

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

THE PROBE

By Alex Rosenzweig

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8909.05:

The *Avenger* has entered the Kansevrís Star System. Our mission is a standard survey of the system. Kansevrís is a wide binary, with a Type F yellow-white star orbited by a smaller red dwarf. The red star orbits the primary at a distance of 126 AUs, and does not appear to affect the system of six planets circling Kansevrís A. Our sensors have indicated that Kansevrís A-IV is Class M, although unexpected energy anomalies have caught the attention of the science teams."

Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig leaned against the wall, listening as Lieutenants DiMaio and Felice completed their initial report on the Kansevrís System. Except for the as-yet-unexplained energy readings on Planet IV, both women seemed to feel that the system offered little in the way of surprises. However, they were currently engaged in a spirited debate over just how much of an effect Kansevrís B would have on the orbit of A-VI.

"I'm surprised, frankly," DiMaio was saying, "that A-VI is stable at all. The gravity from B should have drawn it into a lopsided ellipse a long time ago."

Felice shook her head. "No! If B were even a tenth of a solar mass heavier, then I could see an orbit disruption. As it is, it probably doesn't do much more than slow A-VI up slightly when the planet's on the same side of A that B is."

"Look at those mass readings," responded DiMaio, pointing at a viewer. "You don't think that's enough?"

"Nope." Felice was emphatic. She turned to the commanding officer. "Admiral, let me show you what I mean." Indicating a second viewer, she began tapping in a sequence of commands. A diagram of the Kansevrís System came up, with a gravity-potential grid superimposed. "Now, if we allow for the mass of Kansevrís B and what we believe to be its orbit, we can conclude that the—"

The intercom sounded. The precise but mellifluous tones of Ensign Marascio's voice issued from the speaker. "Admiral Rosenzweig to the bridge, please."

Alex shrugged. Hitting the reply switch, he said, "On my way." He turned back to the two scientists. "Sorry, ladies. Sort it out and put it in the report. Bob and I will look at it later." With a smile, he headed for the door.

The elevator doors slid apart and Rosenzweig stepped onto the bridge. Captain Lane swung around in the command chair. Standing up, he indicated the main viewer. An image of a planet orbited by three moons was centered on the display. A glance at the tactical station summed up the situation in graphical form.

"Report?" asked Rosenzweig.

"We're on final approach to A-IV. It's Earthlike enough, but we're still getting those odd energy readings on the sensors."

The admiral turned toward the sciences station, where Commander Fillmore was examining readings. With him were Ensigns Antler and Hinden, who were lending their expertise to the problem. "Well, Commander?"

"Keep an eye on that," Fillmore told the ensigns, pointing at a viewer upon which a computer simulation was running. The ensigns nodded, their attention on the simulated energy and atmosphere-flow patterns. Bob stood up and walked across to the railing. Leaning against it, he began his report. "It's like this: The planet itself stays within all the parameters of a Class M world. **But,**" and he raised a hand for emphasis, "there is one area of the planet that is the focus of a lot of energy. It all looks electromagnetic in nature, but there's a lot of it. And to add to that, it's being redistributed in such a way that it's disrupting the local environment."

"How can it do that?" the admiral questioned.

"I don't know," Fillmore answered. He shrugged.

"Any intelligent life on the planet?"

"Not that we can detect," the science officer responded. "Kathleen ran a standard search on EM and subspace frequencies, and came up empty. There's certainly no evidence of civilization."

"But there is that energy source," Alex said. He glanced at Jon. "Bears investigating, wouldn't you say?"

Lane looked thoughtful. Then he nodded. "I'd say it does."

Rosenzweig smiled. "Thought you might." He settled into the command chair and turned toward the helm and navigation console. "Ensign Benedetti, take us into standard orbit."

"Aye, sir."

The *Avenger* slid smoothly into orbit. On the main viewer, the blue, green, brown, and white globe dominated the scene. On the limb of the planet, the bridge crew could see a confluence of clouds swirling around one spot on the surface. The admiral glanced toward Commander Fillmore.

"Those clouds. They're over the energy source?"

Fillmore nodded. "Uh-huh. The energy release is leading to a water-vapor concentration. That's why there're so many clouds."

"Focus the sensors on that area. Let's see if we can get a reading on what might be causing it."

