

STAR SURVEY

By Alex Rosenzweig

Prologue: Storytelling

SD10411.09:

The golden-orange light of the star called Kematon lit the landing field set to one side of a small base built into the side of a mountain. Kematon was beginning to set as Admiral Alex Rosenzweig and his team returned to the warpsuttle *Hyperion*. At Star Fleet's behest, the admiral had visited the base to follow up on word of operating difficulties there. It really hadn't taken all that long to check things out and determine what the problem was. A few recommendations and a personnel review later and the team was preparing to return to Headquarters.

As the shuttle got clearance to depart, the base's commanding officer, Lt. Commander LaMastra, signaled one last time. "Thanks again, Admiral," he said. "I really wish I'd thought to put in that sort of info tracking before."

"No worries, Commander. If you've learned something that'll help you in the future, I've done my job."

"Well, then, yes, sir, I have. And thanks for the story, too. Kematon Base out."

"Admiral, Traffic Control just sent clearance on the secondary frequency," Shralat reported.

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Let's be on our way."

As the *Hyperion* lifted off and headed toward orbit, Lt. Commander Coburn turned to Admiral Rosenzweig and asked, "Sir, what kind of story did you tell LaMastra?"

"A tale from one of my tours of duty back on the *Revere*. I thought it might put what I was explaining to him into some sort of perspective. Apparently it worked."

"Y'know, sir," Coburn said, with a glint in his eye, there's one story you never did get around to telling us."

"Oh?"

"The one about your first mission on one of these babies." His gesture encompassed the cabin around them. "You said you'd flown on one a couple of decades ago, but never told us what happened."

"Now that was a heck of a flight," Alex said thoughtfully.

"We have almost a day's travel ahead of us, sir," Shralat mentioned offhandedly.

"Plenty of time!" Coburn said with a bright smile.

Rosenzweig shot Shralat a "You're a *big* help" look. The pilot grinned back at him, but also looked a tiny bit self-conscious at being that cheeky to an admiral, so Alex winked at her to let her know he wasn't really upset. She relaxed a little. "Oh, all right," he replied in response to Coburn. "Since we do indeed have the time, I'll tell you all the story."

Once the shuttle was comfortably on course and all systems were confirmed to be running smoothly, Rosenzweig settled into a seat more or less in the center of the cabin, and the others turned their own seats toward him. The admiral took a breath, and began...

Part I: Prelude

"STAR FLEET COMMAND DISPATCH

To: Captain Arnold K. Nielsen III, Commanding ST 595
Revere

From: Admiral Byron Komack

Subject: ST 595 *Revere* to Serve as Starship Base of Operations for Survey Mission Testing Long-Range Capabilities of *Tai'Atai*-Class Heavy Shuttlecraft and Warp Sled

Stardate: 7607.07

Captain Nielsen:

ST 595 *Revere* is hereby assigned to serve as starship base of operations for a long-range survey mission designed to test the capabilities the *Tai'Atai*-Class Heavy Shuttlecraft/Warp Sled combination and evaluate the vehicle's utility for such missions. Further, your Chief Science Officer, Lt. Commander Alexander Rosenzweig, will serve as mission commander. He is hereby authorized to select, subject to availability, seven crewpersons to accompany him, with an emphasis on scientific and engineering personnel. The shuttle chosen for this mission will carry additional equipment to optimize the systems for the expected tasks.

Once personnel choices have been made, they should be forwarded to my office for review and approval, so that orders may be cut to appropriate personnel. At that time, the *Revere* will proceed to Starbase 24, which has been selected as the field coordination point for this mission. Further orders regarding personnel will also be issued at that time.

Signed,
Byron Komack"

"Screen off," said Captain Arnold Nielsen of the *U.S.S. Revere*. The text of the message from Admiral Komack faded from the viewer, leaving behind the abstract pattern that adorned the screen when it wasn't active. Nielsen turned to Lt. Commander Rosenzweig, who sat next to him at the small square table in the office section of the captain's cabin. "Well, Alex, it looks like you've gotten the kind of mission that a lot of officers would kill for."

Rosenzweig chose his words carefully. After all, he'd been aboard the *Revere* for less than two months, and was still getting to know his new commanding officer. "Indeed, sir. It's quite an honor."

"How long will it take you to get your crew selections together?"

"I'd like to check through some of the personnel files," Rosenzweig said. "Say, a day or two?"

"All right," said Nielsen. "Let me know when you're ready."

"Yes, sir, I'll do that."

"Good. Dismissed, then." Rosenzweig nodded, rose, and left the cabin.

Rosenzweig didn't take too long to make his choices. One of the exercises he'd undertaken at Command School was to assemble a crew for exactly this type of mission, and as a result, he'd already given a great deal of thought to just who he'd want. As his lead for sciences, he wanted Lt. Commander Stephen Penik, with whom he'd gone to the Academy and who was currently serving aboard the *U.S.S. Perseus*. In the lead spot for engineering, Alex had in mind Lt. Commander Bob Gossenberger. Bob had also been an Academy classmate, and was now serving on the starship *Lexington*. For engineering support, he chose Lieutenant Ilene Germain and Ensign Leslie Brennan. The operations role took more thought, and Alex eventually settled on Lt. Commander Lori Bergelson. Alex and Lori had a past, and it really hadn't been a very comfortable one, but the truth was that, when push came to shove, he believed that he could rely on her to get the job done. That left the two remaining sciences posts. In the specialist position, Alex chose Lieutenant J.G. Karen Stewart, a scientist aboard the *U.S.S. Aquila*.

The last post, second spot for sciences, had left Alex less certain. High on the list of possibilities was Lieutenant Cindy Lee, whom he'd met a few months previously. She was a friend of Penik's, and seemed well-qualified for the job. Still, something about her wasn't sitting quite right with Alex. Despite her rank, her field experience wasn't what it might be, and he wasn't clear, from her file, what her reactions to high-pressure situations might be. Given the nature of the mission in question, that could be a significant factor, Alex reasoned, and he decided to continue the search for a suitable candidate.

Even after he adjusted the parameters...several times...the list was quite long. Alex shook his head frustratedly, and scanned the list as it scrolled down the viewer. Suddenly, one name jumped out at him: "Miles, Shirley Ann. Lt. Commander." Alex had known Miles a long time ago. Like both Penik and Gossenberger, Miles had been an Academy classmate, and the two had shared several courses. He pulled her file, and began to read.

Miles, it turned out, coincidentally enough, was currently serving as an Assistant Science Officer on Starbase 24, which was commanded by Commodore Anatoly Kobryn. Her career had been varied, including three ships, two starbases, and an Epsilon-series monitoring station, on which she had served for several months prior to her transfer to Starbase 24. As he continued to read, Alex was struck by how "right" she felt for this mission. He wasn't quite sure what was driving the instinct, but in the end, he decided to trust it. Recalling his crew list file, he added Miles' name into the last billet, saved, and sent on to Komack and Nielsen.

With the recommendations sent in, Rosenzweig contacted Gossenberger aboard the *Lexington*. When his viewer lit with an image of the blond engineer, Gossenberger grinned. "Alex!" he exclaimed. "Been a while. How are ya'?"

"Doin' well," Alex replied. "I hope I didn't drag you away from anything too critical."

