

REACHING TAURUS

By Alex Rosenzweig

Mid-2267...

“Captain’s Log, Stardate 3752.6:

The *Avenger* has been ordered to the Taurus Reach, to provide temporary support to Starbase 47 while one of the vessels normally assigned to the base is in for repairs. The need to have that ship out of action, however briefly, has left a critical gap in Starbase 47’s capabilities, and we will be providing necessary coverage for Star Fleet’s presence in the Taurus Reach.”

Captain Melissa Sturdevant depressed the button that controlled the ship’s log recorder, and sat back in her command chair. She gazed at the main viewer that dominated the front of the bridge, and watched the stars as they drifted from the center of the screen to its outer edges and then out of view in the computer’s reconstruction of what the forward view might look like, if humanoid eyes could “see” faster than light. As a viewscreen image, the space ahead looked placid, almost boring, but Sturdevant knew well that where the *Avenger* was headed was anything but those things.

Like most Star Fleet officers, Sturdevant had read Tim Pennington’s article with a mixture of fascination and horror. While she had known of the wave of colonization that had been spurred in the Taurus Reach in recent years, she—like many in the Fleet—had had no idea that it also had stirred some kind of alien species, which had not taken kindly to the Federation, Klingons, and Tholians poking around. Moreover, the Tholians, especially, were very, very unhappy that the Federation and Klingons were there at all. They, however, refused to discuss why they were so adamant that the sector had to be left alone, and made it perfectly clear that they, themselves, had no interest in being there.

It was in the midst of all this that the *U.S.S. Buenos Aires* had been damaged in a skirmish with the Klingons, and with tensions and uncertainty still so high, even given—or perhaps despite—the Organian Peace Treaty, Star Fleet was very concerned that the Klingons might try to take advantage of the situation. As a result, it had been determined that there could not be a gap in the protection for Starbase 47, also known as Vanguard, and the *Avenger* was ordered out to the Taurus Reach to “fill in” for two to three weeks while the *Buenos Aires* got itself fixed-up.

Sturdevant leaned back and gazed for a moment at the stars before glancing toward the Navigation station. “Lieutenant Takeda, ETA to Starbase Vanguard?”

“Estimating arrival in 2.4 hours, Captain. Parts of the Taurus Reach are low-chi areas, so it’s taking a little longer to move around.” The chi variable in the warp formula

represented a measure of the free-floating matter in an area of space. The more of it there was, the greater the curvature of local space-time and the faster a ship at warp could move.

“Thanks, Hiro,” Sturdevant acknowledged.

“Getting a bit anxious?” came a soft-voiced comment from the vicinity of her left ear.

Sturdevant looked up to see Commander Philip Reichardt, the ship’s Executive Officer, leaning in close to the command chair and smiling down at her. She chuckled. “Guess maybe I am. With everything that’s going on out here, I’m looking forward to discussing some of it with Admiral Nogura.”

“And hopefully not having us get attacked before we even get there?”

“Yeah, that, too.”

“Well, so far, the sensors have been clear, at least.”

“Thank goodness for small favors, eh?”

“Exactly,” Reichardt replied, with a soft chuckle of his own.

The *Avenger*’s final approach to Vanguard took place without incident, and the ship was directed to dock at one of the outer spars roughly midway up the station’s structure. As the *Avenger* was confirmed as secure, a hail was received from Vanguard’s Operations Center.

“*Avenger*, Admiral Nogura would like to meet with your Captain and First Officer as soon as possible. Also, the crew is welcome to take leave aboard Starbase Vanguard before you begin your local patrol.”

Sturdevant turned toward the Communications station, where Lt. Commander Shepherd was holding down the fort. “Mr. Shepherd, please advise the starbase that we’d be happy to meet with the admiral at his convenience.”