"Aye, aye, sir." Bob turned to the console, his fingers tap-dancing across the sensor-control panel. Readout graphics flashed across a lower-tier viewer in response to his commands. "Admiral, I'm getting a metallic reading. Running an enhancement routine..."

"Metal?" asked Lane. He and Rosenzweig exchanged glances.

"It's refined!" The science officer's surprise was clear. The presence of refined metal on a world with no civilization—and indeed, no evidence of intelligent life—was very unusual. It wasn't **unheard of**, but it was rare, especially in systems with no inhabited worlds at all. The admiral stood up and walked to the railing near sciences.

"Can you get any more?"

"With all that loose energy around, sensor scans are being interfered with."

"On-site team?" asked the executive officer.

"I'd say so." Alex took a step back toward the command chair, finger outstretched to hit the intercom switch.

"Admiral?" Rosenzweig stopped and turned toward the auxiliary systems station.

"Yes, Ensign?"

"Sir," began Ensign Ragle uncertainly, "the transporter may not be wise under these circumstances. All the electrical discharges could potentially disrupt a beam." Ragle was a recent addition to the crew, and sticking his misgivings into a rear admiral's planning clearly didn't sit well with him. But, Rosenzweig realized, he had a point. Alex swung on his heel and looked back at Fillmore.

"Bob? What do you think?"

"He may be right, although a lot depends on the transporter's ability to penetrate the disruption."

Rosenzweig considered. He stepped back to the center seat and tapped the intercom control. "Transporter Room."

"Transporter Room 1. Ensign Faas here."

"Ensign, patch your console into the sensors. We'll route computer-analyses to you." He pointed to Ensign Traiger at Mission Ops 1. Traiger nodded and turned to his station, quickly programming the routing function. "I want an opinion," the admiral continued. "Is transporter use safe in the vicinity of the energy anomaly?"

"The readings are coming through now, sir," Faas reported. "Just a second."

"Take your time."

A few moments later, Faas' reply came back. "I'd recommend against it, Admiral. The computer estimates a 40% probability of transporter beam disruption. That's too high a risk, sir."

"I think he's right," Lane said.

The commanding officer took a deep breath. "I do, too. Jon, call down to the Flight Control center and have them put a shuttle in the starboard hangar."

"Which one?"

"Good question. Bob?" Rosenzweig turned back to Fillmore.

"I'd recommend a quick in-and-out run," answered the science officer.

"Not unreasonable." Alex looked at Jon. "Have them ready the *Genesis*."

"Right." Lane stepped back to the command chair and tapped the intercom control on the right chair-arm panel. As he began passing instructions to Lieutenant Lai, the CO again moved to sciences.

"Bob, put together a team and have them report to the shuttle. Put Frank in charge."

"Yes, sir." Fillmore swung back to his station, opening a channel to Lieutenant Warren and calling up the sciences and engineering personnel files.

A half-hour later, the assistant science officer walked into the starboard landing bay. He wore a beige field uniform and carried a tricorder. Glancing up at the control room, he saw Lieutenant Lai directing the crew servicing the *Genesis*. Lai waved, and Warren nodded. The chief flight officer pointed toward the nose of the shuttle, and Warren glanced around the corner. A young woman was poking at one of the thruster packs. Frank walked toward her.

"Is there a problem, Ensign?"

Ensign Cherepon looked up. She straightened and saluted. "No, Lieutenant. I was just cleaning the thruster."

Warren smiled at her. "That's good. You're assigned for this flight?"

"Yes, sir. Large crew?"

"Seven, including myself." As Warren spoke, a group of crewmembers trooped into the bay. All wore field uniforms, and a number of them carried equipment packs. Cherepon caught Warren counting. Yes. All six were there. "Everybody ready?" queried the assistant science officer. Getting affirmative responses, he added, "Let's get aboard."

Soon afterward, all eight men and women were strapped into their seats. Cherepon touched a switch. "Hangar Control? *Genesis* is ready for launch."

"Acknowledged," responded Lai. "Stand by."

"Admiral?" Rosenzweig swiveled toward Ensign Marascio. "Lieutenant Lai reports *Genesis* is ready."

"Good." Alex spared a quick look at the Master Situation displays, then returned his attention to Marascio. "Give Mr. Lai the go-ahead to launch them. Then switch the main viewer to an aft angle."

"Aye, sir."

"*Genesis*? Lai here."

"Reading you, sir," answered Cherepon.

"You're cleared to launch on my mark," the chief flight officer told her. "We're depressurizing the hangar now."

