

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

THE ROAD GOES EVER ON

By Alex Rosenzweig

SD9906.18:

The nine ships cruised back toward Starbase 7, their officers and crews flushed with victory. The Avenger flew at "point", in the lead, shadowed by the much larger Malverne. Just aft of the carrier were the starships Tanagra and Lexington, which had served as adept combatants in the just-completed conflict. To port and starboard of the two cruisers were a pair of destroyers, the Justice and Perseus, and on the edges of the squadron, three perimeter action ships kept a careful watch.

Admiral Alex Rosenzweig sat back in his command chair on the Avenger's bridge. For the first time since this mission had begun, he was calm. Under his command, the squadron had finally dealt with a problem that had bedeviled the Federation for nearly ten months. It had perhaps not been an ideal solution, but it had been an effective one.

The problem had come in the form of an unknown species, the evidence for which had first been detected on SD9808.08. The Avenger had been the ship to first find that evidence, in the form of the wreckage of a Star Fleet cruiser, the U.S.S. Coyote. The Coyote's survivors had reported being attacked by an alien ship, and there had been some hint of alien weaponry, as well. A squadron led by the Avenger had made a search of the area, but there had been little result, and Star Fleet was initially willing to treat the incident as an isolated anomaly, at least in the absence of additional information.

That information didn't stay absent for long, however. Not long after the loss of the Coyote, reports of additional incidents began filtering in: a scout attacked near an asteroid belt in an isolated star system; a transport destroyed; a civilian liner ambushed. Rarely did the elusive attackers approach a heavily-armed vessel. Instead, they preferred to operate via stealth and guile.

As more information was received, Admiral Rosenzweig had made it his business to learn who and what the aliens were. He scoured Intelligence reports for any mention of incidents that fit the appropriate patterns, and where he could, he secured missions for the Avenger that took the ship into areas where such incidents had been reported.

Early in 2299, the aliens made a mistake. Attacking what they had apparently thought was an undefended convoy, they soon found themselves beset by a trio of Star Fleet destroyers. The hostiles began to withdraw, but one of their ships was disabled and captured. When the boarding parties arrived on the ship, they were shocked to discover that the aliens had all committed suicide, rather than be captured. The computers were intact, however, and contained the information needed for Star Fleet analysts to piece together some of the background.

The data they compiled painted a startling story, one which stretched across thousands of years of history. The aliens were called the Darnath. Originally an offshoot subculture of the Nathi (also known as the Vegans of the old Vegan Tyranny), they had mi-

grated from their homeworld of Vega IX several millennia ago. Like the Nathi, they were a race whose members shared a telepathic

link, although the distance they had traveled in their migration had, in the end, severed their link to the home planet. The Nathi kept in periodic contact with their brethren via communication means not unlike subspace radio, but those contacts grew sporadic, and sometimes decades might pass between signals. The result was that the Vegan Conflict with the Terrans and their allies of the late 21st Century was unknown to the Darnath. When signals failed to arrive from the homeworld, the first interpretation was that it had simply been one of the long delays between signals.

Over the years, though, the Darnath had grown concerned over the loss of communication with their homeworld. At first, they had waited, thinking that perhaps shifts in magnetic currents or the transit of large clouds of dust and gas might be temporarily obstructing communications signals. Ultimately, they chose to send a large flotilla of vessels back to their home space to learn the cause of the silence. They were surprised to see that the space that had been largely devoid of star-traveling races when they had departed Vega was now filled with ships and complex communication webs.

Pausing their fleet outside the areas that appeared most active, the Darnath sent in several scouts. Using stealth screens, the small ships had slipped into Federation space and begun to quietly investigate it. Learning to interpret, and then access, Federation databanks and communication protocols, they were able to read and copy the historical data.

What they found shocked them. They learned, to their dismay, that their parent race had been defeated in a war just over two centuries ago with several upstart races which they had never considered significant. Unwilling to accept defeat, and disbelieving the offers of peace from the victorious races, the Nathi had completely destroyed themselves. Even worse, not only were the races they had subjugated all free, but the apparently not-so-insignificant races which had defeated them had eventually banded together and created a huge spacefaring civilization that now largely dominated this area of the galaxy.

The scouts returned to the Darnath fleet to report on what they discovered. Unsurprisingly, the Darnath leaders were not happy to discover what had happened to their parent race. Realizing that they did not have the capability to wage a full conflict, they began a strategy designed to let this civilization, which they learned was called the United Federation of Planets, know of their presence, while they gathered the resources for a large-scale attack and alerted the Darnath central colony to what had happened. They began a series of hit-and-run attacks on Federation ships.

Armed with this knowledge, Star Fleet began to coordinate a response to the Darnath. Rosenzweig continued to take the lead, where he could, in missions to deal with the threat. He hoped to communicate with them if possible, but at the very least, the threat had to be eliminated.

Finally, after a number of limited confrontations, Rosenzweig had led a nine-ship squadron to deal with the situation, engaging

the Darnath fleet where it had taken refuge in the Voranis System. Initial attempts at communication failed, and the ships eventually fell to actual combat. Following the loss of several of the Darnath ships, they began to withdraw, and when it became clear they were retreating on a course that would take them back toward their current colony world, Rosenzweig ordered the squadron to cease pursuit.

He did, however, order a probe deployed from the Malverne, carrying with it a message of peace that would follow the Darnath fleet back to their home base and hopefully provide a basis for negotiation and friendship. After all, the Federation of today had nothing to do with the conflict two centuries before that had ended the Vegan Tyranny...

"We're on final approach to Starbase 7," reported Lieutenant Bradley from Navigation. As Rosenzweig nodded his acknowledgment, Bradley took a closer look at his readings. "Admiral, you'd better take a look at this."

"What is it, Lieutenant?"

"It's a warpshuttle from Headquarters, sir. It looks like Fleet Admiral Smith's."

"Put it on viewer," Rosenzweig instructed. Bradley nodded, and the main viewer displayed the image. Captain Maldonado nodded.

"Uh-huh. That's Admiral Smith's shuttle, all right," the executive officer commented.

"But why is he out here?" mused Rosenzweig.

"No idea," Carlos replied.

Before they could continue speculating, Lt. Commander Kagan looked up from the Communications station. "Sir, we're receiving a transmission from Starbase 7."

"On viewer," Rosenzweig replied.

"Aye, sir." The main viewer image switched to the visage of Commodore Threll A'von, the Andorian commander of the starbase.

"I bid you all greetings," Threll said, "and welcome you to Starbase 7 in the wake of your victory over the Darnath. The reports I have received are good news, indeed."

"Reply frequency," requested Rosenzweig. At Kagan's nod, he continued. "Commodore, Admiral Rosenzweig here. We thank you for your welcome, and request parking orbit over the base."

"Of course, Admiral. Orbital Traffic Control will take care of everything for you. As of this moment, however, you may consider the squadron formally dissolved. Orders will be routed to appropriate ships for new missions. In the meantime, once the Avenger has established orbit, please beam down to the base."

"Acknowledged, Commodore. Oh, if I may ask, is Fleet Admiral Smith on Starbase 7?"

"Yes, Admiral. He wishes to meet with you, as part of your mission debriefing."

"I'll be there," Rosenzweig assured the commodore. "Give us approximately 15 minutes to secure our orbit, and I'll be down."

Threll agreed, and the transmission was cut.

"I know Command was taking this whole Darnath thing seriously," said Carlos, "but enough to bring Mike all the way out here?"

"Seems unexpected, I know," Alex responded, "but I'm sure there'll be some kind of explanation."

"No doubt," Carlos agreed.

Under the steady hand of Ensign Romany at the Helm, the Avenger settled into orbit around the planet upon which Starbase 7 had been constructed. The squadron held formation almost until the end, and then, following the orders from Traffic Control, they broke up and moved to their assigned orbital slots.

A few minutes later, Maldonado completed his post-orbital insertion inspection of the bridge stations, and formally reported, "We're secure, Admiral."

"Thank you, Captain," Rosenzweig answered. He then stood up. "I guess I better go down and meet with the brass." At Sciences, Lieutenant Antrim exchanged a smile with Ensign Adiane, who sat at Mission Ops 1. No one felt it necessary to comment that their own CO, in fact, was one of Star Fleet's top-ranking officers. "Carlos," the admiral continued, "you have the con."

"Aye, sir," Maldonado said. As Rosenzweig headed for the turbo-lift, the exec settled into the center seat.

Arriving on the starbase, Rosenzweig was brought to the base's main briefing room, where he found Fleet Admiral Smith, Rear Admiral Tony Rowley (the commander of the Malverne and a field staffer for the Commander, Starfleet), and Commodore Threll. They welcomed him into the room and invited him to sit down, which he did. A yeoman stepped over to him as he settled into his chair.

