

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

## A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO NORPIN

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Admiral Rosenzweig glanced briefly at the PADD in his hand, then scribbled a signature and handed it back to Yeoman Ysanwe. "Okay, Yeoman, you can take this down to Commander Ciufu. Tell him to let Bob have a good...time."

Captain Maldonado, standing to the left of the Admiral, groaned. Captain Fillmore was beginning a new experiment in temporal physics.

Alex grinned broadly. Before he could comment further, Lieutenant Rhea spoke up from the Comm station.

"Admiral, we have an incoming message from Starbase 7."

"Put it on the main viewer, Lieutenant."

An image of Commodore Vosseller appeared on the view-screen. He looked extremely harried, and instead of the usual image of the Operations Center, he seemed to be standing against a blank wall. He was facing someone offscreen.

"Well, then FIND him, you idiot!" He turned to glare at his own viewscreen, and was arrested by the image of the entire Avenger bridge crew staring back at him. "Oh, uh, hi, Alex. And, uh, the rest of you, too."

Alex raised one eyebrow at the frazzled Fleet Commander. "Why, hello, Bob. And how are you this fine day?" Bob opened his mouth, then closed it again, resembling nothing so much as a tall blond fish. "What brings you to the starbase?"

"Challenger is in for refurbishing," Vosseller replied, finally being able to answer a question.

"And what can we do for you?"

Bob smiled innocently. "Oh, just a nice simple mission for you. I know that you've all just come off a stressful mission, and as your friend, as well as your Fleet Commander, I decided the least I could do was give you a bit of a break."

"Where are we headed?" Carlos questioned.

"Come to the base and dock at the orbital station. We have some passengers for you. The Assistant Commandant of Star Fleet Academy, Admiral Jean-Luc Lassard, has retired. He needs to be transported to Norpin V. Couldn't have found you an easier assignment if I'd ordered it just for you."

"Sounds good, Bob. We're on our way." Alex turned to the navigator. "Lay in a course for Starbase 7. Lieutenant Toland, take us out at warp factor 6."

On the screen, Vosseller leaned forward abruptly. "No! Eight!" Without warning, the screen went black.

Most of the bridge crew turned to look questioningly at the Admiral. He shrugged. "Got me. Oh, well. Engage."

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9508.14:

After completing the emergency repairs to Deep Space Station K-12, we have been ordered to Starbase 7 by Commodore Vosseller. Our mission: to ferry Admiral Jean-Luc Lassard to his retirement home on Norpin V.

Admiral Lassard has been a fixture at Star Fleet Academy for the past 30 years. It simply will not be the same without him. Our ETA at the starbase is 7 hours."

Seven hours later, Admiral Rosenzweig and Captain Maldonado waited in the transporter room for Admiral Lassard to arrive. They were accompanied by a security complement consisting of Security Chief Csuti, his Assistant Chief, Lt. Commander rRham 'ho tzt 'tzen, and two specialists.

Rosenzweig and Maldonado were looking forward to a milk-run. Not only had the repair-mission to K-12 been harrowing, but in the last few hours, a malfunction had been discovered in the ship's food synthesizer systems. It wasn't dangerous, or even particularly troubling, to most of the humanoid crew of the ship. The fire-lizards, however, had reacted to it quite badly, as it had affected the process by which their boron nutritional supplements had been produced. As a result, they'd all come down with the fire-lizard equivalent of a severe stomach flu. Dr. Fillmore and the Medical staff had administered a compound to correct the problem, but the prognosis, while good, also included an indication that the small creatures would spend the next day or two either asleep or quite unhappy about even the idea of moving. Almost all were curled up in their sleeping nests in their various companions' quarters, and the ship seemed strangely empty without cavorting fire-lizards in the off-duty areas.

Alex was brought out of his ruminations as Ensign Cordero reported that the starbase had informed him that the Admiral and his party were prepared for transport. At the CO's nod, he proceeded to beam them over to the ship.

Just as the forms were beginning to materialize on the platform, the doors to the transporter room opened, and Ensign Shmuk, the Ops Yeoman, rushed into the room. "Sorry I'm late."

As the party materialized, all assembled were surprised to note that six forms were appearing—and that three of them seemed to be quite a bit smaller than expected.

"Nobody said anything about *kids*," Captain Maldonado began.

"Welcome aboard, Admiral," Alex interrupted. "How nice that your family has come to see you off."

The tall, brown haired man standing next to the statuesque brunette looked at Admiral Lassard in surprise. "Oh, you must have changed your mind. Well, okay, bye J.L., uh, sir."

The Admiral sighed in exasperation. "No. You are still coming with me." He turned to Alex. "My family will be accompanying me to Norpin V. Didn't the nice Commodore tell you?"

"Actually," Alex stated, "no. But we are very happy to have you all aboard." He turned to the Ops Yeoman. "Make sure that two additional VIP cabins are prepared immediately."

Carlos was smiling nervously at the three children, a girl and

two boys. The older of the two boys was staring intently at the pins on Alex's uniform. Suddenly, he tugged on Lassard's sleeve.

"Hey, grampa," he stated, in the loud voice only given to very small children, "he outranks that idiot at the base!"

There was an uncomfortable pause. Alex looked at Lassard. Lassard shrugged.

"He is soooooo immature," the girl said in a voice that suggested that the entire universe existed for the sole purpose of irritating her.

The silence continued. "Let me introduce you to my family," Lassard broke in brightly. "This is my daughter Vanessa, and her husband Felix Tackleberry. And these are my adorable grandchildren: Ariane, Montgomery, and little Dennis."