"Nah. Just routine intermix diagnostics. Boring stuff. A distraction's a blessing." Bob winked.

Alex chuckled. "Well, okay, then. I wanted to give you a heads-up. I might be giving you a distraction of a bit more than a few minutes soon."

Bob gave him a questioning look. "Oh?" Alex proceeded to fill him in. When he was done, Bob smirked. "So... Lori, huh?"

"Assuming Star Fleet doesn't veto any of my choices."

"And you don't think that might just be a bad idea?"

"She's good at what I need her to do. And I'd expect her to treat this as professional."

"And you? Will you be able to do that?"

Alex smiled to himself. Bob always had been a direct sort o' guy. "Yes, I do believe I will. It's been a long time since...we had our issues."

Bob narrowed his eyes, studying Alex. Deciding that the Science Officer was committed to this choice, he nodded. Changing tactics, he went on, "And Shirley, too?"

"Yup."

"Steve'll love that."

"Jeez, Bob, give Steve a break." Ever since the four of them, along with a few others, had shared a rather...colorful excursion during a break from their studies, Gossenberger had teased Penik about Miles.

"I'm always giving him a break."

"All right, all right." Alex wasn't feeling the need to go back over that ground again.

"Where is she, anyway?" Like Alex, Bob had lost touch with Shirley.

"Starbase 24. She popped up when I was doing a personnel search for crew for this mission."

"It'll be good to see her again," Bob said, a bit more seriously.

"Yeah, agreed," Alex said.

Just then a chime sounded at Gossenberger's desk. "Oh, well. Gotta go. The diagnostic results are in."

"Okay. I'm sure you'll be hearing soon, once the orders come through."

"All right, Alex. I'll talk to you soon. Gossenberger out."

"Rosenzweig out." The viewer faded to black.

Komack's reply came back in less than a week. Although even Komack apparently had been aware of Rosenzweig's past issues with Bergelson ("How the heck does an admiral find out about this stuff, and why does he care?!" exclaimed Alex. "That's *why* he's an admiral," Nielsen commented. "It's his job to know."), he accepted Rosenzweig's requests and advised that the appropriate orders would be cut shortly.

Along with the crew approvals came the orders directing the *Revere* to Starbase 24. Once there, they would be issued the long-range warpshuttle *Endeavor*; the *Tai Atai* combination shuttle vehicle that would be used for the survey. Once the remainder of the crew was picked up, the *Revere*, with the shuttle in tow, would proceed to an unexplored sector just beyond the boundaries of the Federation. The sector didn't have a name, but it was directly adjacent to Sector 1NK-10-30.

Nielsen acknowledged the orders, and directed the helmsman to lay in a course for the starbase. While the ship made its journey, Rosenzweig studied his briefing materials. When he got aboard that warpshuttle, he wanted to be ready.

On Starbase 24, a young ensign handed a padd to Commodore Kobryn. The starbase commander accepted the rectangular wedge-shaped device and read the text displayed on its screen. The text was new orders from Admiral Komack. Kobryn's eyes narrowed as he read.

Glancing up, he saw the ensign still standing at attention by his desk. "Thank you, Ensign. Dismissed." With a crisp salute, the young woman hurried off. Kobryn returned his attention to the orders. He had to admit, he was less than thrilled by them. He didn't mind the field coordination job; he'd had those before. He was not, however, happy to have Lt. Commander Miles "borrowed". Not only was she involved in several projects, but she'd been released from the base's medical center only a few days before, following recovery from injuries. Kobryn noticed the doctor's report on Miles still sitting on his desk, and reviewed it. Miles was reported in good condition. Her knee, ankle, and cranial injuries had all been repaired. The doctor, though, did express concerns that her stress responses weren't fully back up to spec. She'd heal fully in a week or so, the doctor said, but she should take it relatively easy during that time.

Unfortunately, with these orders, she didn't have a week to take it easy. She had perhaps three days, after which she would have to be in adequate condition. Kobryn considered for a moment, then called Miles to his office.

A short time later, Kobryn's intercom chimed. He tapped the control, and the screen lit to show his yeoman at her desk in the outer office. "Sir," she said, I have Lt. Commander Miles here."

"Good," Kobryn replied. "Send her in, please."

"Aye, sir." As her image faded, the office doors split and Miles stepped through. Kobryn looked up as she came toward his desk. He motioned to a chair.

"Sit down, Commander."

"Thank you, Commodore." Sitting, Miles looked curiously at Kobryn. "Sir, may I ask what this is about?"

"Of course. You received the orders from Admiral Komack?" At Miles' nod, Kobryn went on. "As you know, it's a specialized mission, using a long-range shuttle with new hardware and modified systems."

"Yes, sir."

"I am concerned about your participation in this mission. You've only been out of the medical center for a few days."

"I appreciate that, sir, but I feel fine." Kobryn looked skeptically at her. "If it helps, I know the mission commander."

Kobryn glanced at his padd. "Rosenzweig?"

"Yes. We were at the Academy together, and unless he's a lot different now than he was then, he won't push me further than I can go, if he can help it."

"And if he can't?"

Miles' eyes crinkled in a slight smile. "Then he'll do everything he can to make sure he pushes as little past that point as possible." Kobryn just looked at her for another moment. "Sir, I'm flattered by your concern. But this mission is also good for my career, and I'd really like to go. The risks are ones I'm willing to take."

Kobryn sighed. "Very well, if you're sure..."

"I am, sir."

"All right, then. Good luck." Kobryn rose, and Miles did, as well.

"Thank you, sir," she said.

The commodore nodded with a smile, and said only, "Dismissed, Commander." Miles nodded and left. Kobryn watched her go, and then, still smiling, sat back down and returned to his work.

Three days and several hours later, the *Revere* slid into standard orbit around Starbase 24. As the ship's chief engineer made arrangements to have some minor repairs taken care of and the ship rigged for towing the warpshuttle, Rosenzweig headed for the transporter room. Arriving on Deck 7 and reaching the transporter facility, he greeted Transporter Chief Strauss.

"Lt. Commander," Strauss said coolly, "Lt. Commander Miles signaled. She's ready to beam up."

"Good. Let's get her aboard, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir," said Strauss. She turned to her console, activating the system. As a hum began building, she tapped another control and spoke into her 'com pickup, establishing a link to the base's transporter station. "Starbase 24, confirm beaming, please."

A moment later, as a shining cylinder of blue-white light formed on the platform, the base signaled. "We confirm dematerialization."

"We're picking her up," responded Strauss. The cylinder brightened, and a shimmering form in the outline of a slim female appeared within the cylinder. The outline gained form and substance, and solidified into Lt. Commander Shirley Miles, standing on the glowing yellow-orange disk. As the glow faded, Rosenzweig, smiling, stepped out of the booth and crossed to the platform, just as Miles was stepping down to the floor level. The two shook hands.

"Well, Shirley," Alex said softly, "how have you been?"

"Well enough, all things considered." At Rosenzweig's raised eyebrow, a habit she recalled that he'd picked up in his Academy days, she explained, "Had a bit of an accident about a week and a half ago."

Alex's eyes widened in concern. "Accident?"

"I cracked myself up pretty badly," Miles elaborated, "but the medics took care of it. I feel fine now."