"Would you like something to drink, sir?" the young man asked.

"A mug of mint tea would be nice, thank you," Rosenzweig answered.

"Of course, sir." The yeoman crossed to the food synthesizer unit.

"Well, Alex," Smith began, "Tony was just describing to us what happened out there at Voranis. A great job."

"I'd hoped to establish better communication," Alex commented, "but it seemed that they're different enough from us that it would've taken more time than we had in the situation."

"But you tried," Rowley said. "My security chief was all hot for us to blow them out of space right off, but that wouldn't have given us any shot at negotiations later."

Rosenzweig nodded, and Smith continued. "I've been reading the reports and reviewing the sensor logs, and even went it came to combat, the whole thing went about as well as anybody could have asked. Sure, actual fighting is the last resort, but sometimes there's no choice, and I was very impressed with what you accomplished out there...not least of which was that you brought the squadron home intact, with no ship even suffering significant damage."

"We got lucky, a couple of times," Rosenzweig said, "but more importantly, we had good crews out there. I couldn't have asked for better."

"But your strategies helped make that possible," Threll commented. "I read the reports, too, and you seemed to have an unusually clear sense of how both the enemy and the ships under your command were reacting, and how to exploit that sense."

The conversation continued like that for a while, and eventually, Alex started getting the sense that this was building up to something, something that Smith and Rowley, at least, had already discussed. He let things go on for just a bit longer, and then leaned forward, folding his hands on the table.

"Gentlemen," he said, "this is all very nice. We're doing a great job of patting ourselves and each other on the back for a job well done. But, Mike, you didn't need to fly out here to do that. A message from Headquarters would be fine. And you certainly didn't need to drag me down here to tell me what a good squadron commander I was. I'm experienced enough at that sort of thing that you should expect it of me." He paused, and took a sip of his tea. "So, Mike, Tony, Threll... What's really goin' on here?"

Smith's expression took on a serious cast. He traded glances with Rowley and Threll, and then turned his focus back to Rosenzweig.

"There's a situation that we're dealing with back at Headquarters," he began.

"A...situation?" asked Alex.

Smith nodded. "Yeah. You see... Admiral Westervliet is retiring. It's not unexpected; he must be nearly 90 by now. Thing is, though, he's been involved with a lot of high-level activities for a number of years. He's not been so much in the forefront, but he's been there, quietly getting things done. No matter how you look at it, his leaving active duty is going to be something we're gonna feel."

"I can believe it," Alex responded, having a sneaking suspicion that he knew where this was going. "What does it have to do with me, though?"

Mike went on. "We're going to have to be switching a number of senior officers around to cover the gaps that Westervliet is going to leave. With all that shifting around, though, we're still coming up short. Right now, there is a serious need for experienced flag officers who can be more readily available to Headquarters."

Alex wasn't going to let Mike off without saying it himself. He knew what the fleet admiral had in mind, but he wanted to hear it.

"Look," Mike continued, "even though there's been a lot of relaxation, over the last decade or two, of the regulations regarding flag personnel in long-term field assignments, it's still not that common. Put bluntly, we need your experience and skills back at Headquarters."

"Well," Alex commented thoughtfully, "there's only one more year in the Avenger's current mission. I have to admit, I have been thinking of leaving command when it's done."

Rowley shook his head solemnly. "Unfortunately, we don't have that kind of time. We need people now. I wish we could wait, but..." His voice trailed off.

Alex nodded. "No, I understand that. I have to admit, though, that I have certain...um...concerns about 'flying a desk'. I've been out in space, in one capacity or another, for over 30 years, with only a few short breaks during things like ship refits."

"Oh, I definitely understand," Smith commented with a smile, recalling his own transition after serving on ships like the Lexington and Challenger.

"You're trying to fill a set of needs, right?" Alex pressed.

Rowley nodded. "All right," Alex went on. "Answer this question: Is there a need for a space-borne strategist and troubleshooter? Someone who, when some problem or issue comes up, can get out to the scene and figure out what needs to be done?"

From the look on both Rowley and Smith's faces, the admiral knew that they were remembering what he intended for them to remember. In 2271, when the Enterprise had completed its 5-year mission, the Star Fleet Commander at the time, Fleet Admiral Nogura, had offered Captain Kirk a post much like what Rosenzweig

had just asked about. It had been more of a lure than a plan, however, and Kirk had still ended up spending most of the next two and a half years behind a desk and desperately unhappy. It was only the V-ger Incident and the loss of Captain Decker that had allowed him to find himself in command of a ship again. Various Star Fleet psychologists often wondered what might have been if Nogura had actually followed through on the offer he had made to Kirk.

Smith, however, had expected Rosenzweig's tactic. Alex's admiration for James Kirk was well known. Mike proceeded to lay out what he had in mind. "Way ahead of you, Alex. Let me run this past you: You'd have advisory duties regarding overall Fleet strategy and deployment. You'd be heavily involved in the analysis of requirements, plans, and policies in those areas. In addition, yes, we did have you in mind for actively investigating trouble spots around the Fleet, including travel to the facilities in question, if need be, much as you've been doing as a sidelight for the past few years." At Alex's expression, Mike grinned. "Did you think we wouldn't take care of you? We know your skills, talents, and experience. Anyway, I think McCoy would pound me if I pulled a stunt like what Nogura tried." Leonard McCoy, now very active in the Surgeon General's Office, was an outspoken proponent of the relaxation of the regs that once routinely drove flag officers into desk jobs, or forced experienced personnel to reject flag rank promotions to stay in the field.

Rosenzweig thought about it for a moment. It really was what he had been increasingly interested in over the last year or so, he had to admit. He wondered if Smith had been talking to the folks at Star Fleet Psych. "Let me suggest one other thing," he said. At Smith's nod, he continued, "I'd hope to have some freedom of movement, and to have a couple of bases of operation. I'd like to set up field offices, if possible, preferably at Starbases 7 and 52, and if reasonable, aboard a ship as well."

Smith thought for a moment, then huddled with Rowley. When they straightened back up, Smith nodded to Rosenzweig. "I like the idea of the offices, although we would expect you to spend about half to two-thirds of your time in San Francisco. I think reserving a ship for your use might be a bit over the top, though. How about a long-range warpshuttle?"

"I think I could deal with that," Alex said, nodding.

"So we have an arrangement we can all live with?" Smith asked.

"I think we do." Alex smiled as he and Smith shook hands. All things considered, he thought to himself, this wasn't a bad deal at all. Sure, he would have liked to have finished the five-year mission. On the other hand, Smith had agreed to substantially more than was strictly necessary, and had essentially given Alex a great deal of latitude with which to work. If the Star Fleet Commander was satisfied, he ought to be, as well.

"That leaves one other question," Rowley interjected. "Who'll be the new CO of the Avenger?"

Without hesitation, Rosenzweig responded, "Captain Maldonado."

"You certain?" asked Smith.

"No doubts," the admiral responded.

Smith didn't question Rosenzweig's choice. Alex had served with Maldonado for nine years, and had seen the younger man rise to the position of Executive Officer. Since Carlos had achieved that position, the men had worked extremely closely, and with notable success. If, based on all that, Alex was as sure as he appeared,

Mike certainly wasn't going to argue the point. "Will he want the job?" he asked

"I think he'll take it," Alex replied. "He's more than able, and if anyone deserves the chance, Carlos is the one."

"All right, then," Smith agreed.

"Let me suggest a trip up to the Avenger. We should brief Carlos, and it'll be neat to have the crew see you both." Smith and Rowley concurred, and after checking a few last bits of business with Commodore Threll, they left the base commander and headed for the transporter room.

Lieutenant Themri was on duty in Transporter Room 1 when the call came down from the bridge. "Lieutenant," Captain Maldonado's voice came over the 'com, "we have a signal from Admiral Rosenzweig. We have three beaming up from the starbase."

"Aye, sir," Themri acknowledged, and set the system to receive the signal from the base.

As three flag officers materialized on the transporter platform, Themri came to attention. His eyes widened as he saw, along with Admiral Rosenzweig, Rear Admiral Rowley and the Commander, Star Fleet himself, Fleet Admiral Smith.

Smith observed Themri's expression and, with just a hint of a smile, spoke formally to the Andorian. "Permission to come aboard, Lieutenant?"

"Permission granted, **sir!**" Themri responded crisply.

"Welcome aboard, Admiral," Rosenzweig said to Smith, stepping off the platform. "Thank you, Mr. Themri," he said to the transporter officer. "Would you please have Captain Maldonado meet us in the briefing room on Deck 2?"

"Aye, sir," Themri responded. As the Andorian officer turned to the panel and tapped the intercom switch, Alex led Smith and Rowley out into the corridor and toward a nearby turbo-lift.