“Aye, Captain,” Shepherd replied. The Communications Chief—who also doubled as Second Officer—turned his attention to his station. Sturdevant smiled. Despite his famous roots, Shepherd, who was the grandson of the starship commander whose vessel had carried the famous Ambassador Emanuel Tagore to his historic meetings in the Klingon Empire, was never one to put on airs or tread on familial fame.

A moment later, Shepherd nodded. “Vanguard acknowledges, Captain, and their Communications Officer says that Admiral Nogura looks forward to meeting you.”

“Very good,” Sturdevant replied. “Thank you, Douglas.” She stood up. “I guess we shouldn’t keep the admiral waiting. Mr. Reichardt, you’re with me. Mr. Shepherd, you have the conn. And please start working up shore leave rotations. The crew will never forgive us if we

don't give them a chance to sample what the starbase has to offer."

"Aye, aye, Captain," Shepherd said crisply, scooping up a data slate and moving toward the command chair.

Sturdevant and Reichardt beamed over to the station and headed for Admiral Nogura's office. Passing through the vast Operations Center, they both stopped to look at the oversized screens that ringed the chamber. As they gazed around the room, they caught sight of an attractive young woman with a Lieutenant's stripe on her uniform waving to them. As they turned toward her, she gestured for them to join her.

"I'm Toby Greenfield," she introduced herself, "Admiral Nogura's Alpha Shift yeoman. He's waiting for you in his office. If you'll follow me..."

The two officers from the *Avenger* followed Yeoman Greenfield up the stairs to the admiral's office, which was set adjacent to the Operations Center. Greenfield pressed the intercom button on her desk.

"Nogura," came the reply.

"Captain Sturdevant and Commander Reichardt are here to see you, sir."

"Thank you, Yeoman. Send them in."

The door slid aside, and Greenfield gestured for them to enter. The two officers stepped through the doorway and into the admiral's office.

"Please, come in," Nogura said with a welcoming smile. "Have a seat."

"Thank you, sir," Reichardt said softly, as he and Sturdevant complied.

"I trust your journey out here was without incident?"

"Yes, sir, thank you," said Sturdevant.

"Let us hope that your time here is equally so." Nogura looked at them. "Have you read your mission briefing packets?"

"Yes, Admiral, we did," said Reichardt. "Sir, may I ask a question?"

"By all means."

"The briefing seemed at various points to be...how can I put this...vague about what we might find ourselves involved with out here. Am I misunderstanding?"

Nogura studied the two of them for a long moment. Then he spoke calmly. "No, Commander, you aren't. I'm sure that, in addition to reading your mission briefings, you've been keeping up with the news coverage of activities in the Taurus Reach?"

"Yes, sir," Sturdevant answered. "Some of the reports were quite intense."

"The stories by...what was his name...? Pennington?" asked Reichardt. Nogura nodded, and the *Avenger's* first officer continued. "Those stories are positively scary in what they suggest has been found in the Taurus Reach."

"Mr. Pennington did get quite a bit of attention, didn't he?" the rear admiral said with a small smile. "Well, it's true that our actions have stirred up a lot more than we expected. It's also true that some of our research missions have uncovered some profound results. However, some of

what Star Fleet is doing in this area is quite thoroughly classified, and your briefings have, shall we say, skirted around that material. I'm sorry that it has to be this way, but for the moment, my orders are quite explicit about who I am and am not empowered to provide with certain details."

"I have to ask, Admiral," Sturdevant said. "Is anything that Star Fleet has labeled classified likely to get my ship destroyed or my crew hurt, or worse?"

"Captain, I can tell you honestly that I do not believe so, but as we have learned to our dismay out here, misplaced certainty can also get people hurt or worse." Nogura paused. "What I will say is this: if we have any reason to believe that an assignment is going to be particularly dangerous, we will make sure you know about it, and can be on your guard."

"I guess that'll have to do, sir. Thank you."

"Of course." Nogura nodded. "Meanwhile, we expect you to start a patrol tomorrow, but before then, I hope you and your crew will be taking some time to visit our station."