Montgomery, who looked to be about seven, tugged on Carlos' sleeve. Carlos bent down to the child. "Call me Monty. Please?"

Ariane, the typical pre-teen, looked even more bored, and two-year old Dennis waved happily at all assembled.

Alex continued with the round of introductions, and ended with, "Ensign Shmuk, please show the Admiral and his family to their quarters."

Everyone left the transporter room and went their separate ways. Alex and Carlos headed back to the bridge together, and as the Admiral's family turned the corner, the last thing they heard was Admiral Lassard questioning their escort: "Do you have any relatives at HQ? I've met many, many well known Shmuks...."

Later that afternoon, the senior staff assembled in the briefing room for the mission briefing.

"Wendy, the Norpin V colony has requested that we give our passengers a full medical screening. It seems that a couple of years back, an Andorian ambassador retired, and brought a nasty strain of the Andorian screeching flu with him. They've tended to be a little...cautious about the health of their new residents since then."

Commander Padovan broke in, "You mean paranoid."

"That is *not* a very politic way to express yourself, Commander," Captain Fillmore pointed out. "But in this case, that is correct."

"Once the checkups are done, Commander Csuti and Captain Fillmore, you will take the family on a tour of the ship. Alert all necessary personnel."

Wendy smiled brightly. "Sounds like they'll just go 'Bobbing' right along."

"Don't make me recalibrate all of your scanners to Skorr normal readings again," Bob Fillmore threatened his wife. Lt. Commander Csuti was still trying to puzzle out Wendy's pun.

"We'll be passing near star system FGC 62065," Chief Science Officer Ciufo announced. "The star is expected to go nova shortly. Would it be possible to detour slightly so we can get some readings? It wouldn't delay us by more than a few hours."

"Fine. Anything else, anyone?"

There was no response.

"Very well. Dismissed."

The ship's Doctor of Mental Health, Stephanie Richardson, checked her chronometer again. "Where is that Shmuk, anyway?" she wondered out loud. She always told her patients that talking

to themselves was a positive sign of mental health. "I thought Vulcans had that internal time sense. What could have happened to him?" She turned to her terminal. "Computer, what is the location of Ensign Shmuk?"

"Ensign Shmuk is in Exam Room 1."

Over in Exam Room 1, Dr. Urbanavage and Nurse Bush were attending to the Ensign's medical needs. "How did you get this wound, Ensign?" Lt. Commander Bush inquired. They were regenerating the skin on his left arm, which had been abraded off.

"I was attempting to demonstrate the proper use of the sonic shower to the Admiral's grandchildren."

Donna interrupted his narrative. "You got *this* from a sonic shower?"

"Normal operation did not seem interesting enough to the oldest male child. He desired to test the limits of the equipment—and my arm. I am pleased that the equipment was more sturdy than my appendage."

Donna looked at Marla and shook her head in sympathy. "Poor Shmuk."

"Would you like a pain suppressant?" Marla asked.

"That is not necessary," the Vulcan replied stoically. "Pain is in the mind."

"Have it your way." Marla shrugged, and placed the prepared hypo and the dermal regenerator aside.

The doors to sickbay opened, and Admiral Lassard and his family entered.

For someone who claimed to have no emotions, Ensign Shmuk did an excellent imitation of fear. "I am late for my appointment with Doctor Richardson," he announced, and hastily retreated through the door farthest from the new arrivals.

Wendy came out of her office to greet the guests. "Welcome, Admiral."

"Call me J.L." He beamed at all of the attractive young women in the vicinity. "After all, we're all friends here."

Wendy introduced her staff, and split the family into two groups in order to facilitate the examinations. Wendy and Lieutenant J.G. Katie Greenhalgh took the children into Exam Room 2, while Donna and Marla stayed with the adults.

Admiral Lassard peered curiously at Dr. Urbanavage's unusual earring, then stared at her obviously human nose. "Surgery?" he questioned.

Donna stared at him blankly. "I'm sorry, Admiral? What would you like?"

"Your nose."

Donna remained mystified. "Sir? My...nose?"

Realizing he was not explaining himself quite as well as he thought he had, he pointed to her earring. "That *is* a Bajoran earring, isn't it? That Bajoran cadet we had a few years ago made quite an issue of it."

Suddenly she understood. "Yes, but you're right, I'm not Bajoran. This was a gift from my late husband. It was specially commissioned." She turned her head, and the caduceus caught the light.

"What a lovely gesture," he replied. "He must have cared deeply for you."

The exams were completed in short order, as everyone was

proven to be in excellent health. Wendy called down to Captain Fillmore that Lassard's party was ready for their tour of the ship. She was extremely glad when he and Security Chief Csuti arrived five minutes later, since the children had decided that Sick Bay made an excellent playground.

Captain Fillmore paused at the door of Sick Bay, gazing sternly at the three children running amok through the department. "The tour is about to begin," he boomed in a loud voice. "Only quiet children will be permitted to attend." Like magic, the children stopped running and hurried to their mother's side.

Felix looked at his children, then at Captain Fillmore, his mouth agape. "How did you *do* that?" he asked in amazement.

"It's a gift," Wendy said dryly.

"Well now, we shouldn't keep the Captain and the Commander waiting. Please, lead on." Admiral Lassard gestured toward the waiting officers, and the family followed. "Dr. Fillmore, it was a pleasure. You have a fine staff. I hope to see you again during our visit."

"Not too soon," Marla muttered, as Donna elbowed her in the ribs.

"Uh, any time, Admiral. Enjoy your tour." Wendy hoped the Admiral's party hadn't noticed her obvious relief at their departure.