Maldonado was awaiting the three when they reached the briefing room. He shook hands with both Rowley and Smith. Rosenzweig gestured them to the table. As they all sat down, Alex glanced at Mike, who nodded. Alex leaned forward, resting his arms on the table in front of him.

"Carlos," he said without preamble, "I've just received new orders from Star Fleet Command."

Maldonado leaned forward, himself, paying attention. He wondered what kind of mission was critical enough that both Smith and Rowley needed to come aboard personally.

Alex continued. "I'm going to be leaving command of the Avenger. My transfer to Fleet HQ will be effective in just a couple of weeks."

Carlos was starting to nod when the import of what Alex had just said hit him. "Excuse me, what?"

"Alex will be transferring to Star Fleet Command just as soon as the Avenger gets back to Earth and a successor is chosen," Smith elaborated. "He's going to fill a needed role at Command... and elsewhere."

Carlos just sat there for a long moment. "Congratulations... I think," he said to Alex.

"Thanks... I think," Alex replied, just a bit of a smile quirking the corners of his mouth.

"Is this something you want to do?" the executive officer asked.

"It wasn't actually my first choice," Alex responded earnestly, "but duty calls, so..." He shrugged.

"So, are there any ideas about a successor yet?" Carlos wondered whom he might be serving under next.

"Actually, yes," Alex told him. "We'd like it to be you."

For the second time in only a few minutes, Carlos ended up just staring at his friend and commanding officer. "Umm... Me?"

"Nobody better I can think of for the job."

Carlos' stare traveled slowly to Mike and Tony. "We're both willing to go along with Alex's recommendation," Tony said, "if you want the job."

"It looks like you have a decision to make," Mike told Carlos.

Carlos looked very seriously at the Star Fleet Commander.

"Sir," he said, "I have to tell you that I'm very honored by the faith you all are putting in me. But, if you don't mind, I'd like to discuss this with my wife before I give a final answer."

"Of course," Smith said. "Alex, your orders are to return to Earth immediately. This should take a few days. Carlos, you have until the ship gets there to make your decision."

"Aye, sir," Carlos said softly, still trying to wrap his mind around the idea that not only was Alex leaving command of the Avenger after almost 14 years, but that he, Carlos, was the first choice to succeed him!

"Well," said Smith, "I'm sorry this can't be more of a social call, but a lot of work is waiting for me, and I have to get back down to the base."

"I understand completely, sir," Rosenzweig said. All four officers rose, and Rosenzweig turned to Maldonado. "I'll be up on the bridge as soon as I see Admirals Smith and Rowley off."

"Okay," Carlos replied. "I'll see you up there."

Rosenzweig escorted Smith and Rowley back to the transporter room. Just from the expressions on passing crewmembers' faces as they walked through the corridors of the Avenger, Alex knew the rumors would be starting about why two flag officers, including the Star Fleet Commander, had visited the ship. He would have to make the announcement quickly, lest the speculations get out of hand.

Reaching the transporter room, Mike and Tony took positions on the platform and turned to face the operator's booth, where Lieutenant Themri was prepping the system.

"Take care, gentlemen," Alex said.

"Always," Rowley quipped.

Smith smiled and added, "We'll see you in a few days."

"Yes, sir," Rosenzweig acknowledged. He stepped into the booth with Themri, and nodded. "Energize, Lieutenant."

"Aye, Admiral." Themri tapped a series of controls, and Smith and Rowley were engulfed into shining columns of light, then faded away.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. I'll be on the bridge," Rosenzweig said. He nodded and left the room.

Rosenzweig returned to the bridge, and took the command chair that Maldonado vacated. He gazed for a long moment at the forward viewer, then glanced down slightly, to the Helm/Navigation console. "Mr. Bradley, please lay in a course for Earth."

"Earth, sir?" Bradley asked, checking.

"Earth, Lieutenant. Ensign Romany, when you have the course, take us out, full impulse. Go to warp 4 at terminal range."

Both men acknowledged their orders. The expressions on both their faces revealed their curiosity at the ship's abrupt change in plans. The Avenger wasn't often near Earth, heading homeward only when a major assignment required it to do so or when a five-year mission ended. As they knew there was more than a year left in the mission, they could only assume it was a special assignment, one which Admiral Rosenzweig couldn't or wouldn't discuss. They glanced surreptitiously at the exec, but Captain Maldonado was studiously silent.

Alex took a deep breath. He turned slightly to gaze at Lt. Commander Kagan. "Commander, please put me on shipwide."

"Channel open, sir," Kagan acknowledged.

"Thank you, Commander." Alex paused for a moment, then spoke. "All hands, this is Admiral Rosenzweig. Some of you may already know that we were visited a short time ago by Fleet Admiral Smith from Star Fleet Command and Rear Admiral Rowley of the Malverne. Their visit was not quite a social call. They brought new orders, both for me and for the Avenger. The Avenger has been directed to set a course for Earth and proceed there immediately. Once we get there, I must follow my orders. Those orders," he took a deep breath, "direct me to stand down from command of this ship and assume a new post at Star Fleet Headquarters." He saw a number of startled glances flitting amongst his officers, but went on. "No decision has yet been made on who the next commanding officer of the Avenger will be, although a recommendation has been made to Fleet Admiral Smith. By the time we reach Earth, we may know the answer to that question. Over the next several days, there will be plenty of opportunities for all of you to come to me with any questions which you may have. For the moment, let me just say that it has been an honor serving with all of you, and an experience I may well never match again. Thank you."

His statement done, Alex switched off the intercom and looks around the bridge, meeting the gaze of each officer in turn. Once his visual circuit of the bridge was complete, he slowly stood up and stepped away from the command chair.

"Captain," he said to Maldonado, "I'll be in my ready room. The con is yours." With that, he walked to the turbo-lift doors and stepped off the bridge.

In one sense, the Avenger's journey to Earth was uneventful. No sudden attacks marred the trip. No strange subspace anomalies emerged out of the ether to send the ship to who-knows-where. But on another level, there was an odd sense of momentous change in the air.

Rosenzweig spent a lot of time touring the ship and visiting with the officers and crew. It wasn't uncommon for him to do this, but there was an ineffable sense that, this time, as he circulated from one section to the next, he was doing more than just dropping by to chat, or subtly gauging the morale and efficiency of his command. This time, in a quiet, unassuming way, he was beginning to say goodbye. Aware of this, the members of the crew made a little extra time for him, or included him in what they were doing. A few of the newer crewmembers were somewhat confused at the familiarity with which the admiral was treated, but as the older hands explained, Rosenzweig wasn't merely an admiral. For so many years, he had been *their* admiral, and that made a difference.

For his part, Maldonado spent a lot of time in introspection, as well. He had a choice to make, one which could change his life.

He was not finding it an easy one, for such choices never are. He was also only too aware of the brief time he had in which to make it.

One evening, following his shift, Carlos sat at his desk in his cabin, lost in thought. A viewer glowed in front of him, but he wasn't seeing it. The door to the cabin slid open, and his wife, Commander Chaym Gale' n'Maldonado, came in. With her were their two children, Kiran and Ariana.

Seeing his expression, she carried the children into the room they shared and settled them down, then she came back into the sitting area and walked over to him. Carlos didn't react until she snaked her tail around him and gently squeezed. Then he looked up. Chaym pulled up a chair and sat down next to him.

"What are you thinking about?" she asked him.

"I'm trying to figure out what to do."

"About the command?"

"Yeah. Career-wise, it's definitely the thing to do. And I can't discount the fact that Alex has such confidence that I'm the right man for the job."

"I think he's right," Chaym replied. Carlos smiled gently at her.

"But we have to remember that we have additional considerations. If I take the command, it'll affect us in ways that, for another officer, wouldn't be issues. We just have it more complicated than most."

"The children?" asked Chaym. Carlos nodded.

"If I take the command, I'll have a lot less time for them. We've been lucky, in a lot of ways. Alex let me arrange a lot of flexibility in my duty schedule for the children, but I won't have as much of that kind of option as CO. A lot more would depend on you, and you'd not be able to slack off on your post, either."

"I know," said Chaym. "Think of it this way, though: Remember how hard it was even to get Alex to argue with Star Fleet Command to let us have the children stay aboard?"

"Yeah," Carlos answered. "And he was **not** thrilled by the idea. Every time we went into combat, he worried about those children."

Chaym nodded. "And he's our friend. What do you think might happen with a new CO, one we might not even know?" Seeing that she had Carlos' attention, Chaym continued. "A new CO might insist that we go back to following the regs, especially since so much of the original reason that we kept the kids here is gone." The two doctors who had supervised Chaym's pregnancy and the children's earliest development, Fillmore and Urbanavage, had both left the ship quite a while ago. "We might not be able to stay together, experiment in starship family dynamics or not."