"We're standing by." The shuttle pilot looked at Lieutenant Warren, who was calmly checking the computer system. Sure, she thought. You can sit there. I have to fly this thing. She gave her panel a last inspection. Satisfied, she waited for the order to launch.

"The bay's depressurized," Ensign Petersen reported.

Lai nodded. "Open the doors." Slowly, the huge hangar doors slid apart, revealing the stars and the planet below. As Lai hit switches, the gravity in the bay reduced. Cherepon compensated with bursts from the thrusters. Lai touched the com-control. "*Genesis*, you are cleared to launch."

"*Genesis* is away." Marascio's report was matched by the view of the shuttle accelerating out of the bay. The small vehicle dropped between the engine nacelles, then dipped downward toward the planet's atmosphere. In a wide, sweeping arc, the shuttlecraft sped into the top layers of the stratosphere. Cherepon pulled the nose up to angle the craft for entry. As it hit the thicker atmosphere, the shuttle's nose glowed first red, then orange. Then it slipped into an upper cloud deck and vanished from *Avenger's* visual scan.

"Entry's clean," Lane commented from where he stood near Mission Ops 2.

"Good." Rosenzweig smiled. "Ensign," he said to Marascio, "keep a channel open to them."

"Aye, sir."

A low-level vibration ran through the *Genesis*. Cherepon exchanged glances with Warren. "We're approaching the area of the energy anomaly."

The assistant science officer nodded. "Ensign Arkadin, start getting sensor readings on the anomaly region."

"Yes, Lieutenant," replied the young Russian.

"Lieutenant?" It was Ensign T'Shaile. "Should I begin life-form scans?"

"Go ahead."

Cherepon tapped a series of commands into her console, and a topographical scan was displayed on the viewer. "Where should we land?"

"As close as we safely can." He glanced over his shoulder. "Arkadin, how are those readings coming?"

"Fairly well. Do you need anything specific?"

"Radius of the effect."

"About 300 meters. The power is incredible! It's nearly a third of our main power systems on the ship."

"Understood. Thank you." The assistant science officer turned to the pilot. "Can you put us down about 350 meters from the center of the effect?"

Cherepon considered. She focused her topographical scan. After a moment, she pointed to a smooth area to the south of the anomaly. "What about here?"

"Okay. What's our ETA?"

"About five minutes."

Warren nodded. Turning back to the rest of the crew, he said, "We'll be landing in about five minutes. Get ready."

The shuttlecraft swept low over a rolling landscape. It skimmed the tops of a group of trees, then swung left and settled down into an open area. The magnetic-field landing system cut in, sending up a spray of dirt and leaves as the shuttle touched down.

"We're down," Cherepon announced.

"External environment reads okay," came the report from Ensign Antler.

Cherepon tapped a switch. "*Avenger*, do you read?"

"*Avenger*," Marascio answered. "We copy you down. Is everything all right?"

"Fine. Are you receiving our telemetry?"

Marascio glanced across the bridge to the Mission Ops 2 station. The shuttle's data transmission scrolled across one of the top-tier viewers. Ensign Cohl was watching it. "Yes," Marascio said back into the microphone.

"We'll secure the shuttle and send out the team to check out the energy anomaly. Any orders from the admiral?"

Marascio swung toward the center seat, where Rear Admiral Rosenzweig had been listening to the exchange. At the questioning expression on her face, he smiled. "Yes. Be careful." Marascio nodded, returning the smile. She relayed the message to Ensign Cherepon.

The shuttle's side hatch opened and the members of the crew stepped out. Lieutenant Warren pointed to Ensigns T'Shaile and Antler. Both drew out their tricorders and began taking readings. Ensign Arkadin, followed by Ensigns Lubach and Sudler, headed for a nearby rise. Ensign Walsh of security staked out a perimeter. Cherepon walked around the shuttlecraft, doing a visual check of the hull. Warren shot a look at her, and the ensign replied with a thumbs-up signal. The assistant science officer nodded.

"Lieutenant!" Antler hurried over to Warren, pointing in the direction of the rise that Arkadin, Lubach, and Sudler were ascending. "Sir, I'm picking up a lot of energy from up there. We're safe here, but I don't know if going over there is such a hot idea."

"We do have to find out what's over there, don't we?"

"I suppose, but—"

"It is why the admiral sent us all down here. Let's not start worrying until we know there's something to worry about."