Ariane stopped to grab Dennis' hand. "Come on already. And put that down!" she growled at her youngest brother, rolling her eyes at the job of baby-sitting and wishing someone else would keep her brother in line. Dennis guiltily dropped the medical scanner he was holding and stuffed the other "toy" he'd found into his pocket, before Ariane could take that away, too.

"...no running while we are visiting Main Engineering."

Commander Padovan, hearing Captain Fillmore's orders as the large doors opened, cringed and steeled himself for the Admiral's party. "Okay, Zach, keep your eyes open."

"As opposed to checking my eyelids for leaks?" was Commander Zulkowski's retort. "Don't worry, George. Nothing will get past me."

"Better not. Captain Fillmore, Commander Csuti, Admiral. Welcome to Main Engineering." George hoped he conveyed a sense of confidence. He hadn't had any children visit Engineering. Ever.

Bob made the introductions, and the tour began. Ariane was fascinated, dropping Dennis' hand as well as her jaw. "This is so cool. Will we be able to see the warp engines?"

"Yeah, like you'd know a warp engine if you saw one," Monty snickered.

"Would too, you spaceslug," Ariane shot back.

Vanessa turned and glared at her offspring. "That will be quite enough of that, thank you." At the same moment, Captain Fillmore also treated the children to one of his famous stares. Immediately, silence reigned.

"I think it will be possible to take a quick look at the warp engines," Commander Padovan said a bit warily, and the party moved on.

Except for Dennis.

He just happened to spot someone he thought might be interesting. Ensign Tim Longo was in the midst of monthly routine maintenance scheduled on a systems access panel when he "felt" a presence behind him. Turning around, he looked right into the face

of a smiling two year-old. And that was the last thing he remembered.

Dennis giggled at the Ensign, now slumped against the base of the panel on which he'd been working. He dropped the hypospray he had picked up in Sick Bay and exchanged it for the laser torch Tim had been using. At least *this* toy had a really pretty light when you pushed the button. Seeing an open door, Dennis decided it was time to see what he could make the pretty light do and wandered off.

"And that is our Engineering Department. I hope you liked your tour, Admiral, Mr. and Mrs. Tackleberry," George concluded. He was relieved that the sortie had come to a close and the children were well behaved. Maybe the ominous presence of Captain Fillmore had a bearing on that.

Admiral Lassard was quite pleased. "Oh, I believe we had a splendid time in your little Engineering domain. It was almost as pleasant as our visit to Sick Bay." He paused, and leaning toward Fillmore, said in a low voice, "But the lovely crew in Sick Bay are much more interesting to...watch."

"But, of course," Bob replied proudly, with just a hint of friendly sarcasm. Lt. Commander Csuti was puzzled by the remark.

Now, it was Padovan's turn to glare. "Captain, we should be coming up on FGC 62065. I think we should begin our shield frequency calculations and contact Commander Ciufo. We can't waste any time on this."

"I believe you are right. Commander Csuti, will you be so kind as to escort the Tackleberrys to the bridge? I have other pressing matters to attend to."

"Oh, right, Bob, er, I mean Captain." Csuti turned to the group and motioned for them to exit Engineering. "If you would follow me, I'll take you to Admiral Rosenzweig."

At that moment, Captain Fillmore felt a tug on his sleeve. As he looked down, Monty gazed expectantly at both himself and George. "What's FGC 62065? Some kind of new asteroid or a star or something?"

Surprised that a child of Monty's age would be interested in such a phenomenon, George replied, "Yes, it is a star that is about to go nova, a very dangerous situation for any starship to be in. Captain, we have to go."

"Please, can I come? We were learning about novas and stuff like that at school. Please?" Monty pleaded. Bob was impressed with the initiative the boy showed. But Felix objected. "Monty, these nice men have work to do. You can't be in their way. I'm sorry. My son likes to be in the middle of everything."

George felt the same. "We do have work to do. And soon."

"Now George, let the boy come along. He will behave himself, won't you?" Bob looked sternly at Monty. Then he got a glint of mischief in his eyes. "After all, he's got to have something to brag to his new friends about. I can't think of a better story, can you?"

"Fine, fine. But we've got to go. Now." Padovan turned to Monty. "Just don't touch anything," he added a bit gruffly, and proceeded to his office. Fillmore turned toward the Tackleberrys. "Don't worry. I'm quite sure young Montgomery won't be any trouble."

Vanessa gave a tentative smile. "Thank you so much, Captain. I appreciate the opportunity you are giving my son. Now Monty, *behave*."

Lt. Commander Csuti was beginning to fidget. "I think we should go to the bridge now. Don't you?"

"Of course, Commander. Let's not keep the Admiral waiting. Vanessa, Felix, after you." Admiral Lassard stepped aside to let his family pass. As Ariane walked by, Monty stuck out his tongue. She didn't bother to respond directly to him, just rolled her eyes skyward and muttered something about maturity.

Meanwhile, Dennis found his way to a Jefferies tube, attracted by flashing lights. He stared raptly at the pulsing circuitry, then at his hand. Wondering what his pretty light thing would do, he pointed the laser torch and pressed the button.

Captain Maldonado finished his briefing at the Science Station with Lt. Commander Ciufo. "The numbers look fine to me, Augie. Let me know when you're ready to go down to the lab." He rose from the seat and walked to Admiral Rosenzweig. "Shouldn't the Admiral's party be here by now, Alex?"

"I was wondering about that myself. I suppose Engineering was more interesting than I thought. Are the Science staff through with their preparations for the nova?"