"But what about you? Are you going to be able to deal with everything?"

Chaym wrapped her tail around Carlos' shoulders. "Honey," she said, "I am totally willing to do whatever I have to, because I just **know** that you'll be a better father to our children if you can stay with them, even as a busy ship's captain, than if they order me to take a ground assignment to raise them."

Carlos smiled at her. "I could rotate to a ground assignment, too," he pointed out.

"Oh, sure." Chaym snorted. "Like you'd be happy with that. Uh-uh."

Carlos then pulled her close and hugged her. They embraced for a long moment. And with that, the decision was made.

When they finally released each other, Chaym pointed to the comm-panel. "I think you have some calls to make," she whispered.

"Yeah, guess so," Carlos agreed. He reached out and touched the control. "Maldonado to Rosenzweig."

"Rosenzweig here," Alex answered.

"I've made my decision. I'm going to take the CO post."

"Excellent," came the reply. In his mind's eye, Carlos could see the smile on his friend's face. "Have you told Command yet?"

"I'm just about to."

"Well, get to it. And... Congratulations."

"Thanks. Maldonado out."

Breaking the channel to Rosenzweig, Maldonado turned to his computer terminal. Taking a deep breath, he began composing his acceptance message to Star Fleet Command.

Chaym was plotting. She had decided that a party was in order. The crew had a party each year, by tradition, to mark the conclusion of another year of the mission. This year, Chaym felt that it should also mark the change of command and serve as a farewell to Alex, who had, after all, served aboard the Avenger for almost a decade and a half. The catch was that Alex had absolutely no idea that the event was to double as a farewell party, and Chaym intended to keep it that way. As the ship reached the halfway-point of the trip back to Earth, she had the Rec staff busily working, but also watching to make sure that the admiral didn't find out what was up.

A discreet call to Star Fleet Operations verified that Command's intention was to hold the formal change-of-command ceremony aboard the ship, in Earth orbit. Fleet Admiral Smith himself was scheduled to be on-hand to personally perform the ceremony, recognizing Alex's many years of service as a starship commander. Chaym smiled at that news. She knew that Smith still loved a good party.

With the basic idea for the party set, Chaym decided that the best place for the ceremony, and the party, was the Rec Deck. Quietly, she and the Recreation staff began making the arrangements.

By the time the Avenger had entered the Sol System and closed in on Earth, Rosenzweig had managed to visit almost every part of the ship, and many parts several times. He tried briefly to maintain the fiction that it was an inspection, but the crew knew better. They could see that he was simply "being there", as if drinking in the environment that had been his home for the last fourteen years. There was almost wistful quality to the visits, as the admiral knew, all too well, that things could never be quite the same again. Understanding, the crew didn't begrudge him a long last look around.

At long last, the Avenger arrived in orbit around Earth. Lt. Commander Usdin turned from the Communications station and looked at Rosenzweig.

"Admiral, I'm receiving instructions from Terran Orbital Traffic Control. We're to head for TerraMain Spacedock."

Rosenzweig glanced at the helmsman. "Ensign Mostransky, set course for Spacedock."

"Yes, sir."

Standing to Rosenzweig's right, Captain Maldonado asked if the admiral thought that there would be time for shore leave. Alex

guessed that there might be time for a day or two, but he doubted that there would be more. Leaning over to Carlos, Alex pitched his voice low.

"Have you been thinking about who you want for Executive Officer?"

"Yeah," Carlos answered. "Not an easy one, but I think I have a choice." At Alex's curiously raised eyebrow, Carlos went on. "BuPers sent me a group of files. They recommended an officer named Se'ele. Said she's the best person available."

"I don't recognize the name," Alex commented.

"I didn't, either," Carlos agreed, "but I did read her personnel jacket. I think Star Fleet's right. Of the people they sent, nobody is as good. One other thing in her favor: I like the idea of bringing in someone new. We've all been together for a long time. A fresh perspective will help avoid too much..." Carlos paused for a moment, "...inbreeding of ideas."

"Makes sense to me," Alex said, just before they had to turn their attention to the final docking maneuver.

Once the ship had glided to a stop, and Ensign Sharma confirmed that they were on external power, Admiral Rosenzweig stood. Very slowly, very deliberately, he took a long look around the bridge. Gradually, he realized that every member of the bridge crew was watching him.

Alex smiled at them all, and said, simply, "Thank you."

Without a word, the crew gave him one round of applause. He let it run its course, and then turned to Captain Maldonado. "Captain, you have the con."

"Aye, sir," Maldonado replied. Rosenzweig nodded and left the bridge. The exec's gaze followed him for a moment, and then Maldonado turned his attention to the business of securing the ship.

Alex stepped off the bridge and headed for his ready room. Reaching it, he stopped in front of his desk and stared at it for a long moment. His eyes caressed the lines of the desk which for so long had been his. For just a moment, the fleeting temptation to carve his initials in its surface raced through his mind, and was just as quickly suppressed. With a brief smile to himself, he shook his head, cleared the last of his things, and walked out of the room.

Leaving the ready room, Alex went to his cabin. He was almost entirely packed, and his boxes were neatly stacked along one wall of the cabin. There was just a bit more to do, and he applied himself to the task. Soon, he was finished, and he was ready to move. During the Avenger's trip back to Earth, he had made arrangements for temporary housing until he could secure a permanent place in the Bay Area. It had been, he mused, well over a decade since he had actually lived on Earth for any span of time longer than a month or two, and dealing with apartments was almost a new experience. Fortunately, Star Fleet had personnel to assist with that.

The packing done, Alex contacted Star Fleet Headquarters to alert them to his arrival, and then called for a yeoman to help him bring his belongings to the transporter room. Ensign Shmuk arrived promptly, carrying a pair of antigravs, and between the two of them, the job was rapidly accomplished. Amazingly, Shmuk neither dropped nor spilled anything.

Shmuk left Alex and his belongings in the transporter room, and returned to his duties. With the boxes neatly stacked on the platform, the admiral turned to Ensign Vestri, who was on duty.

"Is the system ready, Ensign?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Energize when ready, then."

"Admiral? Permission to speak freely?" Alex raised an eyebrow, but nodded. "Sir, I just wanted to tell you how much I've enjoyed serving under you for the past few years. It's really been—"

"Ensign," he interjected, "before you go too far down this path, keep in mind that I will be back aboard this evening for the change of command ceremony. And no one," he reminded her with a friendly smile, "is excused from that one. I expect to see you there one more time."

"Yes, sir. Don't worry; I'll be there."

"Good. Now, if you would...?" Alex gestured toward the console.

"Aye, aye, sir." Vestri proceeded to energize the transporter, and for the last time as commanding officer of the Avenger, Admiral Rosenzweig beamed off the ship.

When he rematerialized in a large transporter station at Star Fleet Headquarters, he was met by another yeoman. "Welcome, Admiral," the young man said. "I'm Yeoman Juarez."

"Thank you, Yeoman." Alex observed that an antigrav cart sat next to the yeoman. "That for my stuff?"

"Yes, sir. Star Fleet has assigned you temporary quarters until you can get your permanent situation sorted out."

"Excellent. That should only take a few days, I'd think. Can you detail someone to take care of my effects? I'd like to see my new office. I gather you have that information?"

"Yes, sir." Juarez called for a support tech, and as soon as she arrived, he gave her the code for Rosenzweig's guest quarters."

"Don't worry, sir," the tech, who had introduced herself as Ensign Reed, told him. "I'll see to it that everything's taken care of."

"Thanks, Ensign."

"Now, sir," Juarez said, "are you ready to go see your office?"

"Lead on, Mr. Juarez."

Juarez took him to the Admiralty and guided him through the main complex. Only a few things had changed since the last time he'd spent any time in the area, about four years earlier, and almost imperceptibly, he relaxed slightly, knowing he'd have little trouble navigating the primary areas in which he'd spend his time.

Reaching the Operations wing, Juarez led Rosenzweig to a turbo-lift. They rode to the tenth floor, and stepped out into a corridor lined by offices and work areas. Alex kept a careful eye on the labels that marked the doors they passed, knowing he'd need to know them as time went along.

"Here, sir." They had just entered an office module labeled, "Fleet Strategic Planning and Deployment". Yeoman Juarez stood at a doorway. Just beyond it was a work area which contained a desk, a couch, and a viewer. To one side was another door. Sitting at the desk was a serious-looking young man wearing lieutenant's bars, studying something on his desktop viewer.

As he looked up and saw Juarez and Rosenzweig in the outer office doorway, he came smartly to his feet. "Welcome, sir!" he said, snapping off an Academy-crisp salute.