"Yes, sir," Antler replied. He still didn't sound very reassured, and Warren shook his head frustratedly.

Meanwhile, Arkadin and the others were about to find out what was releasing all that energy. Clam-bering to the top of the rise, Arkadin stopped in his tracks. "Bozhe moi!"

"What is it?" asked Lubach. He hurried up behind the sensor technician, joined by Sudler. Both also stopped, gazing in surprise and wonder as they looked down into the next valley. On the far edge sat a... a... Arkadin remembered holos of the Viking probes used in the early explorations of Mars. This thing looked vaguely like that, but it was much larger and more complex. Its up-per surface was festooned with elaborate equipment—antennae, atmosphere samplers, energy emitters, other things the starship crewmembers couldn't even hazard a guess at—and the sides had hatches in them which suggested access to other workings within the structure. Surrounding the probe was a glowing ellipsoid of blue-white energy, and a column of electrical discharge seemed to link the probe to the cloud mass overhead. Static electricity sent shimmers of sparks along the blades of grass surrounding the machine.

"Good god!" muttered Sudler.

Lubach aimed his tricorder at the probe. "Glad this thing's insulated," he said with a grin. "Energy readings all around the top of the scale, throughout the EM spectrum."

"Titanium shell," commented Arkadin. "Assorted other materials. I'm logging them into the tricorder." He continued to aim the device at the probe, watching the display screen as the information scrolled across it.

Sudler glanced back over his shoulder. He could see the shuttlecraft and the other crewmembers in the distance, down the incline. He pulled out his communicator. "Lieutenant Warren?"

"Warren here."

"Sir, you may want to get everybody up here. We've found the energy source. It looks like an old Viking probe, but super-sized!"

"Hmm," responded the lieutenant. "All right. Get what information you can. We'll be up soon."

"Yes, sir."

Warren closed the communicator. "T'Shaile, Antler, and Walsh," he called, "front and center!" When the others had gathered around him, he quickly briefed them on Sudler's report. "We're heading over there," he finished. "Get the equipment and meet me at the base of that rise." As the lab techs and security specialist nodded and scrambled for the analyzing equipment, the assistant science officer turned to the pilot. "Stay here and watch the shuttle."

"Aye, sir." Cherepon tried, and failed, to keep the disappointment from her voice. Warren smiled apologetically.

"Somebody has to."

"I know. I just want to see what's happening."

"I understand." The lieutenant turned to see the other specialists emerge from the shuttlecraft. He joined them, and the group started toward the rise.

The ascent was made quickly, and the seven from the *Avenger* gathered at the top of the rise. They set up the equipment and began studying the probe. To get a better vantage-point, Warren had Sudler, Arkadin, and Walsh place sensor modules along the

ridge at ten-meter intervals. He hooked his tricorder into the main unit and used it as a remote control-module.

Arkadin had just set up the last of his sensor modules. He straightened and started back toward the others. The sound of a squeak and a low hum made him look over his shoulder. For an instant, he froze in surprise. A hatch had opened in the side of the probe, and a rover-like, flat-topped mobile unit rolled out. It was followed by another. With a curse, he began running back toward the rest of the landing party.

Ahead of him, Sudler was checking one of his modules. Hearing Arkadin's footfalls, he looked up questioningly. "Run!" cried the lab tech. The engineer spared the "rover" only a glance before he, too, turned and bolted. From ahead of Sudler, the spark of a phaser beam told Arkadin that the rest of the group had decided that definitive action was called for. He could see several **more** "rovers" coming from the other side of the probe.

As Arkadin and Sudler scrambled toward the other members of the landing party, Ensign Walsh finished a volley of warning shots at various "rovers". His phaser fire had elicited no reaction. The "rovers" kept coming. The security specialist turned a questioning gaze toward Warren. The assistant science officer shifted his attention to Walsh.

"Direct fire, sir?" the ensign asked.

"Yes. At will."

With a terse nod, Walsh leveled his phaser at the nearest "rover". He touched the trigger. A pale blue beam lanced out, to strike the vehicle on the front track-shield. Immediately, hatches opened on all the "rovers". Gun-shaped units extended, and shimmery white beams burst from them. The beams hit the landing party's members. Within seconds, the top of the rise was littered with unconscious bodies.