Carlos nodded. "I've just finished going over the data with Augie. This'll really help their research on stellar dynamics." At that moment, the turbo-lift doors opened. Alex and Carlos stepped toward the group making their way onto the bridge. "Admiral Lassard, I trust your tour has gone well?" Alex asked.

"Quite well, Admiral. Your crew is remarkably efficient and well-trained, too. It was enjoyable. And please, call me J.L. No need for such formality here." Lassard was obviously pleased.

Carlos looked puzzled. "Didn't we start out with three kids?" he asked Lt. Commander Csuti. Alex also wanted an answer to that question. "Where is Captain Fillmore? Commander?"

Bob began to stammer, losing his composure. "He, uh, he left."

Carlos was losing patience. "Oh? And?"

"He went with George."

"And?"

"Uh...Monty, too."

"And?"

Bob was flustered and began to try to explain everything. "Well, Bob and George had to do some figuring for the nova and the shields and...well, Monty wanted to see and George said no but Bob said yes...and I tried to get everybody here but..."

"So, where's the other child?" Alex's patience was also beginning to wane.

"Well, I, uh...thought he was... He's not here." Vanessa stared at Csuti, her eyes wide with surprise and worry.

Admiral Rosenzweig closed his eyes briefly, sending a mental call to his fire-lizard, asking if he might feel up to helping in the search for the child. The response was the sleepy mental equivalent of a grumble: "Leave me alone." This did not improve the Admiral's mood. "Go find him," he ordered the Security Chief. Csuti ran for the turbo-lift. And, as Bob ran, an alarm began to sound. Lt. Commander Michael Klufas announced, "Admiral, we've lost gravity control on Decks 4 and 5."

Commander Chaym Gale' Re'ming'ton, the Chief of Recreation, glanced down from her position on the rec deck's upper level.

"Paul, Sakala, I'll be going down to check on the pool now."

Her assistant, Lieutenant Paul Johnston Hennings, and Lieutenant Sakala, the Fitness Instructor, were going over the gymnasium schedules when Chaym called. "You going to jump over the railing again? Be careful! Last week you scared those new recruits so badly they won't come back to the rec deck if you're here," Paul said as he peered out the door of the Rec Office.

"Why would a ball of fur and claws suddenly landing in the middle of the floor scare anyone? I've never had a problem with it!" Chaym knew her unexpected landings from above unnerved the new crewmembers, but everyone got used to her, in time. She leapt onto the railing and launched herself. At that moment, the gravity cut out and Chaym found herself flying across Deck 4, toward the viewports. Ensign Shmuk, finished with a quick meditation session in the reading lounge, found himself in Chaym's path, with a collision imminent. They crashed into the bulkhead, bounced off and were headed for another round.

A Mohnan howl and a Vulcan exclamation were heard by Lieutenant Rhea, who was hanging onto the railing across from the holodeck. She looked up in time to see the impact. Pulling herself hand over hand along the rail, she saw a tumbling mass of fur, arms, claws, and legs hit the floor as the auxiliary gravity engaged. Rhea ran over to the hapless victims, seeing that Chaym had passed out and collapsed on top of Shmuk.

"Can you hear me? Shmuk, are you all right?"

A muffled voice was heard from under Chaym. "Madame... get off!!!"

"Admiral, auxiliary gravity systems engaged on Decks 4 and 5," reported Lt. Commander Klufas, "and we have a crewman down in Engineering. Medical team on the way."

An anguished scream came from the direction of Admiral Lassard's party. "Where's my baby? He's missing and this ship is about to fall apart!" Vanessa was nearly hysterical. She turned to her husband and, grabbing his shoulders, shouted, "Felix, do something!"

Felix, emotional himself, and not used to being in charge, turned to his father-in-law. "Do something, sir!" And in a moment of total clarity, Lassard faced the CO and XO, demanding, "Do something!" Alex took one look at the raving Vanessa and panicked Felix, and reached for the nearest intercom switch. "Medical team to the bridge!"

Carlos, meanwhile, went for another intercom. "Security, this is Captain Maldonado."

"Yes, Captain, what is the problem?" the deep bass voice of Lieutenant rRham answered.

"We have a missing two year-old. He was last seen in Main Engineering. Begin there and leave nothing to chance. He must be found."

A sound somewhere between a hiss and a growl issued from the intercom. "Do not worry, Captain. I shall find the small one. rRham out."

Dr. Fillmore reassured Felix Tackleberry that his wife would be just fine. "I've given her a sedative. Her vital signs are good, but we should keep her as calm as possible until we find Dennis. You should get some rest, too. The stress is not good for you, either. I'll be back to check on you."

Wendy stopped briefly to confer with Nurse Greenhalgh about Ensign Longo. He would be good as new, once he awoke from the heavy dose of pain suppressant. Chaym had suffered a nasty concussion from her encounter with the bulkhead. Wendy had seen to her earlier and Chaym would be resting in Sick Bay for the next 24 hours. And, for the second time today, Ensign Shmuk was being attended to by Dr. Urbanavage and Nurse Bush. Luckily, he had suffered only minor scrapes and bruises. Chaym's claws were sharp.

"Well, Ensign, that does it. Those bruises should disappear by supertime. Check in with me tomorrow just to be on the safe side, okay?" Donna tried to sound professional, but had a hard time keeping a straight face. Marla had a smirk on her face but kept quiet. She didn't trust herself not to burst out laughing.

"I shall meet with you tomorrow as planned, Doctor. I have every confidence I shall be in optimum fitness later today. Now I should get back to Ops and Commander Graevyn." Ensign Shmuk once again beat a hasty retreat.