"Are you sure?" asked Alex. "I don't want you to be putting yourself at—"

"Yes, Alex, I'm sure. It's fine." Inwardly, Miles was relieved. The Alex Rosenzweig she'd known at the Academy was always eager to help others. He gave respect freely, and asked only that others do the same. He was always willing to draw from his considerable amount of knowledge to add to a discussion, but had enough perspective to be able to admit when he didn't know something, too. One of the things he'd always regretted was that too many of his fellow cadets seemed mainly willing to treat him like a walking knowledge base, from whom they could draw at will. It was something Miles had never tried to take undue advantage of.

For his part, Rosenzweig had always had fond memories of Miles, too. Some, he recollected, might have been perhaps **too** fond, and he ruthlessly suppressed some of those old thoughts. It was neither the time nor the place. He dragged himself away from old ruminations and came back to the present.

"All right, then," he said with a smile. He led her out into the corridor. "Let me take you to your quarters."

"I have some bags to come aboard..." said Miles uncertainly.

"Strauss is probably beaming them aboard right now," Alex assured her. "I'll have a yeoman get them for you. Oh, by the way,

I think you'll know some others of the survey crew. I've chosen Steve Penik, Bob Gossenberger, and Lori Bergelson as crewmembers."

"Bob'll be on the mission?" Miles asked, with a half-smile, thinking back to the off-beat way the two of them had interacted at the Academy. They'd argued a lot, even done a few less-than-nice things to one another, but Rosenzweig had always suspected that they liked each other more than either one would admit.

"Yes, he will be. He'll be engineering lead. I'm sure you'll have occasion to work with him. You'll definitely be working with Steve, who'll be sciences lead."

"Steve, too, hmm?" Gossenberger used to tease Penik about having designs on Miles, and Penik cheerfully teased back. As much as it seemed to be just a game, Rosenzweig had always suspected that it went deeper. He even admitted, inside his own head, that he had a few designs of his own, but to her he'd never said a word, and at this point had no intention of saying anything.

"Yep. We'll be rendezvousing with the *Perseus* and the *Lexington* to pick up Steve and Bob. After that it's on to Starbase 28 to pick up Leslie Brennan. Then we head to Deep Space HQ. On the way, we'll rendezvous with the *Aquila* to pick up Karen Stewart and the *Vogel* to get Ilene Germain. At Headquarters we'll pick up Lori, and then it's out to Sector 1NK-10-30 on the border. At that point, we get onto the warpshuttle and start the mission. We'll head into the area out beyond 1NK-10-30, make general star charts, and conduct closer inspections of any star systems we determine warrant it."

"Sounds very interesting."

"I think so, too."

The two officers reached the guest quarters assigned to Miles. As the door slid open, Alex turned to Shirley. "Settle in, and make yourself comfortable. If you'd like, I'll check back on you in an hour or so. I do have to get some work done, though."

"It's okay; you don't have to check on me, but thanks," Miles said. "Will you be in your office?" Alex nodded, and Shirley continued, "How about if I come look for you there? It'd be more convenient for you."

Alex smiled wryly. "I do have to admit that it would." They both chuckled. "Very well, then. I'll see you later."

"Fine." With a nod, Miles stepped into her cabin, reaching up as she did so to undo the clip tying back her long, straight brown hair. Rosenzweig watched for a moment, until the door slid closed. Then he hurried off toward his office.

A couple of days later, during Rosenzweig's duty shift, the *Revere* reached the *Perseus*. Rosenzweig had, the day before, given Miles a tour of the ship. He'd left her with the news that Penik and Gossenberger would be aboard the next day. Now, he sat at the sciences station and watched the destroyer grow on the viewer.

"Lieutenant East," Nielsen said to the navigator, "what is our distance from the *Perseus*?"

"Fourteen million kilometers, sir."

"Approach to ten thousand kilometers." Nielsen swung toward the communications officer. "Lieutenant Carr, please signal the *Perseus*. Advise them that we are ready to transport Lt. Commander Penik aboard."

"Yes, Captain." A moment later, she confirmed, "*Perseus* acknowledges. Mr. Penik will be beaming over momentarily."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. Please ask Mr. Matex in Transporter Room 1 to have Mr. Penik come to the bridge once he's aboard."

"Aye, sir."

Rosenzweig tapped his own intercom switch. "Lt. Commander Miles to the bridge, please."

"On my way," Miles responded.

Rosenzweig focused on his console and waited for the muted swoosh of the elevator doors. If his guess of where Miles was was accurate, she and Penik would enter the bridge from separate lifts, and he was looking forward to the reaction when they first saw each other.

At the sound of the doors, he rotated his chair to face the two lifts. Penik and Miles stepped onto the bridge almost simultaneously. They both glanced toward the sciences station, where they knew Rosenzweig would be sitting, and then past him toward the main viewer, which showed the *Perseus* pulling away. Their gaze then dropped to Nielsen in the command chair.

"Hello, Commanders," the captain said.

Both Penik and Miles caught the "s" in Nielsen's greeting. They suddenly each looked over and saw the other, and broke into smiles. They caught themselves and acknowledged Captain Nielsen, who was himself chuckling at their reaction.

By that point, Rosenzweig had stood up and moved across the bridge. Penik took a step forward to meet him, hand outstretched. "Welcome aboard, Steve," Alex said, as the two friends shook hands.

"Thanks," Penik replied. "Nice ship you've got here," he quipped. Rosenzweig chuckled, since the *Perseus* and *Revere* were very similar in design.

"Are your things being taken care of?" Rosenzweig asked.

"Mr. Matex said he'd have a yeoman bring them to my cabin."

"Good. Well, I can either let you get settled, or set you straight to work."

"I can rest later," Penik commented with a grin.

"All right, then," Rosenzweig replied. "Why don't you two go down and start looking over the sciences elements of the mission profile. I've got it logged as file SMS12. Steve, you can get to the library lounge okay?"

"Sure, Alex, no problem." Penik turned to Miles and indicated the turbo-lift with an "after you" gesture. Miles nodded courteously and started into the lift. Penik followed. As the doors closed behind them, Rosenzweig went back to his station.

Over his shoulder, he heard Nielsen addressing the navigator. "Mr. East, lay in a course for the *Lexington*."

"Course laid in, sir."

"Warp factor eight, Mr. Williams."

"Warp eight, aye, sir," Helmsman Williams responded. He tapped controls, and the ship smoothly accelerated forward.

The *Revere* made rendezvous with the *Lexington* a few hours later, and Rosenzweig, Miles, and Penik were all on-hand to meet Gossenberger in the transporter room.

As the engineer materialized on the transporter platform, he smiled as he took in his friends waiting for him. "Well, it's Old Home Week," he quipped. Then he glanced at Lieutenant Strauss. "Permission to come aboard?"

Strauss, ever the stickler for protocol, formally replied, "Permission granted."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Gossenberger said, and then the four officers were out the door.

Within an hour, as the *Revere* left the *Lexington* behind and set out for Starbase 28, the group soon found themselves sitting in a conversation pit in the *Revere's* recreation deck, chatting over old times and new plans.

After a while, it seemed like Gossenberger was running out of steam. "Bob, you okay?" Rosenzweig asked.

"Yeah... I just pulled a double shift before coming over here, to make sure I had everything done before I left."

"Bob!" exclaimed Shirley. "Why didn't you say something?!"