"Admiral!" Marascio's exclamation brought Rosenzweig swinging around to face her. "I've lost contact with the landing party. I was talking to Ensign T'Shaile. Somebody shouted something about an attack, and everything stopped. The channel is still open, but no one answers." She pointed at a viewer. The display showed an active carrier, but no transmission.

"Damn." The admiral swiveled toward sciences. "Commander, do a life-signs scan."

Fillmore gave a quick acknowledgement and turned to the task.

"Sir, I have the shuttlecraft." Alex whirled back toward Kathleen. On a viewer to her left was an image of Ensign Cherepon. The shuttle pilot looked confused, not scared or upset.

"Switch to main viewer," Rosenzweig ordered. As the planet-image was replaced by a larger version of what was on the communications viewer, Alex leaned forward. "Ensign Cherepon, what's going on?"

"Sir, all I know is that I can't raise them either. They went over a hill about 40 meters in front of the shuttle, and were supposed to be studying what we know to be a probe of some kind."

The commanding officer nodded. "All right. Stand by, and keep your channel open. Bob, what about those readings?"

"I'm picking up seven Humans and one Vulcan. One Human is by the shuttle. Five more and the Vulcan are about 25 meters from

the center of the energy anomaly. The seventh... Admiral, one of the Human readings is moving toward the anomaly center!"

At that, Rosenzweig was out of his chair and standing at the railing by the sciences station, with Lane next to him. Trading worried glances with the exec, the admiral asked, "Can we tie into the perscan telemetry, find out who it is?"

Fillmore thought for a second. "If the perscanner transmission hasn't been overwhelmed by the energy flux, we ought to be able to."

"Patch to sickbay." Alex stalked back to his chair.

"Sickbay. DeMono here."

"Mike, check perscan signals. One member of the landing crew is heading for the center of the energy anomaly. Who is it?"

"Hold on." A moment later, the doctor was back. "Readings ID that person as Ensign Arkadin."

"Thank you, Doctor. Bridge out." Rosenzweig turned back toward Marascio. "Try again to reach any of the landing party." The communications specialist nodded. But only Cherepon responded to the calls. The admiral filled her in, and she again requested permission to go and check things out herself. After a brief consultation with Lane and Fillmore, Alex approved her request. He ordered her to keep a channel open to the ship, and to secure the shuttle before she left it.

Acknowledging the orders, Cherepon activated her communicator and clipped it to her belt. She added a phaser II, a tricorder, and a medikit. Stepping out of the shuttlecraft, she closed and locked the hatch. She left the craft behind, striding toward the rise. The pilot clambered up the incline. Reaching the top, she stopped. Ahead of her, the probe sat, its shimmering electrical display lighting up the area. The other members of the landing party—with one exception—were sprawled out around the scientific equipment. Ensign Arkadin was missing.

"*Avenger*, are you with me?"

"Yes," Captain Lane's voice came over the communicator. "Go ahead."

"I confirm Ensign Arkadin's absence. Everybody else is here, but they're unconscious."

"Can you wake anyone up?"

"I'll try, sir." Cherepon glanced around. Finding Lieutenant Warren, she knelt beside him. Lightly, she slapped his face. "Lieutenant?" No response. She slapped slightly harder.

Abruptly, Warren sat up. "What—?" His wild look was quickly replaced by a more focused expression. "What the hell happened?" Frank looked sharply at the ensign next to him. "And why aren't you with the shuttle?"

Cherepon pointed skyward. "Orders from above." She glanced down at her communicator. "*Avenger*? Lieutenant Warren is awake."

"Help me wake the others," Warren said. He turned to Ensign T'Shaile, who lay next to him.

"We acknowledge," Rosenzweig replied.

Lane followed up. "Ensign Marascio says she can read you through T'Shaile's open communicator." Cherepon looked over to where the black-and-gold device lay on the grass near T'Shaile. The Vulcan biologist was starting to wake up.

"I understand, *Avenger*."

"What about Arkadin?" came Fillmore's query.

"No information yet. Hold on." The shuttlecraft pilot turned to assist Warren with the other crewmembers. Soon, all were awake. Unfortunately, no one knew where Arkadin was. Sudler had seen the sensor technician hit, but since he himself was hit immediately afterward, he could volunteer nothing more. No one else could help at all.

When the landing party had reported in, Rosenzweig tersely acknowledged. He swung toward the sciences station. "Bob, try to run a life-form scan. See if that turns up anything." He stabbed at the intercom switch. "Rosenzweig to Lt. Commander Lynch."