"We will, sir, thank you," Sturdevant assured him.

"In fact," Reichardt added, "Mr. Shepherd—our second officer—is probably working up a shore rotation roster this very moment."

Nogura chuckled. "And you are welcome to it. If you'll excuse me, however, I must attend to a few duties that I assure you will be less enjoyable than swapping stories with the both of you."

Sturdevant and Reichardt took the dismissal in good part, and left the admiral's office. As they walked back into the Operations Center, they were met by an officer in command gold, who introduced himself as Commander Jon Cooper, the station's executive officer.

"How did things go with the admiral?" he asked.

"Fine," said Sturdevant.

"Was there reason to think it wouldn't?" asked Reichardt.

"The Admiral's been under a lot of pressure," Cooper explained, "but I think he's relieved to have you here, even if just for a few weeks while we get the *Buenos Aires* back into fighting trim."

"It's a relief to us, too," admitted Sturdevant. "Considering that for the past couple of months, all we've been doing are milk runs, having something like this to do is very welcome."

"Captain, I sure hope you feel that way in a week," Cooper told them with a wry chuckle.

"Us, too," Reichardt agreed.

With that, Cooper excused himself, and Sturdevant and Reichardt left Operations. As they made their way toward the terrestrial enclosure that occupied the upper part of the station's primary hull, the *Avenger's* captain pulled out her communicator and signaled the ship. Shepherd responded, and told her that the shore leave rotations were set up. "I can patch it a tricorder, if you'd like."

"Not necessary," Sturdevant told him. "Dump it to my terminal aboard ship, and then go ahead and post it. Let's not waste the crew's shore leave time."

"Yes, ma'am," Shepherd said. "And since you and Mr. Reichardt are already on the station, we put you both in the first group."

Sturdevant and Reichardt exchanged amused looks, and the first officer leaned in. "You just want to keep command a while longer," he said teasingly.

Shepherd, picking up Reichardt's tone, replied, "Of course! Especially when it's nice and safe, docked to a starbase." They all chuckled.

Then Sturdevant said, "Any word on where the crew are going?"

"Well," Shepherd said, "on Vanguard, most of the action is in the terrestrial enclosure. There are a number of bars and restaurants, the most popular of which are Tom Walker's bar and a more upscale place called Mañon's."

"Tom Walker's is probably louder," commented Sturdevant.

"But more of the crew are likely to be there," Reichardt riposted. He figured that Sturdevant would prefer the calmer, quieter locale, but at the same time, it would be good for her to circulate among the crew.

Sturdevant gave her first officer a long look. "Tell you what," she said. "Let's try both."

Reichardt nodded. "Done. But Tom Walker's first." He smiled knowingly at Melissa's acquiescence. He knew that one of two things would happen. Either the CO would put in an appearance and share a round with the crew, then quietly slip away, or she'd get caught up in the merriment in spite of herself and spend the evening. Either way, she'd have a good time, perhaps in spite of herself.

"All right, Douglas," the captain said, "we'll be off to see the sights. Thank you for your help."

"Of course, Captain," Shepherd replied. "And, Captain...? Have fun. *Avenger* out."

Sturdevant and Reichardt reached the terrestrial enclosure a short time later. Stepping through the wide double doors, they gazed out across the expanse they had learned was named Fontana Meadow. Nearby was a group of structures. These comprised the commercial and residential area known as Stars Landing, which was where both of their intended destinations were located.

"I know it's a carefully designed illusion and all," said Reichardt, "but that's still breathtaking. I'd sure like to have something like this on the ship."

"Yes, I can understand that," Sturdevant agreed. "I guess the great big stations still get all the good stuff."

"Except the ability to go star-hopping!" replied Reichardt with a chuckle,

"Exactly," said Sturdevant.

"So let's see how fast the crew found the bars," the first officer said. "I think Walker's is this way."