Rosenzweig returned the salute, then said, "At ease, Lieutenant."

"This is Lieutenant Coburn. He'll be serving as your aide and administrative assistant," Juarez said. "He's been issued your BuPers open file and is already getting acclimated with your needs. He'll also brief you on what you need to know in your new post."

"I'll take care of everything, Yeoman. The admiral will be in good hands."

"Yes, sir, I'm sure he will," Juarez replied. "Is there anything else I can do for you, Admiral?" he added, directing his attention back to Alex.

"No, I think that will be all, Yeoman. Thank you for your help."

"Any time, sir."

"Dismissed," Rosenzweig said, and with a nod, Juarez was gone. Rosenzweig turned back to Coburn. "Well, Lieutenant, shall we check out the office?"

"Of course, sir." The two men went inside.

Entering the office, Alex stopped and looked around. After so many years on a starship, even the idea of an office as large as the one in which he stood being his was a bit of a shock. It was also a very well-appointed office, and he appreciated that. The room was just large enough for the curvature of the building to be apparent, giving the room a gentle arc. The outer wall was fitted with a set of wide bay windows which overlooked the Admiralty complex's grounds. Off in the distance, the Golden Gate Bridge, perhaps San Francisco's most famous landmark, was visible, its span traversing the Bay.

Alex's desk was a wonder of modern design. A mix of the ultra-modern and the richly-natural, the desk itself was inlaid wood, almost a mahogany by the look of it. Mounted into it, though, was a computer terminal of the most advanced design, the control console blending almost seamlessly with the wood. It was a superb design, and spoke eloquently, if silently, to the attention that Star Fleet Command paid to aesthetics.

The wall opposite the desk had a comfortable-looking couch built into it, and two chairs were placed in front of the desk. The wall above the couch held a large painting, mounted in a gleaming gold frame. The painting depicted an Enterprise-class vessel approaching a large station which vaguely resembled TerraMain SpaceDock, while still being distinctly different. Rich in blues and grays, it counterpointed the rust-colored rug and wood-surfaced furniture and wall trim.

"Like it?" asked Coburn.

"Yes, Lieutenant, I do," Alex replied. "Looks like when I told them what I'd like, Building Maintenance really listened."

"They're good that way."

"Mr. Coburn, what's your first name?"

"William, sir, but my friends call me Bill."

"Good. Off-duty, or informally, I'm Alex. We'll only be formal when protocol demands it."

"Very good, sir."

Alex gestured Bill to one of the chairs in front of the desk, and he settled into the one behind it. Picking up a padd, Bill started a quick briefing on what Alex would be dealing with in his new position.

A short time later, there was a soft chime. Coburn poked his head outside, then turned back. "Admiral? Fleet Admiral Smith, Chief of Operations Rickard, and Rear Admiral Rowley to see you, sir."

"Invite them in," Rosenzweig said.

"Please come in, gentlemen," Coburn told the three flag officers. As they entered, Coburn nodded to Rosenzweig and stepped back out to his desk.

"So, what do you think?" asked Rickard.

"Very, very nice," Rosenzweig answered him. He smiled. "It's a lot bigger than I'm used to."

"Shifting from starship duty to ground duty does bring a lot of changes," Rickard commented with a smile. "This one is one of the nicer ones."

Smith then tossed Rosenzweig something. Alex hadn't been expecting it, but moved instinctively to catch it. As he pulled it out of the air, he realized it was a standard uniform insignia. Something about it wasn't quite right, however, and as he held it, it hit him: the insignia was slightly heavier than he'd expected.

Smith watched him for a moment, then smiled and did something unexpected. He stepped to the far corner of the office and turned his back to Rosenzweig. He brought his arm up, but Alex couldn't see what the Fleet Admiral was doing. He *could*, however, hear him whisper, "Smith to Rosenzweig."

A moment later, he jumped, as the insignia in his hand *beeped*. He stared down at it.

"Tap it," Rowley told him. He stared back at the Malverne's commander. "Go ahead," Rowley said.

Alex shrugged. "Ookay." Lightly, he tapped the surface of the insignia.

Abruptly, Smith's voice came out of the insignia, apparently from a tiny hidden speaker. "Smith to Rosenzweig."

Alex blinked, and raised his right eyebrow. "Fascinating," he said softly.

"Right out of R & D," Smith explained. "The research staff has been experimenting with a new direction in field comm-equipment. This is one of the prototypes. It's a fully-capable communicator, built into a shell the size and shape of a uniform insignia pin. The idea is that it'll be worn on the uniform at all times."

"Considering how many situations have been exacerbated when a communicator has been lost or taken," Rosenzweig said thoughtfully, "it certainly makes sense."

"Right," said Smith. "We're hoping to have it ready for general use sometime next year, but right now it's still in the testing phase."

"It's in common use around Headquarters," Rickard commented. "We're also choosing particular ships to conduct the final field tests. We've chosen the Avenger as one of those ships, and the new communicators will be part of the supplies being loaded aboard. Captain Maldonado and the appropriate staff personnel are being briefed, and they'll fill in the rest of the crew."

"Is the technical data available for review?" Alex asked.

"Yup," Rowley said. "Check under the Comm Division files."

"You should start using it immediately," Smith told him. "It takes a little getting used to."

"Will do." He set the communicator on his desk. "Just let me read the operating specs."

"Okay," Smith said. "But if you can, wear it tonight."

"Yes, sir."

Alex's guests stayed for a short time longer, discussing what he could expect during his first weeks at Headquarters and how his role as deep-space troubleshooter would fit into the plan. Finally, though, Smith glanced at his wrist chrono.

"Well, I have to be going. Still some more paper to push before heading up to the Avenger for the ceremony tonight."

The others took that as their cue to leave, as well, and soon Alex was left alone. Standing by his desk, he gazed out the windows, watching the clouds beyond the Golden Gate.

That evening, the officers and crew of the Avenger reassembled on the ship's Rec Deck. It was a strange and heady time. Comparatively few of the ship's crew had ever witnessed a change of command aboard ship, and no one aboard the Avenger now had known the ship under any commander but Admiral Rosenzweig. That was about to change.

Also aboard were Fleet Admiral Smith, Rear Admiral Rowley, and a number of other ship captains and fellow officers, many who had previously served under Rosenzweig aboard the Avenger. As Alex looked around, he was pleased to see that everyone who could fit into the Rec Deck was there. His eyes ranged the crowd, nodding fractionally at crewmembers and guests. As he caught Ensign Vestri's eye, he smiled just slightly and winked at her. She smiled broadly back.

For the first part of the evening, Commander n'Maldonado had organized a cocktail hour, and the officers and crews of the ships represented mingled freely. Rear Admiral Vosseller, aboard from the Challenger, mentioned to Rear Admiral Rowley that he hadn't seen such a collection of brass since the deployment ceremonies of the Shadowstar Flight Team, some years back. Rowley chuckled and noted that n'Maldonado had missed that particular bash, but had heard about it. Whether she was trying to emulate it was anyone's guess, but Rowley at least was glad they were safely moored in SpaceDock.

Eventually, n'Maldonado stepped to the lectern placed near the aft bulkhead of the Rec Deck. Tapping a control, she tied into the room's speaker system. "Gentlebeings, if you would please take your seats?" She gestured to the rows of chairs that had been set up in front of the lectern.

Steadily, the crowd migrated over to the chairs. There weren't enough chairs for everyone, and those who didn't get seats ranged themselves in a loose semi-circle around the area occupied by the seats. When the crowd had gathered, n'Maldonado leaned forward just a little. "Please welcome Fleet Admiral Michael Smith."

The audience rose and applauded. After a moment, Smith raised his hands, and the crowd quieted. Into the hush that fell over the room, Smith spoke.

"As you know, we are here for two purposes," he said. "First, we mark the end of the fourth year of this five-year tour for the Avenger. Second, however, and more importantly, we are here to stand witness to the change of command of this vessel from Admiral Alexander Rosenzweig to Captain Carlos Maldonado, Jr." He picked up a padd and gestured for both Rosenzweig and Maldonado to step forward. With barely a glance at the information on the padd, he began in a strong, clear voice.

"Pursuant to Star Fleet regulations and authorizations effective this stardate, the following changes will occur aboard starship

U.S.S. Avenger, FH 1860: 1] Admiral Alexander Rosenzweig shall stand down as Commanding Officer. 2] Captain Carlos Maldonado, Jr. shall assume the position of Commanding Officer. Admiral Rosenzweig?"

"Sir?" Rosenzweig responded.

"Are you prepared to surrender your command of FH 1860 U.S.S. Avenger?"

"Yes, sir. I am prepared."

"Very well," Smith responded. "Captain Maldonado?"