"Lynch here."

"Get to the transporter room. I want you to determine the minimum safe distance from the energy anomaly at which we can use the transporters. And tell me **quickly**."

"Aye, sir."

With another stab at the 'com switch, the admiral reconnected with the landing party. "I'm having Bob do a life-form scan from up here. Why don't you folks do one from there?"

"Especially," interjected the chief science officer, "since there's too much sensor distortion, so I'm comin' up empty."

"All right," Warren responded, his touch of Southern accent coming through more pronouncedly. "We'll get to work on it."

"Good."

Lieutenant Warren passed on the orders, and the landing party got to work. Soon, Ensign Antler ran up, brandishing a tricorder in his outstretched hands. Triumph and apprehension warred in his expression. "Sir, I think I have it."

"And you don't like what you have?"

Antler shook his head. "Not if I'm right, Lieutenant. I've picked up Human readings. But... They're **inside** the probe."

"**Inside?**"

"Yes, sir." Antler looked distinctly unhappy.

"Ensign, may I see the tricorder?" asked T'Shaile. Antler handed it to her. She examined the readings, then looked up at Warren. Her eyes were dark with concern. "He is correct. Ensign Arkadin is in a chamber within the probe."

When Warren's report was received on the *Avenger*, Rosenzweig shook his head. "Great," he muttered. "Just great." He glanced at Lane and Fillmore. "Recommendations, gentlemen?"

"Get him out of there," Lane said matter-of-factly. Fillmore nodded vigorous agreement.

"Thanks," the admiral responded dryly. He tapped the intercom switch. "Rosenzweig to Commander Lynch. Progress report?"

"Working on it, Admiral. From the readings the landing party's given us, I'd guess that a range of about 500 meters is safe. I'll be fairly certain after this set of calculations."

"Thank you, Mr. Lynch. Bridge out." Rosenzweig double-tapped the intercom switch. "Lt. Commander McHenry to the bridge."

"Aye, sir," McHenry's voice came through the speaker. "On my way."

The security chief arrived on the bridge shortly thereafter, and Lane filled her in while Rosenzweig finished updating Ensign Traiger on what aspects of the upcoming operation he wanted monitored. Returning to the center seat, he turned to Lane and McHenry. "Jon, is Chris fully briefed?" The executive officer

nodded. "Good. We're essentially agreed that we will take whatever measures are necessary to rescue Mr. Arkadin. Chris, get a security team together. As soon as Mr. Lynch gives the word, we'll beam the team down. They go in and get Arkadin out. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," responded the security chief.

"Good. Report in when ready." McHenry nodded and left the bridge.

"Whatever measures are necessary?" asked Fillmore. "Does that include destruction of the probe?" At Rosenzweig's nod, Bob looked resigned. "I was afraid of that."

"If we can get Arkadin out without it, we won't destroy the probe," the rear admiral assured him. Fillmore nodded.

Alex started to swivel toward communications, and his chair-arm intercom beeped. He stopped in mid-turn and tapped the 'com switch. "Rosenzweig."

"Admiral, this is Commander Lynch. I have that information for you. Minimum safe beaming distance is 507 meters."

"That close?"

"Yes, sir."

Lane reached over and tapped the navigation console intercom unit. "Then why did Mr. Faas recommend against beam-down?"

"I think," and Lynch sounded hesitant, "that he simply did his check for an area too close to the energy source. Anything less than 505 meters away and the gradient spikes into the danger zone. Anything 507 meters away or more and safety is basically assured."

"That's a sharp field cut-off," Fillmore observed. Turning back to his console, he quickly initiated a scan of the area at the range Lynch had quoted. "Hmm..." Alex glanced over at him, but the science officer was concentrating on his readouts. The admiral shrugged.

"All right, Commander. Thank you. Bridge out."

"You're welcome, sir." And the connection broke. Then the intercom beeped again.

"Grrr..." Alex muttered. He hit the control. "Rosenzweig here."

"Admiral, McHenry here. I have a team ready." The commanding officer grinned at the exec, pleased with the security chief's efficiency. It had been, what, a minute or two?

"She had this planned as soon as she knew something was wrong," Jon suggested.

"Outstanding," Rosenzweig told McHenry. "Send them to Transporter Room 4." He pointed at Lane and flicked a finger toward the Mission Ops stations. Nodding, the first officer moved to signal that transporter room and alert the officer on duty. "Beam down as soon as possible, and call in when on the surface."