The two found Tom Walker's fairly quickly. They stepped through the doorway and gazed around the room. It was filled with both Star Fleet officers and civilians, and it

wasn't long before they were able to pick out personnel wearing the *Avenger's* phoenix-bird insignia on their red, gold, and blue uniforms.

"Captain Sturdevant! Commander Reichardt! Over here!" Following the sound of the call, they saw a group of *Avenger* crewmembers at a pair of tables in one corner of the room. Lieutenant Michael Engelking, the *Avenger's* big, powerfully built chief helmsman, was waving them over. "Glad you could join us," he said when they got to the table.

"Thanks!" replied Reichardt. Both he and Sturdevant settled into seats that their crewmates had procured for them.

"So, what can I get for you two?" came a female voice from next to them. Both Sturdevant and Reichardt looked up at Tom Walker's partner Allie, an attractive brunette wearing a leather-like pants and vest combo. "And welcome to Tom Walker's!" she added.

"Thank you very much," Sturdevant. She chose a wine cooler flavored with a berry that was popular on Alpha Centauri IV, while Reichardt opted for a stout beer.

"Coming right up," Allie told them, before she moved back into the crowd.

"This isn't normally your sort of place, Captain," noted Lieutenant Baranger, a propulsion systems officer whom Sturdevant had met a few times. He hadn't been aboard the *Avenger* for very long, but had become popular with his shipmates and could often be found in the midst of a group of crewmembers in the recreation room.

"That's true," Sturdevant agreed. "Blame Mr. Reichardt. That said, though, I can hardly complain about sitting amidst a bunch of my crewmates and having a good time, now can I?" She winked at Baranger and the crewmembers around them cheered.

As it turned out, neither Sturdevant nor Reichardt ever made it to Mañon's. They instead spent the next several hours with the crew at Tom Walker's. A few crewmembers had enough to drink that Reichardt had to tease them, none too subtly, about the potential need for a soberall before their next duty shifts, but no one went far enough to be disorderly, just very cheerful. Finally, though, after a surreptitious glance at his wrist chrono, Reichardt tapped Sturdevant on the shoulder and said softly, "About time for us first-shifters to get back to the *Avenger* and let the next group have some fun."

Melissa released a small sigh, but then smiled and nodded. "You're right. Let's get the others rounded up, the tab paid, and us home."

Soon afterward, the *Avenger* crewmembers were bidding thanks and farewell to Allie and Tom Walker, and moving out of the bar and back out into the walkways of Star's Landing. Sturdevant led them out onto Fontana Meadow, and then drew out her communicator. Making contact with the ship, she requested beam-back.

Arriving on the bridge, Sturdevant noted that Shepherd was still in the command chair. "Right on time," he noted with a smile.

"We decided not to hog all the drinks," the captain assured him.

"Thanks," Shepherd replied. "I'm in the third group, so hopefully they'll have time to resupply after the first two. So, how was Mañon's?"

"We never made it," Melissa admitted.

"Really??"

"It's true," Reichardt said, arriving back on the bridge after his side-trip to Engineering. "So many of the crew were already at Tom Walker's that we ended up just staying there."

"Congratulations, Captain," Shepherd said brightly. "I hope you enjoyed yourself."

"I did," Sturdevant replied. "I think that everyone had a good time. At least, I hope so."

"Well, I scheduled myself for the third group," Shepherd said. "Hopefully everyone won't have drunk up all the stock."

"Heh. Not likely," Reichardt answered. "I think they're well-equipped for thirsty ships' crews, especially with some of what goes on out here." Shepherd chuckled in response.

"And your report?" Sturdevant asked Reichardt.

"Lt. Commander Betancourt reports no shortage of offers from the station's engineering crew to help with any repairs or upgrades we might need. She's been requisitioning supplies, but turning down any work that might leave us flatfooted if we have to get moving in a hurry."