Wendy approached Marla and Donna. "I see you two have been so popular you're getting repeat customers. We seem to be under control for now. How about stepping into my office?"

The trio had no sooner entered the CMO's office when it became apparent that Wendy was more than slightly annoyed. "Anyone want to venture a theory as to how one of our hypos ended up in Engineering?"

Marla and Donna looked at each other, then, simultaneously pointing, offered, "She did it!"

If anyone had been around during the crisis, a wave of childish giggling could have been heard in Jefferies Tube #12. Dennis liked the tickling sensation he felt deep in his belly. And it was fun to float, too. Abruptly, Dennis fell back to the floor, and saw the lights come back on in the panel. He had enjoyed his adventure so far and decided to see where else he could go. Crawling out of the tube, he spotted the aft set of doors to Engineering. He exited and found his way to the nearby cargo transporter. It was full of differently sized and shaped containers, kind of a bizarre castle. Now, this looked interesting...

Transporter Specialist Ensign Lorraine Vestri waited for the cargo transport from Deck 4 to arrive. "Those lugheads in Engineering are beginning to get to me with the delays," she said to no one in particular. "If I don't get that equipment to Astrophysics soon, it'll be *my* head on the proverbial platter. Guess I'll just have to do it myself." She hit the override on the transporter console and beamed the cargo to Deck 7. "Better do a quick check before I contact Lieutenant Setak." She had just begun her check when she was alerted by Damage Control about the gravity loss. She put her PADD on the console and ran to join her team. Dennis, disoriented from his brief transporter ride, peeked around from the center of the cargo in time to see Vestri run through the doors. He decided to go that way, too.

The corridor was empty. Dennis toddled around until he heard a noise. It came from an open doorway ahead of him. He looked in and saw a man behind the desk. Quietly, he walked into the office.

Lt. Commander Csuti was studying reports in the Security Office. "What an awful thing to lose a small kid. And it's all my fault. We're not supposed to *have* kids on a ship like this!" he grouched. Feeling like he was being watched, Bob looked up to see the same

small kid everyone was searching for. He hit the intercom switch. "Csuti to the bridge!"

At this time, Dennis decided to show this bigger person his pretty light thing and pointed the laser torch at Bob. Nervously, Bob rose from his chair and made his way around the desk. His first thought was to remove the potential weapon from the child's hand, but soon changed his mind when Dennis kept coming forward, waving the torch. Bob wasn't used to dealing with children, and most of the methods he knew for disarming assailants just weren't appropriate for a toddler. So he retreated while trying to figure out what to do. It quickly became an almost comical scene, with Dennis running after the fleeing Security Chief.

On the Bridge, Rosenzweig answered the Security signal. The entire crew looked up as they heard shouting coming from the 'com. "Stay back! Put that thing down! No, get away! Stop it! I mean it, put it down! Go away! Get outta here!"

"Bridge to rRham. This is Captain Maldonado. Get to the Security office immediately!"

"Yellow alert! Carlos, you're with me. Mr. Klufas, you have the bridge," Alex commanded as he and Carlos headed for Security.

Running out of his office, Commander Padovan shouted for his right-hand man. "Zach, what the hell's going on?" Captain Fillmore and Monty were hot on George's heels. Bob was also more than curious as to why the ship had suddenly lost gravity. Well, at least we know it's not the kid's fault, thought Bob, glancing back toward the excited boy.

"That was cool! Can we do it again?" Monty sounded hopeful, thinking gravity loss must be common on a starship like the Aven-ger. He quickly changed his mind, seeing the look on Bob's face. The trio met Commander Zulkowski at a console. Studying the readouts, Zach announced, "The problem is...right behind that wall!" He indicated the main systems display unit. Monty was standing on the far side of the console, unable to see where the men were looking. Grabbing the side of the unit, he jumped up high enough to get a good view and unknowingly hit the control area force field switch.

George, Bob, and Zach ran toward the edge of the control area to check out what Zach had detected, and collided with the force field. Stunned for a brief moment, they were aware of childish laughter from the other side of the console. All turned toward the sound and Monty quieted under the annoyed glares he received from the three men. "Smart kid," Bob said to George as Zach turned off the field.

"Someone had fun in here. Looks like the work of a laser torch. I knew we should keep those hot things in cold storage," Zach commented after studying the panel.

George rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Just fix it."

Bob gave the report to the Bridge, suggesting a Security Alert. He was instructed to remain in Engineering until things were sorted out. "Okay, let's get to the bottom of this mess. Monty, sit down and don't touch anything!" he said, pointing to the side of the main systems display unit. A few moments later, the announcement of the Security Alert was made.

"And now the fun begins," said Commander Zulkowski to the young and very scared Montgomery Tackleberry.

"Looks like she's beginning to come around," Dr. Urbanavage remarked to Nurse Bush. "Be ready with additional sedation if needed." Marla nodded and reached into the drug cabinet next to the bed.

Vanessa slowly opened her eyes. She was disoriented for a moment, then remembered Dennis. "Have they found my son yet?" she asked the doctor at her side.

Donna looked down at her with a smile. "Yes, the Security team's located him."

"Will they be bringing him here to Sick Bay?" Vanessa was distressed. Dennis was so young, only beginning to talk. How would anyone on this ship understand him?

After a slight hesitation, Donna replied, "They haven't quite... caught him yet." She hoped that statement didn't make her crewmates sound inept.

"What do you mean?" Vanessa asked, the fear rising in her throat.

We don't have the time for this, thought Marla. She clenched her teeth to prevent herself from screaming. "Security is working on that," she said, barely controlling her feelings.

