put together!"

"Ahem!"

The sound of the admiral clearing his throat caused the two men, along with the rest of the bridge crew, to turn toward him. He stepped onto the bridge, followed by the boarding party. On the main viewer, he could see the *Konkordium* positioned between the *Avenger* and the installation. \*At least the argument kept the *Konk* from being fired upon,\* he thought.

The security troops moved onto the bridge, leveling their rifles at various crewmembers, who remained at their stations. When two of the guards approached Lane, though, he backed away.

"Oh, no!" he said. "You may have me, but this ship is not going anywhere!" He pulled a phaser and fired at the navigation console. Ensign 1st Class Abbott barely jumped out of the way of the beam. Hurrying to engineering, Abbott shut down the power to the nav-station. Fortunately, it didn't seem too badly damaged.

\*That did it,\* Rosenzweig thought. \*Now I'm gonna have to get tough!\* He walked to the center seat and switched off the red alert. Flipping open his communicator, he adjusted it to the channel that both Admiral T'Sal and Captain Levine were monitoring. "This is Rear Admiral Rosenzweig. The word is given. Repeat, the word is given."

Aboard the *Konkordium*, Levine received the admiral's message. "Helm, take us to our new position. Engineering, reverse tractor beam to pressor configuration. At my signal, lock onto the *Avenger* and—"

"Give her a great big push," finished Commander Peterson, who was still at the engineering station. Levine gave her a "thumbs-up" signal and swung her chair forward again.

The sight of the *Konkordium* moving unexpectedly out of the forward view caused a murmur of confusion from the *Avenger's* bridge crew. The jolt from the dreadnought's pressor beam only added to it.

"Captain," Fillmore reported from sciences, "I'm picking up an energy surge from the Threshold installation. It's coming on!"

"No," Lane said, sagging into the center seat. "You're...you're pushing us into it."

"Yes, and as soon as we are in the 'manifold', I will signal for Admiral T'Sal to deactivate both gates," Admiral Rosenzweig said, holding up his communicator for emphasis.

"We'll be killed!" Lane jumped up and grabbed Rosenzweig by the arms. Two security guards immediately pulled him away and forced him back down into the seat.

"Or trapped," the commanding officer said. "Either way, you're not going to have the *Avenger* to play around with any more."

They gazed into the main viewer, watching the two halves of the Threshold gate get steadily closer.

As the *Avenger* had done once, it did again. It disappeared...

## EPILOGUE:

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8808.02, Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig recording:

For the past five days, we have been docked at Starbase 29 for maintenance and repairs, cleaning up after our adventure with the stargate. The crew has been given an extensive battery of physical and psychological tests and show no signs of the aliens that previously 'possessed' them. Apparently the aliens fled when the *Avenger* was forced into the stargate by the *Konkordium's* tractor beams. The nature of the aliens themselves, as well as their motivations for the hijacking, remain a mystery. The merchant fleet we had been escorting rendezvoused with the starship *Tai Shan* and were delivered safely to their destination. After our stopover here is complete, we will proceed with our mission. End report. Rosenzweig out."

"It is unfortunate that we could not contain one of the aliens for study," Admiral T'Sal said. She stood on the bridge, in the drab attire that passed for civilian clothes on Vulcan, with a set of golf clubs swung over her shoulder.

"I thought they couldn't live outside their own dimension."

"Yes," she admitted. "Perhaps with volunteers to act as hosts—"

"Out of the question."

"I suppose you are correct," T'Sal said, sighing. "As the experiment was a fluke, we will probably never encounter them again."

"Thank the gods!" Rosenzweig responded earnestly. T'Sal cocked an eyebrow at him.

Just then, the turbo-lift doors slid open, and Lt. Commander Fillmore, Captain Lane, and Ensign 1st Class Abbott entered the bridge. All were back in uniform. Lane was even fully shaved. He and Fillmore were just finishing a conversation.

"You're lucky that Star Fleet decided not to press charges," Fillmore was saying.

"Not really," Lane countered. "We were impaired, acting under duress, and not in our right minds. Legally, that's temporary insanity."

"As opposed to our normal mode of operation," commented the science officer with a smile.

"That's permanent insanity," Abbott interjected, taking his place at navigation.

"I see you're all ready to assume your duties," Rosenzweig commented placidly.

"Fit as a fiddle, minds sharp as ever," Fillmore answered, smiling.

"Good. As soon as we transfer Admiral T'Sal to the base, we'll be on our way."

"Strange time to take a vacation," Lane said, just noticing the Vulcan's attire.

"Star Fleet decided that it would be for the best if I were to drop out of the public eye until this incident is forgotten."

"Lay low 'til it blows over," said Lane.

"Essentially correct," T'Sal confirmed. "I decided to go to Palm Springs, on Earth, and practice my golfing."

"I didn't know Vulcans golfed," Fillmore put in off-handedly.

"Oh, yes. It is an excellent sport requiring patience and hand-eye coordination. In addition, it is frequently played in an aesthetically pleasing environment."

"And after that, you'll be back to work on the Threshold?" the executive officer inquired.

"Actually, no. Star Fleet has chosen to discontinue this line of experimentation. Although the project itself was successful, the amount of energy that it consumed was such that it was deemed, 'not cost effective.'" And with that, she said her goodbyes and left the bridge.

Lane returned to his station. He paused, then turned back to face Rosenzweig. "You mean," he exclaimed angrily, "that we went through all that! **You** went through all that! For nothing?! NOTHING?!!"

"Calm down, Jon, calm down," the rear admiral tried to soothe. Shaking his head, the commanding officer swiveled forward. "Mr. Abbott, set course for Sigma Belladonna II. Mr. Toland, warp four."

"Yes, sir." "Aye, Admiral."

-----THE END-----

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