"Thank goodness the ship's in solid shape," Melissa commented.

"If we weren't," Shepherd asked, "would we even be out here?"

"He has you there," Reichardt noted.

"There are certainly worse ways to be had," the captain replied with a smile.

"Captain?" It was Science Officer Devereaux. As Sturdevant turned to face the science station, she continued, "I've been downloading intelligence updates from Vanguard on active scientific investigations in the Taurus Reach. There's a lot happening, but a great deal of information is also listed as classified and need-to-know. Is there something going on?"

"There's a lot that Admiral Nogura wasn't about to explain," Sturdevant told her. "To his credit, he was quite up-front about that. But up-front or not, it still means that we don't know everything there is to know, and Star Fleet is perfectly satisfied to keep it that way."

"Not just satisfied," Reichardt added. "Completely intent on it."

"So how will we know if we've found something important?" asked Devereaux.

"Our orders are to report on a regular basis, and if we come across something that makes Admiral Nogura think we need additional information, he'll have it transmitted out to us."

"I just hope that it'll get to us in time to save our skins, if it comes to that," Reichardt added softly.

"Me, too," added Ensign Patel from the navigation station.

"Well," Sturdevant replied, sparing the young woman a quick glance, "we didn't come out here to be safe, did we?"

"I wish to have no connection with any ship that does not sail fast, for I intend to go in harm's way," said Shepherd. When the others looked at him, he continued, "A quote, from John Paul Jones."

Sturdevant smiled. "Indeed. Very apropos, Mr. Shepherd."

"Thanks, Captain."

"Well, speaking of harm's way, before I go getting into it, I'd like to get some shut-eye," declared Reichardt. "I'd like to start this patrol off fresh."

"Good idea," said Sturdevant. "I think it's that time for me, too. Shift-change soon, Douglas?"

"Yes, Captain," Lieutenant Thral will be up to take the next watch."

"Very good, then. Good night." And with that, the captain and first officer left the bridge.

By the middle of Alpha Shift the next day, *Avenger's* crew had all returned to the ship, and all decks and divisions were reporting readiness to get underway. Captain Sturdevant walked a circuit around the bridge, chatting briefly with the on-duty crew, before settling into the command chair. Gazing around the bridge, she studied the information cascading across the upper display screens above each station. That information made one thing clear: *Avenger* was ready to embark on her mission.

As if on cue, Lieutenant DeAngelo turned from the Communications station. "Captain? We're receiving a hail from the starbase. They're asking if we're ready to get underway."

"On audio, Lieutenant," said Sturdevant. DeAngelo nodded and pressed controls.

The voice of Lieutenant Dunbar, Vanguard's senior communications officer, sounded across the bridge. "*Avenger*, please advise your status. Are you prepared for departure?"

"Affirmative," replied Sturdevant. "I confirm *Avenger* as ready to go. Requesting departure authorization."

"You are cleared for departure," Dunbar said. "Traffic Control is sending the vector to your navigation personnel."

Sturdevant glanced toward the Navigation station, where Lieutenant Takeda was concentrating on the astrogator display and the information on it. He looked up and nodded. "We have it," Sturdevant answered Dunbar.

"Course plotted and laid in," Takeda said smoothly, his fingers dancing across the navigation controls.

Another voice came onto the channel, deeper and more gravelly. "Be careful out there, *Avenger*."

"We will, Admiral. Thank you."

Reichardt came to stand next to the command chair. He handed Sturdevant a data slate. "All decks and divisions report ready. We're good to go."

Sturdevant smiled, squared her shoulders, and leaned back in her chair. “Mr. Engelking,” she said to the helmsman, “if you would be so kind, please take us away from the station. Our patrol awaits.”

Engelking smiled. “Aye, aye, Captain.” He touched the multicolored controls on the helm panel, and the *Avenger* smoothly responded, easing away from Starbase Vanguard and out toward the stars of the Taurus Reach.

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