Noticing the alert lights around the perimeter of Sick Bay, Vanessa wondered aloud, "Why are those lights flashing?"

"Oh, security alert," Donna said flippantly, glancing to Marla and nodding almost imperceptibly. Marla understood and had the hypo of sedative ready.

Again, Vanessa felt the fear. She asked about the Security Alert one more time. This time, Donna opted for the direct approach. "Let's just say your son is involved."

Vanessa opened her mouth as if to scream, but passed out before any sound could come. Nurse Bush, hypospray in hand, shrugged and said, "Oh well." This time she made sure the instrument was placed back in the drug cabinet.

In the Security Office, Dennis had Csuti backed into a holding cell. "Put that down! Over there, on the desk! Okay, just drop it to the floor!" Bob was shouting at the small child while trying to motion for the torch to be put down.

Funny! Hee-hee! Dennis thought. Then he began to gesticulate as Bob had been. Suddenly, the laser torch went off, striking the control panel for the cell. Bob's eyes opened wide as the force field came on; he realized that the panel had been hit.

Footsteps echoed in the office as Ariane ran in. "Dennis! I found you!"

Turning around, Dennis saw his sister and smiled. He wanted to show her his pretty light thing and pointed it at her. Ariane backed up, frightened, not knowing what her brother had in his hand. She kept edging back, until she bumped into an unyielding surface. Thinking it was a wall, she turned to look up at the largest kimodo dragon she'd ever seen. "I'm dead," she said aloud.

Dennis stared at Lt. Commander rRham framed in the doorway. Scared, he dropped the laser torch as well as his jaw. Ariane, jolted out of her fright, ran to her little brother. She whisked him off to the side of the office. rRham surveyed the scene, looking from the children to his Security Chief and back again. He emitted a low rumble of exasperation, then gazed at Bob and asked, in his monotone bass voice, "Chief, what are you in for?"

"Just get me out of here," Bob demanded.

rRham sauntered to the doorway of the cell. He examined the entire frame and turned his attention to the fried panel. "Will you do something?!" exclaimed Csuti as rRham looked in at him. Shrugging and putting his massive hand into the force field, rRham disengaged the field and looked toward Bob.

"It was just a level 1 security field, sir. Nothing to get excited about."

Bob stepped from the cell, sat at his desk and put his head in his hands. "Don't say a thing," he instructed the imposing Assistant Chief.

"I was not about to, sir."

"Time to get back to the bridge. George, I believe you and Zach can handle everything from here. Monty, you're with me," announced Captain Fillmore.

"Can't I stay here and watch Commander Zach finish up? This is really neat!" Monty had hoped he'd be able to get away from the stares Bob had been throwing his way. George looked over at Bob with a silent plea that said, Please, take this kid out! Bob understood. "No, Monty."

The youth was disappointed. "But I..."

"Montgomery!" The voice of the Captain boomed through the Engineering section.

A very quiet "Uh-oh..." came from the boy. He immediately followed Bob to the turbo-lift and on toward the Bridge.

Alex and Carlos returned to the Bridge and reported to Admiral Lassard. "There was no need for all of us to go to Security. Lt. Commanders Csuti and rRham have the situation under control. Everything should be back to normal shortly." Alex had hoped he wouldn't have to eat his words.

"I am sure it will. The children seem to get into everything these days. It takes such a toll on my daughter," explained Lassard. The turbo-lift doors opened, revealing Captain Fillmore holding young Montgomery by the collar. Spying his grandfather, the boy groaned audibly.

"Captain, thank you for returning my grandson. You may release the prisoner now," said the Admiral, smiling at Bob.

"I think the prisoner should be escorted to a more secure area, say, the briefing room?"

Lassard was still smiling. "I wouldn't worry, Captain. There are many, many wonderful things here on the Bridge to keep young Monty entertained." With reluctance, Bob released his charge. Monty promptly walked away from the imposing Captain as quickly as possible, and soon found himself at the Communications console.

Not noticing the child, Lt. Commander Klufas unintentionally ignored the question put to him. He was totally engrossed in the task at hand.

"What you doin'?" Monty again queried as he put his hands on the console to get the officer's attention.

The bridge crew were discussing the coming stellar event with the visiting Admiral. Suddenly, the normal starfield was replaced by an image of...

"Klingons!" Lieutenant J.G. Joe Toland shouted to the crew. Lassard leaned toward Alex. "When did the Klingons change the color of their ships to pink?" he questioned. The Klingon ships vanished and the normal starfield returned. A child's voice was heard

from the Communications station. All turned in that direction.

"Hey! You had enough points for Commander!" exclaimed Monty. He was summarily lifted from the deck and escorted to the turbo-lift by Captain Fillmore.

The phrase "Main Briefing Room" was heard by the crew as the turbo-lift doors closed.

"You have very responsive officers, Admiral," remarked Las-sard.

Alex swallowed hard and thanked him, wondering when it was all going to end. Klufas sank down in his chair as the rest of the crew turned back to their own consoles, not wanting to be in Michael's place at the moment.

The doors to the Security office closed as Ariane and Dennis made a run for them. "You did not think we would not anticipate your move, did you? Not very smart for two who are in as much trouble as you." Something akin to a growl issued from deep inside rRham. He was indeed pleased with his capture of the young fugitives. "Sir, is that really necessary?" he asked his Chief, noting the phaser in Bob's hand.

"Of course it is! They are dangerous individuals." The shaking phaser became steadier as Bob became more confident. "Take these two to the bridge. They must answer to the Admiral and their parents for such behavior. And if they try anything, *eat them!*"

Ariane looked from the Security Chief to the large green lizard and into a mouthful of impressively sharp teeth. Her eyes widened at the prospect of a dentist's view of the officer. She decided that she'd better think of something real fast.

