

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

BORDER SKIRMISH

By Alex Rosenzweig

"Captain's Log, Stardate 8804.09:

The Avenger is currently patrolling border sectors near Klingon space. All is currently quiet, but with the recent upturn in border violations, things are tense aboard ship. I'm concerned about the situation, and I sincerely hope that there are no problems."

Rosenzweig switched off the log recorder and glanced around the bridge. All of the standard duty stations were manned. Commander Hunt was at the helm, with Ensign 1st Class Abbott at navigation. Captain Lane manned the sciences console. Lt. Commander Centor worked busily at communications. Ensign 1st Class Padovan was at engineering, and Ensign Lazidis sat at the weapons/defense station.

Captain Vosseller was also on the bridge. He moved quietly from station to station, talking to the crew, examining readouts, and occasionally making adjustments.

"Anything on the sensors, Jon?" Rosenzweig asked.

"Not a thing," Lane replied.

"Okay. Are we still tracking the backup ships?"

"Of course," the science officer said. He wondered why the admiral was so concerned about the backup vessels. He must be expecting trouble, Lane decided.

"Good. Maintain."

Lt. Commander Fillmore had come onto the bridge just in time to hear the last exchange. "What backup ships do we have?"

Lane looked up at him. "The heavy cruiser Tikopai, a destroyer, and a scout. They're pacing us outside Klingon sensor range."

"Ah," Fillmore said. "I understand."

Vosseller, who had paused to listen to the exchange at sciences, moved on. As he reached weapons/defense, he glanced at the readouts. Lazidis was new. She had come highly recommended, but this was her first deep-space assignment, and she was inexperienced.

Noticing an unusual pattern on one of the readouts, Vosseller leaned over to get a better look. Lazidis looked up at him.

"Sir?"

Vosseller reached out and touched a control. On the readout, the anomalous pattern cleared. "Careful," the exec advised, indicating the readout. "Watch the energy flux. We don't want to disable half the phaser banks."

"Sorry, sir. I'll be more careful."

"I'm sure you will, Ensign."

Rosenzweig watched the exchange. Vosseller had handled that well. Lazidis needed some time, but she'd get comfortable with the shipboard routine. Hopefully, this patrol would be just the ticket to give her some needed experience. The admiral's thoughts were interrupted by a call from Lt. Commander Centor.

"Alex, we have an advisory in from Monitor Station Epsilon 3. They report a group of Klingon ships paralleling us on their side of the border. Commander Gannett says he's sent out a drone to get some close-in information. He'll have more for us later."

"Acknowledge the message, Devorah. Jon," Rosenzweig went on, "see if you can track the Klingons." Lane nodded and bent to

the scanner readouts. Fillmore leaned over a side console, tapping in an enhancement program for the science officer. Lane responded with a nod.

Vosseller had moved to the damage and repair station, where he was running spot-checks on critical systems. Rosenzweig swung toward him.

"Well, Bob, all okay?"

Vosseller shut down the console. "Yes. Everything checks out."

"Good."

"Alex!" This was from Lane. "The Klingons are moving toward us. The sensors are beginning to resolve individual ships."

"Yellow alert," Rosenzweig said to Lazidis. Swinging to communications, he said, "Devorah, alert Epsilon 3 and the backup ships." Indicators changed color and a klaxon sounded.

"Yellow alert, sir," the tactical specialist reported.

"Readings coming in," Lane interjected. "I've got 3 battle cruisers, 2 Klode-class and 1 K'tinga-class. No name-ID's. And they're shifting course again." He paused, exchanging a glance with Fillmore. "They're heading right for us now."

The computer-voice cut in. "Klingons on attack course and closing."

"Go to red alert," ordered Rosenzweig. Lazidis hit a switch. The lights deepened to the red of battle illumination. Klaxons sounded the call to stations.

Vosseller made a quick circuit of the bridge, running last-minute checks at various stations. The turbo-lift opened to discharge several crewpersons onto the bridge. They hurried to take up positions at the open stations.

"Raise shields," the admiral said. "Energize phasers. Arm photon torpedoes." A nod from Lazidis and the touching of several controls told him he had been heard. He looked toward the main viewer, which showed the approaching Klingons as tiny flecks.

"Commander Hunt, increase magnification on viewer."

"Aye, sir." The image shifted, and the ominous outlines of 3 Klingon battle cruisers in attack formation were centered on the screen.

Centor turned from communications. "Messages from the support ships, Admiral. The Tikopai, San Martin, and Monoceros are moving in."