"Yes, Admiral?"

"Are you prepared to assume the duties of Commanding Officer, FH 1860 U.S.S. Avenger, with all the responsibilities and privileges that accompany that post?"

"Yes, sir, I am."

"Will you uphold all Star Fleet regulations, and the Constitution of the United Federation of Planets?"

"Yes." Carlos' voice was firm as he responded to the traditional words.

"Will you lead your crew with wisdom and strength, setting the example for the officers and crewmembers who serve under you?"

"Yes, sir."

Smith smiled then, for just a moment, before returning to the script. "Very well. Captain Carlos Maldonado, Jr, effective this stardate, you are hereby requested and required to assume command of the Federation starship U.S.S. Avenger, and to lead this crew in its ongoing mission. Do you accept this command?"

"Yes, Admiral, I do."

Rosenzweig bent slightly and drew, from behind the lectern, a gleaming saber, with its handle inlaid in purple and gold enamel. He turned to Maldonado, holding the sword flat in the palms of his hands. "In symbolism of the transfer of command authority, I present you with this sword. Use your authority wisely and well, and lead these people into the future." He held the sword out to Maldonado, who gingerly accepted it, then swung it down so the point rested lightly on the carpet. Rosenzweig and Maldonado shook hands, and the admiral then looked up slightly.

"Computer," he said. A soft chime responded. "All command codes, operating ciphers, and primary authorizations are hereby transferred from Admiral Alex Rosenzweig to Captain Carlos Maldonado, Jr., effective immediately."

"Acknowledged," the computer voice responded. "Transfer complete."

Rosenzweig turned back to Maldonado. "Congratulations, Captain."

"Thank you, Admiral," Maldonado responded formally. Smith shook both men's hands, and the room thundered with applause.

Chaym then stepped forward and faced Rosenzweig. She held up a computer cart. "Admiral," she began, "as we know, you've been in command of the Avenger for more than a decade. With the help of a few strategically-placed people, we thought we'd share a look back. Courtesy of the Avenger's logs... 'This is Your Command'."

The room darkened, and the large viewer on the aft wall lit up. Rosenzweig's voice echoed through the room...

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8506.21..."

Effective this stardate, I accept operational command of the starship U.S.S. Avenger. We are preparing to leave

dock on the first of what will hopefully be many successful journeys. Commander Cohen reports all systems ready, and Commander Cook tells me the work done on the ship has made her one of the most advanced vessels in the Fleet..."

Rosenzweig smiled as he remembered how excited the crew had been that day. After the tense months on the Constitution, it had been like a breath of fresh air to have been transferred to a newly-refitted and ready ship.

The logs continued...

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8710.29:

The crisis is over. Commander tr'Lemaln and his compatriots are returning to Rihannsu space, and Outpost 4 is secure. Thanks to impressive teamwork, a major incident has been averted. Now, I look forward to the completion of our mapping assignment, and I wish all of our missions could wrap up so neatly. End entry."

.....

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8802.28:

Our search has been successful. We have made contact with the Explorer Rhentas of the Ahrman'yak Transstellar League. Our question has been answered, in a way simpler than any of us would have guessed: the Konkordium was attacked in a case of mistaken identity, clouded by uncertainty and fear. The Ahrman'yak are at war with a race known as the Jinimar. By coincidence, the Jinimar vessels are superficially similar to Federation craft. As the Ahrman'yak follow a totally different design approach, the differences—so obvious to us—were trivial to them, and they feared that the Konk was a Jinimar ship. An offer of alliance has been made, and the Ahrman'yak are interested. The Rhentas is now accompanying the Avenger and Tai Shan to Starbase 29, where contact will be made with Star Fleet Command representatives to discuss the potential alliance and what should be done next."

.....

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8909.05:

The Avenger has entered the Kansevis Star System. Our mission is a standard survey of the system. Kansevis 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 AU's, and does not appear to affect the system of six planets circling Kansevis A. Our sensors have indicated that Kansevis A-IV is Class M, although unexpected energy anomalies have caught the attention of the science teams."

.....

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9011.13:

After picking up new personnel at Starbase 29, we have proceeded to the Danzrikal Star System. Eight planets orbit this Type K star, two of which are Class M. The inner Class M world supports a civilization rating F+ on the Richter Scale of Cultures, equivalent to Terra in the early 2000's. The outer planet is uninhabited. Our mission is to survey the outer Class M world and to observe the civilization on the inner one. Star Fleet expects an

eventual colonization attempt, and wants to compare it to several other systems which have followed a similar pattern."

.....
"Captain's Log, Stardate 9105.30:

The Avenger has been given an unusual assignment. We've been sent to seek out a Klingon battlecruiser. However, it is of course more complex than that. The IKV Ekru, our quarry, appears to have encountered a space warp of some kind. The nature of the warp is unknown, although it has been speculated that it may lead into another dimension. Reports from Monitor Station Epsilon 5 indicate that the warp was approximately 2.7 parsecs from the station when the Klingon vessel was drawn into it."

.....
"Captain's Log, Stardate 9301.30:

The Avenger has resumed course for the Rezifan System. We expect to arrive there only four hours late, and to make rendezvous with the Alliance only one hour behind schedule. Meanwhile, we can only reflect at the many ways change affects existence, from the personal to the planetary scales, and even beyond. We hope that the Kaisabans will overcome their difficulties. If they do, when they are ready, they could become a valuable addition to the Federation."

.....
"Captain's Log, Stardate 9304.15:

The Avenger has been diverted from its patrol assignment along the Romulan Neutral Zone. We are now carrying a consignment of emergency medical supplies, bound for the planet Ahlyar. Ahlyar has been stricken by an unusually fast-acting viral plague. Thousands of people are dead, and thousands more are dying. Until now, Ahlyar has had only limited contact with the Federation. Representatives from that world have declined either membership or affiliation. However, circumstances have grown desperate enough for Ahlyar to call for help. The Federation, perhaps sensing an opportunity to enhance relations with Ahlyar, has opted to respond quickly. The Avenger is one of several vessels assigned to carry supplies, on a mission listed as 'most urgent'. For us, there is one more complication. Between our present position and Ahlyar lies a sector of space claimed by the Daltexi, a highly territorial and often hostile race. Entry into this sector could precipitate a major diplomatic incident, if not outright war. While the Daltexi do not pose a serious military threat to the Federation, Star Fleet Command feels it to be quite important not to cause a confrontation. We can avoid Daltexi space by flying through a narrow band of unclaimed space which borders their territory. The problem is that this band of space also borders the Klingon Neutral Zone, and with tensions still high, there is a natural wariness."

.....
"Captain's Log, Stardate 9304.26:

While en route back from our relief mission on Ahlyar, the Avenger has intercepted a distress signal from a passenger liner called the S.S. Starlight. We are well past

the Daltexi sector, and have put considerable distance between ourselves and the Klingon border, as well. It is therefore doubtful that the signal is a ruse. According to the transmission, the liner apparently encountered a magnetic storm of unusual force for this sector of space. The strength and unexpectedness of the storm seems to have caught them unawares, and overloaded their shields, allowing energy surges to essentially 'fry' many of their internal systems. According to the records, the Starlight is a Sunshine-class vessel, built within the last 15 years. The Starlight reports a crew of 150 and nearly 500 passengers. The crew have their hands full trying to prevent panic. With damage severe enough to threaten the life-support systems, this is proving to be no easy task. In response to the call, the Avenger is making best speed for the Starlight."

.....
"Captain's Log, Stardate 9310.12:

The Avenger is operating within the asteroid belt of 356 Sagittae, a white A-type star. We are conducting a geological survey of the belt, cataloging its resources as part of a Star Fleet plan for the development of the system, possibly including the placement of a facility here if such is warranted. Personnel from the Sciences and Engineering Divisions are working to prepare a viability report for the Logistics Division at Headquarters. Also, the Avenger's Flight crews are getting a welcome chance to actually fly, as we are utilizing an array of small craft to increase our detailed coverage of the belt."

.....
"Captain's Log, Stardate 9407.09:

The Avenger is headed back to the Rhadamanthus II Drydock facility for extensive repair work following the incident in which Avenger became involved. Ship and crew are in flight readiness, with a few crewmembers recovering in sickbay. Unfortunately, six officers were killed during this incident. Upon docking, their bodies will be returned to their families. The 'incident' that befell Avenger, however, cannot be discussed in this log entry. I will, however, be required to report this matter to Star Fleet Command upon docking at Rhadamanthus II. Other information reports that the ship's phenomenal weapons and shielding upgrades have reverted to their normal states. Apparently, whatever Lieutenant Underwood had done to them, the uprating became regressive. No logs on the phenomenal increase in overall hardware efficiency are on record...presumably as a result of the efficiency regression. The Avenger should make drydock in about three days and we'll take this matter up from there. End Entry."