"Aye, sir. Out."

Ensign Wolf listened carefully to Captain Lane's advisory. Calmly, he acknowledged. Signing off, he began powering up the transporter unit and running systems checks. By the time the security team arrived, everything had checked out and was ready. Lieutenant Romano headed straight for the equipment lockers, handing out phaser IIs and communicators to the brown and beige-clad security team. Ensigns Camus and Trycieckyj already carried phaser rifles drawn from the ship's armory. Ensign Sparrow carried a photon grenade launcher and grenade case. Wolf looked quizzically at them.

"What are you doing, assaulting a Klingon military garrison?"

Romano speared him with a look. The assistant chief of security was in no mood that day to be trifled with, and he hadn't earned the nickname "Terminator" for nothing. Wolf almost, but not quite, cringed. "We're going to rescue Mr. Arkadin, whatever it takes. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," Wolf replied quickly.

The lieutenant seemed satisfied. "Good." Wolf relaxed...slightly. The security team climbed onto the platform. "Energize," ordered Romano.

The security team materialized on a grassy incline about a hundred meters from the *Genesis*. They hurried toward the shuttle. As expected, it was empty. The landing party was still up on the rise.

"Sparrow," directed Romano, "set up the grenade launcher on the top of the shuttle. We'll need this much distance if we have to use it."

"Aye, sir." Sparrow began to climb the shuttle, pulling his equipment up after him. The remainder of the team followed Romano up the rise.

The two landing parties met at the first group's observation post. Lieutenant Warren quickly briefed the assistant security chief on the situation. When he finished, Romano looked pensively at the apparently quiescent probe.

"Any change in Arkadin's life signs?"

"No" responded Ensign Antler. "He's apparently just lying in there."

Romano nodded. With terse commands, he deployed the security team along the ridge. All of them kept their communicators active, so Romano could give orders without having to shout. When he finished, he found Cherepon and Warren staring at him.

"What is it?"

Warren asked, "What now?"

"Alert the ship. Beyond that, I don't know." And Steve did not like not knowing.

The *Avenger* responded quickly to the landing group's signal. Rosenzweig listened to Romano's report. When the lieutenant finished, there was a pause. Then the admiral's voice came back. "Lieutenant, does there seem to be any prospect of getting Mr. Arkadin out without damaging or destroying this probe?"

Romano looked at Warren, who shrugged. "No idea," responded the assistant security chief. "Doubtful."

Warren got on. "We have readings on him, but cannot penetrate the inner workings of the probe. Have you got any sensor improvements up there?"

"No," came Fillmore's voice.

"Then we're stymied as far as information-gathering is concerned," Frank told him.

"Blast," growled Rosenzweig. Then, "All right. If you have no further data to add, I want your—" The admiral was cut off by an exclamation from Ensign Antler.

"Sir! I'm detecting an increase in Arkadin's heart-rate and adrenalin-flow."

"Something's scaring him," concluded Camus.

"Can you detect any change in the probe?"

"No, Admiral," Warren said. "It's too well shielded."

Rosenzweig and Lane exchanged glances. Giving Fillmore an apologetic shrug, the admiral ordered, "Go in."

"Yes, sir," Romano replied.

"Sorry, Bob," Alex said, "but Arkadin's life has to come first."

"I know," Bob replied.

On the planet's surface, Romano directed the security team into position. "Camus, Walsh, Trycieckyj, make a square. This is one corner. The probe's at the center. You're at the other corners." From their places on the ridge, the specialists waved and moved out. Moments later, all three reported that they were in position. Romano called Sparrow, making sure he was ready. He was. "All right," Steve said, "let's do it. Take out the antennae on top, especially the ones shooting off the electricity. Ready? Fire!"

The phaser beams lanced across the valley, shearing off four of the antennae. The energy ellipsoid wavered and dimmed, and the discharge column faded, concentrating on two of the remaining protrusions.

"Those two antennae tied to the energy column," commanded Romano. "That's our target. Take aim."