"I've done it before. It's not a big deal."

"Bob," Alex said softly, "I need my team at its best. That includes you. Now go get some rest. And that *is* an order." There was just enough of an undercurrent of firmness in Alex's voice that Bob didn't argue.

"All right, all right... I'll go rest."

"Good. We're 23 hours from Starbase 28, so let's reconvene tomorrow, at the beginning of Beta Shift. If you've got any questions at that time, we'll address them, okay?"

There were no objections, so Gossenberger headed off to the cabin assigned to him. The other three officers remained for a while, until a call from the physics lab drew Rosenzweig away, too.

The next day, at the end of Alpha Shift, once the Chief Scientist for Physical Sciences arrived to relieve him, Rosenzweig relinquished the console and entered the turbo-lift.

"Rec Deck," he said, and the lift sped down the tube. When it reached its destination, the disembark light flashed on and the doors slid open. Alex stepped off, crossed around the lift station, and walked through the middle of the chamber.

Two ensigns were playing a game as he walked by. One of them, a female engineering specialist, looked up and said, "Hello, Commander. Would you like to join us?"

"No, thank you, Ensign," Rosenzweig replied. "Another appointment calls. Another time, perhaps?"

"Of course, sir," the specialist said with a smile.

The Science Officer glanced around the room for a moment. Not seeing who he was looking for, he headed toward the alcove lounges to one side of the main Rec Deck. Following the directory signage, he reached one of the lounges in which tridimensional chess sets were set up. Penik was fascinated by chess, and Alex theorized that he might have found himself a partner.

Entering the alcove, Alex stopped in his tracks, completely taken aback by what he saw. Penik had indeed found himself a partner. Miles sat across the table from him, intently studying the tri-leveled board. She brought up her hand, held it for just a moment, then reached out and lifted a rook, moving it three spaces forward and down a level, and took Penik's queen. Steve just shook his head as Alex walked up to the table.

"Shoulda seen that one," Alex quipped as he approached. Penik looked up, a mix of amusement and chagrin playing across his features.

"You're right," he replied, managing to look simultaneously self-deprecating and ironic. "I'm usually better than that."

"Couldn't be that you're distracted by anything, could it?" came a new voice. Lt. Commander Gossenberger had come into the alcove and settled himself in one of the unoccupied chairs, his eyes twinkling as he teased.

Penik gave him a look that said nothing so much as, 'Give me a break', and Rosenzweig just grinned.

"No, Bob," Steve said, "I **don't** think so."

"No?" Gossenberger looked pointedly at Miles, who seemed startled at the attention. Apparently, she'd not had cause to think much about the old teasing in a long time.

"Bob..." Alex remonstrated gently, reacting to the beseeching look she gave him.

"Okay, okay, I'll stop," Gossenberger said.

"That's better," Alex replied. He also seated himself, and they observed the rest of the game in silence.

When Penik and Miles were done, they both stood up. Despite his error earlier in the game, Penik had rallied and scored a decisive victory. Rosenzweig shook his hand, congratulating him, and Miles echoed the gesture a moment later.

Rosenzweig then took the opportunity to jump in with a bit of business. Glancing at both Penik and Miles, he asked, "Did you two read over the science outline for the survey mission?"

Shirley nodded. "Yes, we did. I don't see any major issues. But I did notice a heavy emphasis on the physical sciences. Not expecting to need biosciences much?"

"Unless something really unexpected happens," Alex commented, "I really don't think we'll be making contacts with any new civilizations. We'll also be running an essentially space-based operation, so if we do encounter life-forms, we'll do biological analysis from the shuttle."

"Ahh," Shirley responded.

"I've checked my own mission file," Bob added. "I hadn't realized that this mission configuration hadn't ever been tested for this shuttle design."

"The original orders included that. It would seem that we're the guinea pigs." Alex smiled. "But I trust you. And you'll have two support staff to help."

"Germain and Brennan."

"Right." Alex nodded.

"Then we'll get the job done."

As the *Revere* pulled into orbit around Starbase 28, Rosenzweig contacted the base and requested permission to beam down. Receiving the okay from the base, he made his way to the transporter room.

Materializing in one of the booths in the main transporter terminal on the starbase, Alex slid back the translucent door and stepped out. Glancing quickly about, he noted a bank of terminals set into one wall. The signage over them said, "ORIENTATION TERMINALS" in clear, bold letters.

Alex walked over and activated a terminal. As the screen lit, he entered in a request for the location of Ensign Brennan.

"Ensign Leslie Brennan is in her quarters," the computer responded.

"Establish communication link," instructed Rosenzweig.

The computer beeped in response, and the viewer image shifted to display Brennan in her quarters. "Yes?" she said. Behind her, Alex could see several persons seated around a square table, an unfamiliar-looking board game between them.

"Hello, Leslie, it's Alex Rosenzweig."

"Commander!" said Brennan, surprised. "I wasn't expecting you for another couple of hours. You're on the surface?"

"That's affirmative," Rosenzweig replied.

"I'm in Building LQ-Delta. You're welcome to come on over. There should be a ground transport near where you are."

"Yes, there is."

"Good!" Brennan smiled brightly. "I'll wait for you here. See you in a few minutes."

"All right, then," said Rosenzweig. "Out."

Alex stepped away from the terminal and crossed over to the ground transport units. Stepping into an empty car, he told the onboard computer, "Building LQ-Delta." The computer beeped an acknowledgement and the car silently glided off along the track.

As he rode along, Alex looked through the windows at the structures which went by. At least in this part of the base, they were of an essentially utilitarian design. There were none of the more exotic structures that graced the complexes of Starbases 11, 17, or 22. These buildings were simple and clean-lined, evoking a more "businesslike" atmosphere. Above and beyond the buildings, fluffy white clouds hovered in a green sky, lending just a hint of otherworldiness to the scene.

The car slid to a stop not far from Building LQ-Delta. Alex stepped out and headed down a walkway. He turned a corner and continued along a plastiform walkpath, bounded by an old-style stone wall. Amusedly, he reached out and gently touched the stone. It was very smooth on the wall's top and sides, but he could see that it had been built from mortar and rough stones—the old fashioned way—and then laser-cut to smoothness after the wall had been erected. Alex smiled at the touch of homeyness, and then continued on his way.

Reaching the building, he used the touchscreen by the door to access the building directory and signal Brennan. "Brennan here," came Leslie's voice through the speaker. With the surprise from her previous greeting gone, Alex could sense something else different from when he had known her at the Academy. She had been a cadet while he'd been at Command School, and they'd gotten to know each other then. Now, he could sense a real self-assurance in her. She had grown into her position.

"It's Alex," Rosenzweig said.

A light flashed and the door slid open, as Leslie said, "Come on up. I'm on Level 4, Room 9."

"On my way." Alex walked into the building's lobby and crossed to a bank of lifts. He rode up to the fourth level and stepped into the hallway. Following the numbers by the doors, he located Brennan's room easily enough. He tapped the door chime, and a moment later, the door slid open to reveal Ensign Leslie Brennan standing there.

Alex gazed at her for a moment. Far from the Academy cadet he had known just a couple of years ago, Leslie was now a confident, poised specialist.

"Come in, please, Alex," she said, stepping aside to allow him to enter the room. The table he had seen on the viewer was off to one side, though it was now empty. The game, too, had been put away. "I sent my friends home," Leslie said. "You're early."