.....
"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."

.....
"Captain's Log, Stardate 9603.27:

The Avenger is holding position in Sector 16857, near the Rihannsu Neutral Zone. Repairs to the ship are nearly complete. Engineering and Maintenance personnel are hard at work fixing the last systems that still need work. The destroyer Hannibal is on hand, and will keep watch on the sector, in case of any inimical encounters, especially with the Romulans. We ourselves are limping away at low warp speed. The crew is largely intact, though shaken. Not only must we deal with our damaged ship, but also, for many of us, with a terrible sacrifice..."

.....
"Captain's Log, Stardate 9811.06:

The Avenger has been assigned to the Namati Star System, under classified orders. We are here to recover a downed probe. According to our information, the U.S.S. Jutland was sacrificed for the information contained in the probe's memory cores. Namati's proximity to Rihannsu space is a matter of concern, but Star Fleet Command has made it clear that recovery of this information is of the highest priority."

.....
"Captain's Log, Stardate 9906.26:

This will be my final entry as commanding officer of this vessel. We have arrived at SpaceDock without incident, and I am in the midst of final preparations to transfer command of this vessel to Captain Maldonado. Only a few remaining files need to be readied, and the appropriate changes to command codes and ciphers are being prepared. The Avenger will only be in dock for a couple of days, so there won't be much time to adapt to the changes before the ship returns to duty. It is with a mixture of satisfaction and wistfulness that I look back at the accomplishments of 14 years. Starship command is a unique experience, and one I will remember all the rest of my days. I wish Captain Maldonado the best, and know that he'll do this ship and crew proud. Admiral Alex Rosenzweig out."

As the last entry faded into silence, a hush fell momentarily over the crowd. It was followed by another round of applause. Alex blushed, but couldn't help smiling. He held up his hands, and the room quieted.

"You all do know how to make a guy feel good," he began. There were a few chuckles. Alex turned to Chaym. "Thank you. It was wonderful." Then he turned and gazed back at all the others, from Ensigns to the Star Fleet Commander, and said, simply, "Thank you all. I'll never forget the honor of serving as your commander, and all the times we've shared and things we've seen. But now, that honor, and duty, has fallen to Captain Maldonado. He'll be the one to lead this crew through the end of the 23rd Century and into the 24th. I wish him the best of luck, and hope all of you will support him as you have me over the last 14 years." He turned to Maldonado. "May the wind be at your back."

With that, the formalities were done. Maldonado dismissed the crew, and reminded them that there was still plenty of food,

and that they were welcome to just relax. Gradually, various crewmembers broke into smaller groups, mingling, chatting, and enjoying the food and the music playing in the background. A few quietly drifted away, but the others seemed not quite in such a hurry. Maldonado had authorized two days' leave for the crew, while the ship was being reprovisioned, but it seemed that many of the crew were not quite ready to go dashing off.

Rosenzweig strolled around the Rec Deck, stopping to talk to members of the crew, as well as the guests. Seeing Lt. Commander Setak, the Avenger's new Chief Science Officer, Alex stopped to congratulate him on his promotion. "It's well-deserved," he told the Vulcan.

"Thank you, Admiral," Setak replied. "I understand that it was at your recommendation."

"Yes, it was. You deserve it."

Setak looked curiously at Rosenzweig. "Sir, may I ask a question?"

"Certainly, Commander."

"I am curious. Why was Lieutenant Antrim not offered the position? She did serve as acting Science Officer for a number of months."

Rosenzweig took a deep breath, then answered. "She isn't ready yet." At Setak's quizzical look, he elaborated, "She's a fine researcher and analyst, and on a small ship, she'd likely be a fine Chief Science Officer, too. But she has a way to go before she's ready to deal with the administrative aspects of the job on a ship the size of the Avenger. She may be ready someday, but today is not that day."

"In that case," Setak said, "I will endeavor to make her so."

Alex nodded. "One thing to keep in mind, though: She may be resentful for a while. Keep that in mind."

"Yes, Admiral," Setak replied.

Alex flashed the Science Officer a smile, then excused himself and wandered in Captain Maldonado's direction. Carlos was surrounded by crewmembers, being congratulated. Alex paused, not wanting to intrude in Carlos' moment. As he stood, watching, he sensed someone coming up beside him. Glancing over, he saw Fleet Admiral Smith coming up beside him.

"Different experience, eh?" Smith asked.

"Mmm, hmm," Alex responded noncommittally.

"You get used to it," Smith noted with a smile on his face.

"I'd think so," Alex answered. He waited until the group of crewmembers had moved on, then nodded to Smith and hurried over to speak to the captain.

Carlos grinned as he saw Alex approach. "Hey, Al."

Alex returned the smile. "Hey, there. Well... She's gonna be your ship now. Ready for it?"

"Ready as I'll ever be." At the Admiral's raised eyebrow, Carlos went on, "Let's be real. Until one's actually had a command of one's own for a while, one's never a hundred percent ready."

"That's true." Alex paused for a moment. "It's been a long time since I've even thought about my first command, aboard the Revere all those years ago."

Carlos saw the look in Alex's eyes. "So," he inquired, "what about you? You're going to be out of a ship command for the first time in years. You ready for that?"

Alex paused thoughtfully for a moment. Then he said, "Well, the deal I struck with Fleet Admiral Smith has the potential to be enough to match a command for its fascinations. At the very least,

it'll be unique and different. So on that level, I guess I'm ready. But there's nothing like commanding a ship, really. So many people aspire to it, and so few of us get to do it. And I got to do it for over a dozen years. No, I think I'm okay with moving on. It's your turn now. And I wish you the very best of luck."

"Thanks," Carlos answered. "I'll do my best with it. Will you be around over the next couple of days?" Carlos wasn't actually sure what answer he was hoping for, but couldn't avoid the question.

"Not much, actually. I have to get myself set up, too. Thankfully, I have a very efficient aide, who'll be helping me get settled in." Alex gestured across the deck, to where Lieutenant Coburn stood chatting with Fleet Admiral Smith. "One good thing: he's completely at ease talking to everyone up to the Fleet Admiral. That'll be helpful."

"Good point," Carlos commented.

Gradually, the party drew to a close. Crewmembers stopped to congratulate Maldonado, or wish Rosenzweig well, one more time, and slipped off to quarters or duty stations or shore leave. The senior officers did the same, and finally, only Carlos, Alex, and Chaym stood on the quiet Rec Deck.

"Anything you need before I go?" Alex asked Chaym quietly.

The Mohnan shook her head. "No, I don't think so. I'll tap a few of the crew in the morning to help the Rec Staff with the clean-up." She smiled at him. "Don't worry about us. We'll be just fine."

"Okay. Thanks for everything."

Chaym paused for a moment, and then she hugged Alex hard. "And thank you, too," she whispered. After just a moment, Carlos joined in, and then, the moment past, all three turned and walked out of the Rec Deck.

As morning dawned over San Francisco, Rosenzweig arrived early to his office at the Admiralty. It wasn't long before he was busy organizing his staff and, with Lieutenant Coburn's assistance, getting acclimated to his duties. Soon, he was busily catching up on the latest updates on Fleet deployment and making recommendations on an array of strategy issues. By early afternoon, he was actually starting to realize that his new post could well be as challenging, in its own way, as his previous one.

Meanwhile, aboard the Avenger, Captain Maldonado was picking through the paperwork and dealing with the more mundane aspects of his new command. He was also awaiting the arrival of the new Executive Officer, Lt. Commander Se'ele, to whom he was very much looking forward to passing off at least some of the bureaucratic mess.

Lt. Commander Setak sat at his new desk, in his new office, analyzing the Sciences Division files. He rapidly concluded that a number of changes could improve the operation of the division substantially, and acted swiftly to implement them. As he reorganized the administrative file structures, he thought back to his conversation with Rosenzweig. In looking at her work, Setak could see the potential in Antrim, but the Admiral had been right. Antrim was a far more adept researcher than she was an administrator. And as much, he reflected, as one might wish it otherwise, a Chief Science Officer would have to be both.

The goal, as he saw it, would be to help Antrim reach her potential without sparking resentment of his now-superior position. This, he knew, would be no easy task, especially for one still learning about emotions and their complexities. Setak also knew, though, that he would make the attempt.

At just about 1000 hours, Lt. Commander Se'ele arrived. Maldonado was in his ready room, studying status reports, when his door chime sounded. "Come in," he said. Ensign Frost of Security entered the room, escorting a tall, reserved Vulcan female. "Captain, Lt. Commander Se'ele."

Maldonado came to his feet. "Please come in, Commander. Have a seat."