Inside the probe, Arkadin had lain on a flat surface. He was inside a box that reminded him a lot of a coffin, except that it was completely rectangular. It was just under a meter high, just over two long, and about a meter and a quarter wide. As soon as he'd awoken, he'd decided that he was a...a...a sample. His conclusion was reinforced when a bunch of hatches opened, beams of light shone on him, and pen-shaped objects on extensors gently probed at him. He had lain still, hoping that if he did nothing to disturb the system, it might just poke and prod him, then put him back outside. He started worrying when a high-pitched hum reverberated through the chamber. It was almost—but not quite—painful. After a short time, it stopped. Then another hatch opened. A new probe came out, this one bearing a sharp, bladelike extension. It moved toward him.

"Oh, damn..." he muttered. Then he felt the explosion, and the lights went out.

"We have cut its power-flux balance," T'Shaile said in the sudden quiet.

"Quickly," said Romano, "before it adjusts its generators, can you get a reading on Mr. Arkadin?"

"I have him, sir." Antler looked up from his tricorder. "He's in the back of the probe, relative to us."

"Main generator's on that side," advised Warren, pointing to the left side of the probe.

"Okay. Here's what we're gonna do." A quick glance told Romano that the other security men were listening over their open communicators. "Walsh, you and Trycieckyj will hit the generator. Camus, you, Lubach, and Sudler will go after Arkadin as soon as the probe's power is cut. Understood?" The responses were all affirmative. "Good. Let's go!"

In a precise pincer-maneuver, the two teams moved in. Quickly, Walsh and Trycieckyj drilled the generator module with phaser-fire. The last lights still working on the probe faded out. Carefully, Camus and the two engineers began the task of extracting Arkadin. Finding a hatchway that they determined was a likely entry-point, they cut through it and went in from there. Soon, the slightly bedraggled lab tech was pulled from the probe.

"We have him," Sudler signaled.

"Well done," Steve responded. "Get him back to the shuttlecraft. Mr. Sparrow."

"Sir?" came the specialist's reply.

"You can break down the grenade launcher. We won't need it."

"Aye, sir."

The sciences and engineering personnel still nearby poked through the now-inert probe. Carefully, they scanned everything they could. When they were finished, they packed up the sensor modules and analysis gear and headed back to the *Genesis*. Arkadin and the security team had beamed back to the ship. With a last look around, Warren herded the remainder of the landing party into the shuttlecraft and ordered the hatch sealed. As the crewmembers strapped in, Cherepon powered up the engines.

"Ready?" Warren asked her.

"Yes, sir," the pilot responded.

"Very good. Launch at your discretion."

"Aye, Lieutenant." Cherepon hit a series of controls. The mag-field activated, and the *Genesis* lifted from the ground. The boosters fired, and the craft soared into the air.

Reaching space, the *Genesis* matched orbits with the *Avenger*. It came in behind and below the frigate. Cherepon contacted the ship, and Lieutenant Lai directed them to the starboard bay. Smoothly, the doors opened. Cherepon guided the shuttle into the bay, bringing it to a stop just beyond the landing target. Soon after, Lai advised them that the bay was repressurized. The hatch opened, and the crew exited.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8909.05:

After determining as much as possible about the alien probe found on Kansevriv A-IV, and with our landing party having returned intact, we are preparing to leave orbit. One more pass near planet V will complete our business here. Ensign Arkadin is recovering from his incident, but appears none the worse for wear."

"So," the admiral said, standing in the astronomy lab, "have you two figured out what's happening with Kansevriv A-VI?"

Lieutenant DiMaio shrugged, smiling at Lieutenant Felice. "I have to concede this one," she said. "We've run a whole string of simulations, and it looks like Carmella's got it right. The perturbations of A-VI just aren't that significant."

"Although there are slight shifts when B and A-VI are on the same side," added Felice, "the orbit ought to be stable for about another billion-and-a-half years."

"All right, then," said Rosenzweig. "Is the report finished?"

"Yes, sir." Felice held up a computer-cart. "Finished—" and she handed it to DiMaio "—and delivered."

"Good. Then we can—" The intercom sounded. Once again, Ensign Marascio's voice flowed from the speaker.

"Admiral Rosenzweig to the bridge, please."

"Haven't we been through this before?" Alex asked. The two scientists smiled. Touching the intercom switch, he continued, "What is it, Ensign?"

"Admiral, we've received new orders from Star Fleet. They're coded SECLAR 7, so not even Captain Lane can review them without your clearance."

"All right, Ensign. I'm coming. Rosenzweig out." He turned back to the two lieutenants and shrugged. "Well..."

"Talk to you later, sir," DiMaio said.

And the rear admiral was...again...out the door.

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