"Four to three," said Fillmore.

"Actually," Lane replied, "we're about even." Years earlier, he had learned military tactics under Captain Douglass White while serving aboard the Shaitan. A key lesson had been balancing attack groups by combat capability, not merely by numbers.

The computer-voice sounded. "Alert. Drell-4 torpedoes activated." On the screen, the gaping, mouthlike torpedo tube of the K'tinga-class ship was glowing with the fiery orange-red of a tor-

pedo force-field. Seconds later, the torpedo was ejected from the battle cruiser.

"Incoming fire," said the computer. "Alert." The torpedo struck the Avenger's forward shields. The bridge shuddered.

"Jon?" asked Rosenzweig.

"Shields holding."

"Ensign Lazidis, return fire," the admiral ordered, snapping down the chair-arm motion-control restraints.

Lazidis did so. The forward phasers emitted hot blue beams of light. Phaser fire from the other ships sizzled past the Avenger and toward the Klingons.

The D-7's began to shift position. They peeled off and moved out of the visual field.

On the Tikopai, the captain swung around at the helmsman's shout, to see one of the D-7's speeding toward the ship.

"Evasive maneuvers, Lieutenant," he told the helmsman.

Swinging to the officer at weapons/defense, he asked, "Status?"

"Ready, Captain. Shields are up. Weapons are enabled."

"Lock phasers on target," the captain ordered.

"Locked on," replied the tactical officer.

The captain watched as the D-7 grew on the main viewer. Then, "Fire." The Tikopai's forward phasers released a burst of energy. Double blue beams lanced out, to strike the D-7's primary hull.

"The Klingon shields are holding," reported the science officer.

"Captain," called the communications officer, "the Monoceros reports they're under attack. The San Martin is assisting. Avenger reports that the Drell-4 is keeping them occupied."

"Very well," replied the captain. The bridge shook as Klingon phaser fire struck the shields. The captain swung to the science officer, saw her nod, and swiveled forward. "Fire phasers. Ready photon torpedoes."

The heavy cruiser returned the Klingon's fire, phaser beams driving in to hit the D-7's starboard engine nacelle.

"Fire torpedoes. Aim for the nacelle." The Tikopai released 2 torpedoes. As they reached the Klingon vessel, there was a bright flash. A small cloud of debris erupted from the nacelle.

"The second torpedo penetrated the Klingon shields," reported the science officer. "We've disabled one engine."

"The Klingon vessel is moving off," the navigator added.

"Good," said the captain. "Bring us around to back up the Avenger. Communications, get a report on the Monoceros and the San Martin."

Meanwhile, the Avenger was being kept busy by the Drell-4. Vosseller grabbed the rail behind Rosenzweig as a disruptor attack jolted the bridge.

"You okay, Bob?" the admiral asked.

"Yes." Vosseller looked across the bridge to see Lazidis returning fire.

Suddenly, the Drell-4 dove inward, approaching in a burst of speed. It sped under the Avenger, releasing bolts in quick succession from disruptor banks on its boom and secondary hull. The Avenger was hit hard. The bridge tilted a full 40 degrees to starboard. Vosseller, his hands locked around the rail, saw Lazidis thrown from her chair to crash to the deck in front of the helm console. She lay stunned, and as Rosenzweig keyed the intercom

switch and shouted, "Engineering! Status report!" Vosseller bounded toward Lazidis.

"Hunt," he called over his shoulder, "transfer weapons control. Track those bastards and return fire!" There was a backup fire-control panel at the helm station, and Vosseller knew full well that Hunt could handle the phasers. He knelt by Lazidis, muttering, "Too green. She forgot about her restraints." Ascertaining that she was alive, he pulled out his communicator. "Sickbay, this is Vosseller. Get a medical team to the bridge immediately. Out."

Lazidis started to wake up. She moaned and shook her head. "Easy," Vosseller said. "A medical team's on the way."

In engineering, Lt. Commander Newcome staggered back to the main control console. "Stabilize the backup systems!" he shouted. Ensign Witcher dashed for a panel. Newcome hit the intercom switch.

"Bridge. This is engineering. We took one helluva hit. Engine systems are stabilized, but shields are down 7 percent. Things are holding together down here, but they may not be if we get hit like that again. Out."

"Acknowledged, Mr. Newcome," Rosenzweig replied. "Do what you can." Vosseller knelt by Lazidis, waiting for the medical team. He glanced up as the admiral added, "How is she, Bob?"