"Thank you, Captain," Se'ele responded. At least, Carlos thought to himself, she's schooled in Human-style courtesy.

Se'ele settled into the chair opposite the captain's desk. Carlos studied her carefully. Right off the bat, he perceived a sternness to her, a focus on her duties, and he briefly wondered how well she would fit in with the often fun-loving crew of the Avenger. Then he shook himself mentally. He'd figure out how to mesh his style with hers. All would work out.

"Well," he said, "Have you read your briefing materials on the ship and crew?"

"I have. This should provide a suitable working environment."

"Good. We're in the midst of reprovisioning and cleanups now, and the plan is still to leave dock tomorrow. A lot of the crew are still on shore leave, but I don't expect any problems with getting them all back where they're supposed to be by the time we leave. I've been reviewing readiness reports, and I'd like to have you take that over, once you're settled. Oh, that reminds me, were your belongings taken to your quarters?"

"Yes, Captain, they were. As soon as I log into the ship's computer and confirm my access codes, I'll pick up on those reports. Also, one question. Did the division chiefs remain aboard?"

"Yes, they did."

"Would it be possible for me to schedule a meeting with them, prior to our leaving dock? I'd like to start getting acquainted before we actually head off into space."

"That's fine," Carlos agreed. "I'll leave that to you."

"Thank you, sir."

The two officers chatted for a few more minutes, as Maldonado quizzed Se'ele about her background and briefly described life aboard the Avenger. Soon, though, he could tell that she was anxious to get to work, and he dismissed her.

A short time later, a message appeared on his terminal viewer, informing him that the meeting with the division chiefs had been scheduled for 1230 hours, over lunch in the Officers' Lounge. The captain smiled. Se'ele was definitely efficient.

When the division chiefs arrived in the Officers' Lounge, they found Se'ele sitting on one of the conversation pits, waiting for them.

"Please, join me," she said, looking up at them. They all settled onto the comfortable seats. "I wanted us to meet on an informal basis, to start," Se'ele began. "We will be working together for some time now, and it is best for us to begin to get to know one another before we leave dock, not wait until we have to count on each other in a crisis."

"Makes sense to me," Lt. Commander Underwood commented, leaning back. "By the way, nice to meet you."

"You would be Mr. Underwood?" Se'ele asked.

"I would."

"Your records show you as a rather unique individual. Definitely...unorthodox."

"I definitely can't claim to fit into a conventional mode, Commander, no."

"As long as you continue to serve effectively, this will not pose a problem. Please be aware, though, the unorthodoxy is not, however, a justification for ineffectiveness."

"Of course not," Underwood replied, sounding faintly irritated. "I think you'll find that when I'm on the case, things do get done, even if the process isn't quite what the rulebook says. Have either Admiral Rosenzweig or Captain Maldonado indicated any displeasure with my work?"

"No. However, you will find my approach to be...rather different from that taken by either of those gentlemen, and the key to our having a proper working relationship will be to recognize and adapt to that. In turn, I will attempt to adapt to your distinctly unorthodox style. Do we understand each other, Mr. Underwood?"

The Chief of Operations paused for a moment, making sure that he had parsed her sentences correctly, and then nodded.

"Yes, we do. I don't think you'll be disappointed."

"I hope not," Se'ele answered.

"Ker-pow," Commander Zulkowski said softly to himself.

"Excuse me?" Se'ele said, turning to the Chief Engineer.

"Nothing," Zach deadpanned.

"You're Mr. Zulkowski?"

"The one and only," Zach replied with a smile.

"You have a reputation for humor."

"They tell me that, yes."

"According to some of what I've read, not all of it might be considered good," Se'ele said. Setak glanced up at her, and caught the merest hint of a glint in her eye. He raised an eyebrow, but otherwise said nothing.

"I suppose it does take a bit of getting used to," Zach admitted.

"I appreciate the place that humor holds, Mr. Zulkowski, do not doubt it," Se'ele said softly. "I can also appreciate a good joke." There was the slightest emphasis on the word 'good'. "But I would appreciate it if there is no losing sight of the fact that humor is no substitute for effective performance of one's duties. Your record here indicates some brilliant work, and I would hope that it is not compromised by a tendency to tell jokes."

"Not at all, Commander," Zach responded.

"Good. Then we also understand each other."

The rest of the meeting ran smoothly. Se'ele reviewed the condition of each division, and all the chiefs found themselves appreciating her direct, straightforward style. Doctor Reilly reminded Se'ele that she was due in sickbay for her physical, and the new exec nodded.

"As soon as I have organized a few more files, I will be in to see you, Doctor. Will that do?"

Reilly nodded. "I think it will," she said. "But make sure it's today."

"Yes, Doctor, I will. You may be certain of that."

Reilly sat back, satisfied.

With that, Se'ele ended the meeting. Both she and the division chiefs felt that they could work well together, and as far as she was concerned, her goals had been met. The exec stood up and started for the stairs leading up to the lounge's balcony. Half-way up, she turned and looked back at the chiefs. "Oh, by the way... Don't forget that we're also, hopefully, gonna have a little fun from time to time, too." She suddenly flashed them a merry smile. Just as suddenly, it was gone, and she headed up the stairs and out through the doors on the way to her office.

The chiefs stared at the doors, then turned and looked at each other, wondering what the heck they had just seen.

"I have a feeling," commented Lt. Commander Jennings, "that this is going to be an...interesting year."

The next day, the Avenger was a busy ship. The ship had been resupplied, the crew had returned from leave, and the Avenger was poised to leave SpaceDock to begin its next assignment.

As had become a tradition on the Avenger for dock departures, all the principal officers had taken bridge stations. Lt. Commander Underwood had the helm, while Lieutenant Bradley was at the Navigation station. Setak was at Sciences for his first dock departure, as well, and Se'ele was doing a standard exec's circuit of the bridge.

Captain Maldonado, sitting in the command chair, slipped a computer cart into the reader slot. It was a heady feeling, he reflected. He had done this many times, but now, for the first time, it really was *his* chair. And that made a big difference. On the right chair-arm panel, a tiny screen appeared. Text and some graphics scrolled across the screen, outlining the particulars of the Avenger's new mission. The ship was to investigate a series of very odd readings that a survey vessel had detected deep within the Tormaine Nebula, a possible stellar nursery. If the sciences staff deemed it worthwhile, a recommendation for an extended survey would be sent back to Star Fleet.

Carlos smiled. This was an appropriate mission to get things started. He leaned forward. "Mr. Bradley, set a course for the Tormaine Nebula." He rattled off a set of coordinates, which the Chief Navigator entered into the computer.

"We're ready, Captain," Bradley responded a moment later. At the Helm, Underwood nodded, as well.

"You just give the order, Captain, and we'll get this bird in gear."

"Easy, Chris," Maldonado said with a chuckle. "First things first." He turned to face the Communications station. "Commander Kagan, hail Dock Control. Let's get clearance to get out of here."

"Aye, sir," Kagan answered. As she turned to her station, the captain gave the assembled bridge crew and senior officers a brief rundown of their new mission.

In SpaceDock Control, a single flag officer stood near the main console, watching as the ship made its preparations. Admiral Rosenzweig thought back to another time that he'd watched the Avenger depart on a mission without him, to test a radical "star-gate" technology. This time, though, he knew that he'd not be back aboard in just a few hours or days. This time, the ship really was going on without him. Ironically, he realized that he was okay with that. He knew she was in good hands.

An indicator flashed on the comm-panel, and Lt. Commander Kagan's voice came over a speaker, requesting departure clear-

ance. Alex glanced at the technician sitting at the station. "If I may?"

"Of course, sir."

Alex leaned in and quickly glanced at the ships' status board. Then he reached out and tapped the reply control. "This is Admiral Rosenzweig. You are cleared to depart behind the Bennington. Assume standard deep space running mode for system departure. Good luck, Avenger. May the wind be at your backs."

There was a momentary pause, and Captain Maldonado's voice came back. "Thank you, Admiral. We'll make you proud of us. Avenger out."

The channel closed, and Rosenzweig straightened up. "Thank you, Ensign," he said to the technician.

"You're welcome, sir."

Stepping away from the console, Alex walked across the Control bay until he reached the large viewports which looked out into the main hangar. Silently, he watched, as a few hundred meters away, the Avenger slowly turned, thrusters flaring, toward the huge spacedoors. Smoothly, the ship traveled through the bay, finally easing its way through the doors and off into space. It slid away from SpaceDock, accelerating steadily, its mission resuming and new journeys beckoning. The doors slid closed.

With a wistful smile, Admiral Rosenzweig nodded to the dock controllers, and left the room. His own pace quickening, he headed for the transporter stations, on his way back to Star Fleet Headquarters to focus on his own new adventures.

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