"We made better time than we expected," Alex said. "Are you ready to go?"

"Just about. I just have a couple of last-minute things to get together." She stepped into an adjoining room. A moment later, she called back out to him, "Could you set the comm-panel to accept messages?"

"Okay." The Commander went over to the panel. It was a standard design, and the settings took only a few seconds to program. As he finished, Leslie came back out, a carry-case in

hand. She stopped at the comm.-panel, and signaled her superior officer, letting her know that she was heading up to the *Revere*. After getting the acknowledgement and approval she needed, she turned back to Rosenzweig.

"Let's go," she said with a smile.

The two stepped into the corridor, and Leslie keyed her security code into her door panel. She and Rosenzweig then returned the ground transport unit and rode back to the transporter terminal. From there, they beamed up to the ship.

As the last tinges of transporter energy faded around them into nothingness, Rosenzweig stepped forward and off the platform, then turned and extended a hand to help Brennan. With a smile, she accepted his hand and followed him off. With a nod of thanks to the specialist on duty, the Science Officer led his charge out of the room.

As they approached the quarters to which Brennan had been assigned, the next door down the hall opened and Lt. Commander Miles stepped out. "Hi, Alex, Ensign," she said.

"Hi, Shirley," Alex said. "This is Leslie Brennan. She'll be part of the engineering team on the mission."

"Nice to meet you, Leslie. I'm Shirley Miles."

"A pleasure, Commander," Brennan responded. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

"I'm sorry I can't stick around and chat," Miles said, "but I have to find Commander Penik and check on a few things with him."

"That's fine, Shirley," Alex said. "We'll catch up with you later."

Miles smiled and hurried off down the corridor. Alex turned back to Leslie. "Will you need any help settling in?"

"I don't think so," she said.

"Call me on the bridge if you have any questions."

"I will. Thanks, Alex." Brennan favored Rosenzweig with an excited grin.

Rosenzweig smiled back and also took his leave. He decided that Brennan had been a good choice for this mission. He might not be her mentor any longer, but as her superior officer, he'd be able to see how she applied her training in the field. That suited him just fine.

Returning to the bridge, he was met by Captain Nielsen. "Ms. Brennan settled in?"

"Yes, sir, or at least she's getting there."

"Good. We're ready to leave orbit. Our next step is to collect Lieutenant Stewart, yes?"

"Right."

"Good, then." Nielsen turned back to face the front of the bridge. "Ensign Wilder, lay in a course for Deep Space HQ, by way of our rendezvous points with the *U.S.S. Aquila* and *U.S.S. Vogel*."

"Aye, Captain," replied the young navigator, Kathy Wilder. She worked her console, setting parameters, entering equations, and laying in the course. "Course programming ready," she reported.

"Helmsman," said Nielsen, "take us out. Warp factor five when ready."

"Yes, sir," the helm officer replied, focusing on the console. The ship slid smoothly out of orbit. From his station, Rosenzweig watched as the image of the starbase shrank on the viewer. As the planet faded from view, he glanced at a chronometer at his station and realized that he had several hours before he was

actually due on the bridge for his shift. He also realized that he was hungry.

Excusing himself, he rode down to the rec deck. He crossed the deck and entered one of the smaller dining rooms nearby. Ordering a sandwich from the synthesizer, he found an unoccupied two-person table and quietly ate his meal.

Finishing up, he returned his tray and utensils to a retrieval slot and went back into the rec deck itself. Glancing around, he saw Lt. Commander Miles on the upper-level balcony, gazing out of one of the large viewports. He climbed the stairs located to one side of the room and walked along the balcony until he reached her.

"Hello, there," he said warmly.

Miles looked over at him. "Hi," she said.

"Enjoying the view?"

"It's beautiful." Miles gestured toward the port and space beyond it. Below them, the ship's single drive nacelle could be seen stretching aftward, away from them. Just barely visible to their right was the warpshuttle, nestled near the dorsal and secured with tractor beams and mag-locks.

"Looking out from here, you can get a good feel for the ship. Take the nacelle." She pointed. "It's, what? Twenty meters high?"

"Eighteen and a third, approximately," Rosenzweig said.

Miles nodded. "I know the basics of the engineering, but as for the details..."

"Well, I'm sure Bob'd be happy to go on at some length about starship engineering," Alex commented with a smile.

"Oh, he has," Miles replied with a chuckle. At Alex's look, she explained, "We've been discussing the mission to some extent. If need be, I'll be able to help a bit with the engineering."

"Hopefully, we won't need that, but it's good to know. You did read the briefing, right?"

"Yes, I did."

"Like it said, Leslie's quite capable. Graduated near the top of her class. And Ilene's an expert in her field. In a few years, she'll be challenging Bob, and he's no slouch." Rosenzweig smiled at Miles' chuckle, and then changed the subject. "Tell me, do you enjoy working on Starbase 24?"

"Yes, I do. Maybe it's not as 'glamorous' as a ship assignment, but I don't really need that. I do eventually want to head up the Sciences division on a ship or base, though, and I figure this mission will be a good one on my record." She paused for just a moment, then said, "I want to thank you for inviting me to be a part of your crew."

"Well, it wasn't an act of altruism," Alex replied with a smile of his own. "Your record is exemplary, and your performance ratings all excellent. I need a solid officer, and you're that. You might also have noticed that I chose a number of people I know for this mission. Since we'll all be in close quarters for several weeks, known quantities were also valuable, and you're that, too."

"All right. I can't argue with that thinking," Miles said.

Rosenzweig opted to change the subject again. "Come on. Let me show you a few other recreational amenities we have to offer..."

While Rosenzweig and Miles were enjoying the *Revere's* recreational facilities, there was also activity taking place up on the bridge. Captain Nielsen received a message from Star Fleet Command. The mission timetable had been moved thirty-six hours forward. To compensate, Lieutenant Germain and Lieutenant J.G.

Stewart would have to be picked up earlier. Both the *Aquila* and the *Vogel* had been notified, and were proceeding accordingly. As the message ended and the main viewer switched back to the view ahead, Nielsen swung to the lieutenant sitting at the communications station.

"Anything more?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied the communications officer. Nielsen nodded and turned back to the helmsman.

"Increase speed to warp factor seven, Mr. Obryk." Obryk moved to comply, and Wilder looked back at Nielsen.

"Same course, Captain?"

"Correct, Ensign."

"Aye, sir." Wilder turned back to her station and entered the new time parameters into the navigation computer. As Obryk manipulated his controls, the *Revere* moved steadily more swiftly through space.

The ship made good time, and reached the rendezvous sector well ahead of schedule. Following orders, the on-duty navigator dropped the ship out of warp. At the sciences station, Lieutenant Yaworski began running sensor sweeps of the area, with a program running to flag him upon the *Aquila's* approach.

The *Aquila*, as it turned out, was an hour and a half late. Both Nielsen and Rosenzweig were more than a little irritated by the time the scout was picked up on the sensors and they were called to the bridge.

"Put me through to the *Aquila's* captain," ordered Nielsen, as he stepped off of the lift.

"Yes, Captain," said the communications officer. "They're acknowledging our signal."