"Now to the Bridge," rRham stated as he unlocked the office doors and motioned the children out. Grabbing her brother's hand, Ariane led Dennis into the corridor.

"Dennis, *run!*" she screamed. Dennis took off to the right, while Ariane bolted the other way.

"Come back. That is an order," the tall Tzen officer calmly called after the children. "You must come back at once. I am waiting. Please return immediately." Realizing the youngsters were not listening, rRham's voice reverberated down the hallway, "I will find you and return you to a holding cell!"

Walking back into the office, rRham approached Security Chief Cсутi. "The prisoners have escaped. Give me a phaser. Now."

At the Navigation console, Lieutenant J.G. M'reen was studying the readouts. "Sirrr, we arrre apprrroaching Starr System FGC 62065. Estimated distance: 400 million kilometerrrs."

"Very good. Lieutenant Toland, take us out of warp. Full impulse." Admiral Rosenzweig was relieved. Things were settling down again. Now, if the flyby went as anticipated, the rest should be a breeze.

"Ciufo to Bridge. We should be in range for our readings. Did you happen to forget about us?"

Captain Maldonado had been about to call down to the astrophysics lab. "Of course not, Augie. We just dropped out of warp and should be in range in..." Carlos looked toward the navigator.

"About seven minutes, sirrr," came the reply from M'reen. "We will be able to slow to half impulse if needed," added Toland from the helm.

"Did you get that? Lieutenant Antrim is beginning to monitor

the star from the Bridge."

Augie was slightly confused. "Siobhan's up there? Where's Fillmore?"

A chuckle was heard from the center seat. Grinning broadly, Alex replied, "He's had an important matter to attend to. We'll get him back up here soon."

A few muffled laughs were heard on the Bridge. Carlos smiled, wondering what Bob would think of the "unprofessional" behavior. "Good luck, Augie. Maldonado out."

Alex went back to the task at hand. "Helm, move us into position, 300 million kilometers. Half impulse."

Joe nodded, "Aye, sir."

Monty wished he could hide under the table or crawl under the chair's cushion. The Captain was not very happy right now. Monty wondered if he ever blinked! The stare said so much, without Fillmore having to actually say anything at all. Finally, the silence was broken. "I appreciate your youthful curiosity, Montgomery. However, you are old enough to know that a starship is *not* a playground." Monty looked at the huge officer and nodded. "You will remain here until I figure out what punishment is fitting for your crimes." The captain was joking, of course, but Monty just stared, bug-eyed and slack-jawed, while images of what this almost 2-meter tall, 135 kilo, fully-trained Star Fleet captain could do to him...

Fillmore activated the monitor in front of him to run some calculations for his experiment, his face showing one of those patented Fillmore half-smiles.

Ariane listened to the rise and fall of excited voices. Something important was happening, that was obvious. She crouched inside the Jefferies tube until the voices died down. Slowly, she peered out of the opening, noticing the Sciences insignia on the door across the hall. Seeing the corridor empty, Ariane crept along until she found an unlocked lab door. She entered, and the door slid shut behind her. The first console she happened upon displayed a ship schematic. Excitedly, she said, "Computer!" There was no reaction from the ship's computer. Ariane was puzzled. She tried again and the result was the same. "How am I ever going to find Dennis now?" she wondered aloud. "This console must be on touch activation only. Hmm, better try this one." She started to hit switch after switch, trying to turn on the panel.

Suddenly, the console was alive with light and sound. "Experiment diagnostic in progress."

"I didn't do it!" Ariane shouted, jumping back toward the wall.

The bridge was quiet while the Sciences staff were monitoring the readouts. All needed to be ready to get the ship going at a moment's notice. Lieutenant Antrim's voice broke the silence. "I'm reading a subspace pulse from the star. It's going now!"

Ciufo called up from the astrophysics lab. "Okay, all finished here. Time to go!"

Rosenzweig nodded toward the helm. "Take us out."

The helmsman complied. And tried again. Lieutenant Toland turned to the Admiral. "Sir! I have no response! We have a power drain!"

Maldonado immediately went to the intercom. "Engineering! Locate and isolate that power drain!"

"We're on it! Padovan out!" was heard by the bridge crew.

Inwardly, Alex groaned. What next? he thought as he turned to Lassard. "Sorry, Admiral. Looks like we've got a bit of a glitch." The visiting dignitary shrugged. Grinning, he said, "It's always something, isn't it?"

Engineering was a beehive of action. Commanders Padovan and Zulkowski were bent over the main control bay console, tracking the power drain to the EPS system, then to the Science labs on Deck 7, and finally to another of Captain Fillmore's experiments.

"Damn, Fillmore has done it this time! Zach, take a crew down to Deck 7 and get that thing shut down!" George barked to Zach, wanting to put the pompous Second Officer in the brig for this latest problem.

"Sure thing, Chief! Lieutenant Darby, Ensign Brescia, and Ensign Neltex, with me!" Zach called out, and the team ran for the Jefferies Tube.

Shaking in a corner, Ariane kept repeating to herself, "I didn't do it! I didn't do it!" All she wanted was for the lights and sounds to stop and to find her brother.

The doors to the lab opened and the Engineering team ran in. Ensign Brescia saw the scared girl and went to see if she was hurt. Zach dove for the console, shutting it down while the others started diagnostic scans, making sure no damage had been caused by the power surge.

By now, Ariane was sobbing uncontrollably. But the lights and noise had stopped.