"Holding on," the executive officer replied.

"Good."

"Firing phasers," Hunt said, hitting the control. The ship's phasers cut loose against the Drell-4. The Klingon vessel was hit, and Hunt realigned the phasers.

"Bring us around toward that cruiser," ordered Rosenzweig.

"Aye, sir," the helm officer replied. He patched helm control to Abbott and said, "Take it."

"Right." Abbott nodded and started keying in the program. The Avenger swung around to face the Drell-4. From another angle, the Tikopai moved in.

"Fire phasers, then torpedoes," directed Rosenzweig. Hunt nodded. The Avenger's phasers fired. Immediately afterward, the Tikopai also fired on the hapless battle cruiser. Then Hunt released the torpedoes. Two fireballs bloomed near the Klingon craft.

"Got him!" shouted Lane. Rosenzweig swung to face him as he looked up. "The Drell-4 took 2 direct torpedo hits, one amidships and one near the impulse drive. We've penetrated their shields at several points."

"The Drell-4 is moving off," reported Abbott.

"Good shooting, Jeff," Rosenzweig said to Hunt, swinging forward. "Mr. Padovan, what's our status?"

"We're operational, Admiral. Deflector shields at 91%. Lt. Commander Newcome says he's reenergizing now."

The turbo-lift doors slid open and a medical team, led by Lieutenant Graulau, raced in. They shot a quick glance around the bridge, and Fillmore pointed to where Lazidis lay, with Vosseller beside her. The medics moved toward them.

"I don't think it's too serious," Vosseller advised Graulau, "but she's pretty shaken up."

"We'll take it from here," said Graulau. Vosseller moved out of the way. The medical team set to work. As they moved Lazidis onto an anti-grav stretcher, Vosseller gave her a reassuring smile. She weakly returned it, then closed her eyes. The medical team carried

her into the turbo-lift, and the doors slid shut. A moment later, they opened again, and Lt. Commander Bell ran out.

"Brenda—" Vosseller began.

"Other tactical crew are tied up," the chief of operations told him. "I'll take the station up here." The exec nodded.

"Go."

As Bell moved toward the weapons/defense station, Rosenzweig swiveled to face Lane. "Jon, are the San Martin and Mono-ceros still engaged against the other D-7?"

Lane nodded. "Yes. Readings from here indicate a stalemate."

"Let's see what we can do about that." Rosenzweig swung forward. "Ensign Abbott, plot us a course toward them. Mr. Hunt, warp 2."

The Avenger shifted position and accelerated in the direction of the destroyer and scout. The Tikopai moved in directly behind it. The Klingon captain proved to be, in Rosenzweig's estimation, either a berserker or a fool, for when the 2 vessels approached, the D-7 promptly fired on them.

"Idiot," muttered the admiral. He glanced at weapons/defense. "Lt. Commander Bell, engage."

"Aye, sir," Bell responded briskly, keying the phaser controls.

The Avenger began to fire, and moments later, the Tikopai followed suit.

Though hopelessly outnumbered, the D-7's captain steadfastly refused to budge. It wasn't long before the combined onslaught from the 4 Federation starships overloaded the battle cruiser's shields. They collapsed, and the phasers sliced into the hull.

Lane looked up. "Alex, the matter/antimatter force barriers in their engines are becoming unstable."

"Damn," Rosenzweig responded. "Mr. Hunt, get us out of terminal range. Devorah, warn the other ships."

All 4 ships backed away from the doomed battle cruiser. The flaring intensified from the broken secondary hull. All at once, there was a series of tiny flashes at the connection point of the secondary hull and the boom. The primary hull fled away, using the small impulse drives located at the end of the boom. Then the secondary hull was replaced by a blazing fireball.

Hunt switched the main viewer to track the fleeing boom and primary hull. He looked back at Rosenzweig. "Shall we pursue, Admiral?"

"No," said Rosenzweig. He turned toward Bell. "Secure from general quarters." Glancing back to Hunt and Abbott, he ordered, "Bring us back to our patrol course."

"Aye, sir," Hunt replied. Abbott nodded.

The extra technicians shut down their consoles and left the bridge. Only the normal-duty crew remained. A tactical specialist came in and relieved Bell at weapons/defense. Vosseller stood near the rail and gazed at the main viewer. Rosenzweig activated the log recorder.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental:

Our patrol group was attacked by a trio of Klingon cruisers. We drove them off, with only minor casualties here. I can only hope now that this is an isolated incident, and not a harbinger of more to come."

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