As Captain Gary Sandun, the *Aquila's* commanding officer, appeared on the main viewer, Nielsen half-rose, hand upraised, index finger extended, "Captain Sandun, you'd better have one helluva good excuse for—"

"Captain, please," Sandun said placatingly, "we do."

"And that would be?"

"We'd located an asteroid field outside a star system, and were surveying it when the timetable update came through. Some of the asteroids had highly unusual properties that suggested that they might be highly valuable. I hoped we could finish a preliminary investigation in time to keep to schedule, but what we found took a little longer to completely assess. I do apologize, Captain, but I felt that what we'd found was worth it."

Nielsen thought it over for a moment, and the relented. "Oh, all right." He sat down again. "But I wouldn't use that excuse again, if I were you."

"Right," said Sandun.

Rosenzweig stepped down to stand next to the command chair. "Captain Sandun, is Lieutenant Stewart ready to beam over?"

"Yes, Commander, that much we can say. She should be over there momentarily." Sandun leaned out of range of the viewer pickup for a moment, but the *Revere's* bridge crew could hear him ordering his transporter officer to beam Lieutenant J.G. Stewart across. Rosenzweig glanced questioningly at Nielsen. At the captain's nod, he turned and left the bridge.

As Rosenzweig departed, Nielsen returned his attention to the main viewer. "I don't mean to come down hard on you," he said, "but we had been given to understand that the schedule

changes had been communicated to all involved ships and were being treated as serious.”

“They were, Captain, and I am sorry for the delay. I truly felt that it was necessary, but I see your point of view.”

“All right, then,” Nielsen replied, satisfied that his point had been made.

Sandun nodded. “Then, if you don’t mind, we need to catch up on our own schedule, as well.”

“Certainly,” Nielsen said, inclining his head. “*Revere* out.”

“*Aquila* out.” Sandun managed a quick salute to Nielsen as the signal faded out. Nielsen smiled, then glanced down as the intercom bleeped.

“Transporter Room 2 to bridge. Rosenzweig here. Lieutenant Stewart is aboard.”

“Very good, Commander. Get her settled and then get back up here. The *Vogel* is our next stop.”

“Aye, sir. Rosenzweig out.”

Switching off the intercom, Nielsen glanced back the Helm and Navigation stations. “All right, let’s get back underway. Warp eight for thirty minutes, then warp seven.” Nielsen was thinking about the need to make up for lost time. Both the helm and navigation officers quickly complied with the orders.

In the transporter room, as he finished speaking to Nielsen, Rosenzweig stepped out of the operator’s booth and across the room to where Stewart was just stepping off of the platform.

“Permission to come aboard?” asked the blonde-haired woman. She was small in stature, a bit shorter than Rosenzweig, but her eyes shone with intelligence and intensity.

“Absolutely,” he replied, breaking the formality. As he led her toward the door, she was already asking questions. Who was already aboard? What would her role be on the mission? Were there specific objectives? And so on. Gradually, Alex guided the conversation to more general topics, since Stewart was the only member of the crew who he did not already know. Once he had her talking a bit about her background, he started getting a better feeling for who she was as a person.

The *Revere* rendezvoused with the *Vogel* several hours later. Once there, they found that the *Vogel*’s commanding officer *had* hurried to meet the revised timetable. Due to the delays in picking up Lieutenant Stewart, and even with trying to make up time, the *Revere* arrived twenty minutes late, and as contact was established, Nielsen quickly found that Captain Tirpak was not happy. He was not happy that his finest engineering officer was being taken away from him, even temporarily, and that the ship that was doing so couldn’t even get there in a timely fashion made him even less so. So, when Nielsen appeared on his main viewer, he made little effort to hide his irritation.

“Well, it’s about time that you got here.”

“There’s an explanation,” Nielsen said.

“I’m waiting,” was Tirpak’s dry response.

“The *Aquila*’s captain was trying to complete an asteroid field survey, and felt he could get some critical investigations done without too much delay. He ended up being mistaken. He apologized to me when we rendezvoused. I was less than happy, myself.”

“Hmph... Scout captains. Always pretending to be explorers.” That he was speaking to a scout CO seemed not to matter to Tirpak. “I suppose you want us to beam Germain over.”

“Yes, please.” Nielsen had quickly decided that antagonizing Tirpak simply wasn’t worth the energy. “We’d like to be underway again as soon as possible.”

“Very well. We’ll send her over. Out.” Tirpak faded from the screen.

A few moments later, the transporter room signaled. “Bridge, Lieutenant Strauss here. Lieutenant Germain is aboard.. Do you have any idea where Mr. Rosenzweig—no, never mind, he’s here.”

Rosenzweig had just entered the room. He nodded as Strauss saluted and said, “At ease, Lieutenant.” Then he turned to face Ilene Germain as she stood on the platform, taking in her slim form in a beige, long-sleeved Class B uniform. Walking across the room, he reached the platform and extended his hand. She took it and stepped down to the grating.

“Welcome aboard, Lieutenant,” Alex said softly. Ilene nodded gravely, but a trace of a smile played at the corners of her mouth.

“Thank you, sir,” she said formally. Then she reached back and scooped up the case that sat on one of the disks.

With a nod to Strauss, Rosenzweig led Germain out into the corridor. As they started down toward the turbo-lift at the corridor’s end, Alex glanced toward Ilene.

“So, tell me, how have you been?”

“I’ve been well,” Ilene answered. She chuckled. “You should’ve heard Captain Tirpak, though, when the orders first came in. He nearly had a fit; I don’t remember the last time I saw him so angry.”

“Wow... He was that upset about you being detailed for this mission?”

“He’s a creature of schedule and of order, and not only did he have an officer pulled off his ship, he had to rearrange his schedule to accommodate it. So I bet you can guess how he felt.”

“Yeah, I guess I can. But in all seriousness, there’s really nobody I could think of who’s better suited to back up Bob Gossenberger on this mission.”

“Thanks,” Ilene said, obviously pleased by the compliment.

“You’re welcome,” Alex responded, as they reached the turbo-lift and stepped inside. “Passenger quarters,” he ordered, and the lift obediently responded.

“Almost everyone’s on board already, right?” Ilene asked.

“Everyone except Lori, now. And we’ll be picking her up at Deep Space Headquarters, where we’ll be scheduled to dock for a day...assuming they’re not still having problems getting the refitted ships into the docking bays.”

“I read about that,” said Ilene. “They had to do some internal rearrangements, but no structural modifications. It’s a tighter fit, but the ships will fit.”

“Good. In any case, when we got to Starbase 24, we were issued the warpshuttle *Endeavor*, which we have rigged in tow. After we leave Headquarters, we proceed to Sector 1NK-10-30, board the *Endeavor*, and head out beyond Federation borders.”

“Okay, but why do we need three engineers, then?”

“*Endeavor*’s full of experimental stuff. This design of warpshuttle has never been used for this sort of independent mission before. We’re the guinea pigs to see how well it can work. And since it’s, essentially, a test flight, Star Fleet wants the engineering systems fully monitored. And that means several engineers.” The lift came to a stop, and the two got off and walked down the corridor. “You’re quartered next to Leslie Brennan,” Alex told Ilene. “Lori will be on your other side.”

Ilene nodded, and then touched Alex's arm, very gently. "Alex, I want to thank you for letting me be a part of this."