"We have power!" Toland exclaimed.

Relieved, Rosenzweig commanded, "Get us out of here! Warp 7!" The *Avenger* sped away as the shockwave from the nova reached the ship's previous position.

"Zulkowski to the Bridge. I've got the girl."

Maldonado answered the 'com. "Good work, Zach. Take her to the Main Briefing Room. Captain Fillmore will be waiting for her there. Maldonado out."

Admiral Lassard smiled broadly. "It would seem that the good Captain now has two prisoners."

More than one of the bridge crew wondered about that comment.

Quiet. That was the preferred state for Ensign Shmuk. The Vulcan way. The crew's mess hall was deserted. It was a perfect time to go over the Ops schedule he was preparing for Lt. Commander Graevyn while enjoying a nice bowl of hot plomeek soup. Contentment: that was as close as anyone got when asking Shmuk how he felt. Yes, right now he was content. But something had just disturbed the mood, a "sensed" presence.

"Shmuk!" shouted an excited little voice, as Dennis slammed his small hands on the table next to his larger companion. Spoon, bowl, and hot soup went flying into the air and all over both child and Ensign. A horrible wailing sound issued from Dennis as he was burned by the steaming liquid. Shmuk threw down his PADD, scooped up the child, and dove into the turbo-lift.

"Sick Bay!" shouted the no-longer-so-calm Vulcan.

Dr. Fillmore was preparing to head back to her office for the unenviable task of paperwork when the doors to Sick Bay opened

and in rushed the agitated Ensign Shmuk carrying the wailing Dennis. "Oh, no, not again," she sighed heavily.

Nurse Bush, seeing her favorite patient of the day yet again, quipped, "Vulcan syntheskin...on tap!" She hurried over to the pair, leading the Ensign to the nearest bed while Wendy and Nurse Greenhalgh disengaged the crying child to tend to his injuries.

"Come on, Shmuk. You should know the way by now." For some strange reason, Marla did not feel like laughing. "How did you manage this one?"

By now, Shmuk had regained his composure. "I was attempting to have a leisurely bowl of plomeek soup and finish my work for Chief Graevyn when the young child hit the bowl and we were burned. I shall be fine. The child is another matter."

Felix Tackleberry was in another room in Sick Bay, sitting by his wife's bed. Dr. Urbanavage, checking her readings, smiled at Vanessa. "I think you are just about ready to return to your quarters. It looks as though things are almost normal again." When we get the children off the ship, *then* everything will be normal, the Doctor was actually fervently hoping.

Vanessa looked to her husband and tried to smile. Suddenly, the sound of a child's crying was heard. "I know that scream," Felix said, running out the door.

"Oh, dear." Rising from the bed, Vanessa put her feet on the floor and tried to stand. Still a bit unsteady from the sedatives, her knees would not support her.

Donna ran over to her patient. "Whoa there, take it easy. I'll get you to your son." They walked out to the adjoining exam area.

"Da! Mummy!" Dennis forgot about his pain and reached for his parents. The medical staff had a much easier time tending to the toddler from that point on.

Wendy took this moment to contact Rosenzweig. "Sick Bay to bridge. We have Dennis."

"Acknowledged. The older children are also accounted for. Bridge out." Alex breathed a sigh of relief that was echoed through the bridge, as well as Sick Bay.

"Thank God," whispered Vanessa.

Admiral Rosenzweig and Captain Maldonado were the first to arrive in Transporter Room 3. "I won't be satisfied until they are all down on Norpin," Carlos remarked to Alex as they entered.

"I know exactly how you feel," Alex replied with a grin.

The officers nodded a greeting to Ensign Cordero, who stood at the transporter console. Arriving at the same time were Lt. Commander rRham, Ensign Shmuk, Admiral Lassard and his family, two Security officers, and Lt. Commander Csuti, who was dressed in full security armor. Alex looked at Bob, then rRham, who shrugged.

The Tackleberry family took their places on the transporter pad. Lassard turned to Rosenzweig and shook his hand. "Thank you, Admiral, for a most interesting journey," Lassard said, then stepped onto the pad.

"It was our...pleasure," Alex replied. As the officers looked toward the family, Monty seemed to shrink back against his grandfather while Ariane clung to her father.

"Energize." Alex gave the command to Ensign Cordero, then flashed a broad smile to Admiral Lassard. The last view the assembled group had of their guests was the smile mirrored on J.L.'s

face.

The group was relieved when the family's silhouettes disappeared. rRham turned to his Chief. "You can put the phaser away now, sir." Bob continued to hold the weapon.

"Bob, the threat is gone now. You can put away your weapon and get out of that gear. Understood?" Alex had to control himself. He wasn't sure whether to laugh or put his Security Chief on report for such ridiculous behavior.

Bob seemed to snap out of his trance. "Oh, um, yes, sir." He holstered the weapon.

The officers began to leave the area. As rRham turned, his tail swept around, knocking Ensign Shmuk off his feet. Shmuk's head struck the corner of the transporter operator's booth, and he landed on the deck, face down. Uncontrolled laughter sounded through the room, while Carlos tried to contact the medical staff. "Maldonado to sick bay..."

Lounging at his ready room desk, Alex awaited the connection to the U.S.S. Challenger.

"Admiral, I have Commodore Vosseller," Lieutenant Rhea's voice came through the speaker.

Alex replied, "Thank you, Lieutenant. On my viewer." He was going to enjoy this. Bob's smiling face appeared.

"Alex, what can I do for you? I trust the mission went well?"

Alex chuckled inwardly and leaned forward. "Well, Bob...I think we need to talk..."

-----FINIS-----