Alex stopped and looked into her eyes. He took her hand and gently squeezed. Then he smiled and shook his head. "Ten years," he said, "and you still do it to me. Come on. Your quarters are just down this way." He put an arm around her shoulders and they walked on together.

After leaving the *Vogel*, the *Revere* sped on toward Deep Space Headquarters. They reached the big station several hours later, as Rosenzweig was coming on duty. As he stepped onto the bridge and relieved the assistant chief science officer, he turned to gaze at the large central body and six attendant docking spheres.

Captain Nielsen was overseeing the approach operation. "Lieutenant Carr," he addressed the communications officer, "have we received approach instructions?"

"Coming in now, sir. Proceed to Dock #6, approaching from station north."

"All right," said Nielsen. He looked at the helm officer. "You heard the lady. Bring us to Dock #6, station north."

"Aye, aye, sir," the helm officer responded crisply. He expertly guided the ship down and around, until the starship dock with its big, quadranted doors was centered on the main viewer. The *Revere* sent the "ready" signal to Dock Control, and the four doors swung wide open, flooding the ship with light from the dock's interior.

"Hull illumination off," Nielsen directed the engineering officer.

"Aye, Captain." With the touch of a control, he deactivated the beacons which lit the vessel during normal space operations.

"Dock Control requests control transfer," reported Carr.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," said Nielsen. "Helm, transfer control." With a nod, the helm officer did so, and the ship slid smoothly into the dock. As it came to a stop in the center berth, crews in thruster suits jetted out to attach anti-drift lines to the ship. The outer doors swung closed.

"Ship secured," the helm officer reported.

"Dock Control confirms," said Carr.

"Very good," said Nielsen.

"Captain," said Carr, "we're receiving a signal from a Lt. Commander Bergelson. She says she's ready to come on board."

Nielsen and Rosenzweig exchanged looks. "All right, then," said the captain, "have her beamed on board."

"Aye, sir."

"Well, I guess I'll go down and meet her," Alex said, not quite sure how to react to Bergelson's proactivity.

In most officers, such initiative and enthusiasm would have pleased him, but given the past history between Lori and himself, he couldn't help but be just slightly wary.

By the time he reached Transporter Room 3, Bergelson was thanking the transporter specialist and getting ready to walk out the door. Alex walked in and greeted her with a smile. "Hello, Lori."

"Commander," she said impassively. Alex's smile faded just a little, and with a nod to the ensign, he guided Bergelson out of the room.

"I'd hoped to be there to meet you," Alex said. "I apologize for not being there."

"No apology necessary," Lori replied. "I asked to be beamed over immediately, even if you weren't there yet."

"I see." Alex's tone was flat, signaling that he was not inspired by Lori's action.

"Now," she went on, "answer a question for me. Why was I picked for this mission? I assume you were involved in the crew choices."

"I was, yeah."

"Then why me?" And this time there was challenge in her voice. "With our history, especially. It just seems so...odd."

"Yeah, I guess it does," Rosenzweig conceded. "But the reality is, for what I needed done, our past aside, I trust that you'll be able to do it. And that's not something I can say about just anybody." He paused for a moment, then added, with a wry smile, "Besides, after that rescue mission a while back, you owe me one."

Lori's voice softened a little. "You're right. I do. And I appreciate the confidence in me, but I'm sure you can understand why I'd think it's weird."

"I can. But I also need you to tell me: Was I wrong about being able to trust you?"

Bergelson took a deep breath. "No. No matter what happened back then, I will do my job, and this is part of my job."

"Good," Rosenzweig said. "I can't ask more of you than that. Now, let's get you to your quarters."

Once Bergelson had been settled in her quarters, Rosenzweig decided that the time was right to start running full simulations, working aboard the *Endeavor* while it was still secured to the *Revere*. Beginning at 1500 hours the next day, the crew beamed onto the shuttle and began practicing.

The initial test went very well, considering that it was the first time that they were working with a full-scale simulation. Rosenzweig put Bergelson in charge of collecting and correlating the parallel sets of data from the sciences and engineering tasks. Along with himself, she would be writing the general mission report.

After the first test, the team continued, and over the 12.7 hours it took to reach Sector 1NK-10-30, they ran three more two-hour simulations.

By the time the ship reached its destination, Rosenzweig was eminently satisfied with the crew's readiness. They had all gotten used to their stations, and no one seemed to be having any problems with the equipment. Rosenzweig and Gossenberger would be sitting at the forward flight control console, above which the main viewer was positioned. Penik and Miles were stationed at the sciences/computer station on the starboard side of the cabin. Opposite that console, on the port side, was the engineering station, where Germain and Brennan would be working. Next to engineering was a general purpose station, which could be configured for up to six different operating modes, and next to sciences was a backup sensor monitor station, where Stewart would be working under normal circumstances.

Aft of the sensor monitor station was a supply and storage bay, containing field equipment, emergency supplies, and replacement parts. On the port side, aft of the general purpose station, was the personal hygienics unit, which contained the sanitary and waste processing facilities for crew use.

In the center of the cabin, eight large seats had been mounted. Each was designed so that it could double as a sleep unit, eliminating the need for additional bunk facilities. It wasn't long on privacy, but then again, it wasn't intended to be for extended journeys. Two small viewports were set into the cabin walls, aft of the storage bay and the hygienics unit, and aft of

those were the engine assemblies for the magnetic field drives that the shuttle used. Between the engine assemblies was a short corridor that led to the aft airlock and docking port. Altogether, the shuttle was a compact but complete spacecraft.

Part II: The Survey Mission

Rosenzweig was on the bridge when the *Revere* reached Sector 1NK-10-30. Nielsen was sitting in the command chair, and as Ensign Wilder reported passage through the cosmographic center of the sector, he glanced over at the Science Officer. Rosenzweig's eyes were gleaming with anticipation.

"Mr. Rosenzweig," Nielsen said, and smiled slightly as the Science Officer's eyes snapped back from the viewer to focus on the CO. "Can you get me any readings on spatial conditions beyond this sector?"

"We're just coming into range," Alex replied with a smile. He turned to his console and touched controls, focusing on the readings parading across the circular viewers. "Wide variety of stars," he said. "All stellar types represented, with a slight concentration of Types O, G, and K." Type Gs, they all knew, were stars like Sol.

"Is there any plan to emphasize Type G stars on the survey?" asked Nielsen.

"Not as I have it set up right now," Rosenzweig said. "I don't want to bias it at the outset." He turned toward the navigator. "Ms. Wilder, what's our time to the shuttle deployment coordinates?"

"Roughly one hour, eight minutes at our current speed," Wilder told him.

Nielsen looked over at Rosenzweig. "You'd better go down and get ready. We'll cover things up here."

"Aye, Captain," Alex responded. He levered himself out of his chair and headed for the turbo-lift. After one more glance around the bridge, he stepped into the lift and rode down to Deck 5. Reaching his quarters, he gathered the few personal effects he wanted for the trip that he'd not already packed, stowed them in his carry-bag, and headed for the transporter room.

Materializing in the shuttle's cabin, he noticed that several of the crew chairs already had personnel effects left near them. Smiling, he emulated his crewmates' actions and left his bag near his own chair. Then he walked forward to the flight control station. He ran his fingers over the portside chair at the console, and settled into it.

Leaning slightly forward, he entered several test sequences into the computer, and reviewed the results. Seeing that all was ready for the flight, he reset the console to its standby mode and walked back to visually confirm the supply inventory. The records showed that all was prepared, but the tradition of a visual check before flight had never died out. Looking over the stocked materiel, he mentally checked off each item: spare parts, medical equipment, tricorders and other sensing/analysis equipment, phasers of Types I and II.

"Hmm..." The thought occurred to him that some Type III "rifle" mounts for the phasers might be a good idea. Moving to the communications panel, he signaled the ship and requested tie-in to the small arms arsenal.

"Security. Small Arms Arsenal," came the response.

This is Lt. Commander Rosenzweig aboard the *Endeavor*. Could someone authorize four Type III phaser mounts for us, please? Have them beamed over to the shuttle."

"Aye, sir, will do. Arsenal out."

Several minutes later, a column of energy glowed into being in the center of the cabin, resolving into Ensign Sternhagan. "Reporting as ordered, sir. Four Phaser III mounts, as requested." He patted the case he was holding.

"Thank you, Ensign. Put them into the supply bay over there, would you?"

"Yes, sir!" As Sternhagan started to bolt toward the supply bay, Rosenzweig chuckled.

"Relax, Ensign, you'll live longer."

The ensign slowed down and glanced back toward the Science Officer, a smile on his face. "Sorry, sir. Guess I'm just a bit excited. I sure wish I could go with you."

"You'll get your turn, I'm quite sure," Alex told him.

After the Phaser IIIs were stowed, the two men beamed back to the *Revere*. Thanking Sternhagan for his help, Rosenzweig took his leave of the young man and headed toward a turbo-lift.

"Passenger quarters," he told the lift as he stepped inside. The lift obediently carried him up a deck and across the expanse of the primary hull. Reaching his destination, he stepped off and walked down the corridor until he got to Lt. Commander Penik's quarters. He palmed the door chime control, and in response to the soft tone, he could hear Penik responding, "Just a minute." Alex waited.

A moment later, the door slid open. "Come on in," Steve told him.

Entering the cabin, Alex said brightly, "Hi, Steve! Ready to go?"

Penik smiled and said, "Definitely. How much time until launch?"

"About 45 minutes. I want everybody aboard and ready about ten minutes before that, though."

"Okay. I just have to get a couple of things, and I'll be ready. Should I head straight to the shuttle?"

"Sure. I'll go get the others."

Rosenzweig moved on to Bergelson's cabin, noting, as he let her know the plan, Penik's passage behind him and down the corridor en route to the transporter room. He continued down the line, alerting Germain, Gossenberger, Brennan, Miles, and Stewart. With everyone having acknowledged, he made his way back to the lift. As he was stepping aboard, he heard a voice behind him.

"Hold the lift!"

Rosenzweig put his hand over the sensor, and the lift doors remained open. Ilene hurried in, and Rosenzweig pulled his hand back. The doors closed, and he said, "Transporter Room 2."

"Hi," Ilene said, with a slightly breathless smile.

"Hello, there. All ready?"

"Yes, indeed." Her smile faded a little, as her demeanor grew a bit more serious. "Alex, I'm sorry I haven't been able to spend more time with you."

"Nothing to be sorry about," Alex said reassuringly. "We've all been busy getting ready, and with the accelerated schedule of picking everyone up, I haven't been able to spend as much one-on-one time with anybody as I'd've preferred."

"Okay. I just didn't want you to think I was deliberately avoiding you or anything."

"Oh, no, not at all." Alex looked straight at her, and said, "I will say this much, though. I've missed you. Y'know how long it's been since I've been able to do any more than say 'Hi' at a run? One year, two months, and seven days."

Ilene thought for a moment, and then responded, "Right. I came aboard on 7607.20."

"And I was very glad to see you."

Germain smiled at him, and he took a step closer to her and gave her a gentle kiss. He felt her hand wrap around his arm and squeeze. But it was only a moment later that they felt the lift slow down.

Alex sighed. "Almost there. And now we have a job to do, and personal considerations are set aside again. At least this time I'm in command." The lift came to a stop, and the two stepped out and into the hallway. Reaching the transporter room, they beamed over to the *Endeavor*.

Gossenberger and Penik were already aboard, as were a few techs from the *Revere*, completing pre-launch checkouts. As Rosenzweig and Germain materialized, Gossenberger crossed the cabin to meet them, while Penik continued reading displays near the airlock.

"Everything's ready on my end, Alex. Exterior inspections are done and all system indicators show green."

"Good, Bob, good," Rosenzweig said, with a broad smile. He rubbed his hand together in anticipation. "Has the ship transmitted an updated launch-time for us?"

"They transmitted one over a couple of minutes ago," said Penik, joining them. He glanced at his wrist chrono. "We're at...twenty-three minutes to launch."

Gossenberger and Germain stepped away to go over some engineering matters, and Rosenzweig was about to make a comment to Penik when three more columns of light presaged the next arrivals. The light faded, revealing Stewart, Miles, and Bergelson. Stewart and Penik moved off to go over the sciences checklist, and Rosenzweig moved forward to the flight control console. He had settled into the chair at his station when he heard footfalls right behind him. Turning back, he saw Bergelson, a padd in her hand. He gave her a smile.

"Hi, Lori. Ready to go?"

"Pretty much." Lori's tone was still guarded, a fact which Alex did not miss. He crooked a finger at her, and she took a couple of steps closer.

"Lori," he said in a lower tone, "you are going to need to relax, at least a little bit. Otherwise, this is going to be a very, very long trip."

"Is that an order?" she asked him.

"Oh, hell, no," he said. "Unless you think it would make a difference?" He cracked a smile as he said that, so she'd know he wasn't being completely serious.

"Probably not, no," she said, "but I'll try. Okay?"

"Okay. I can live with that." With a nod, he continued, "Meanwhile, would you man the general purpose station during launch, please?"

"Aye, aye," she said, slightly more jauntily, and took her station. Satisfied, Rosenzweig turned back to his console, and observed the indicator confirming that Bergelson's console was activated and operating properly.

By the time the countdown reached 11 minutes before launch, Brennan had arrived, making the crew complete. Rosenzweig directed a final systems check, and when Bergelson

reported that the readouts showed everything working just fine, he nodded, satisfied. He rose and turned back toward the rest of the cabin.

"Time check, Bob?" he asked Gossenberger, who was at the righthand seat at the flight-control station.

Bob relayed the time, which had reached T-minus seven minutes. Rosenzweig glanced back at the others. "Shirley, Leslie, you're on down-time for launch. Steve and Ilene'll be at the sciences and engineering consoles." Miles and Brennan both nodded and settled into their seats in the center of the cabin, Miles's behind Penik's and Brennan's in the back row next to Stewart's. Stewart herself was at the sensor monitor station.

A T-minus two minutes, everyone was seated and ready. A beep came from the comm-unit. Rosenzweig reached out and touched the actuator control, and Captain Nielsen's voice filled the cabin.

"All right, *Endeavor*, you've got less than two minutes to go. Good luck, and I'll see you in three weeks. Nielsen out."

"*Endeavor*, acknowledging. Well-wishes appreciated. Out."

As he countdown reached zero, there was a series of thunks, as the locking clamps released the *Endeavor* from its position near the *Revere's* dorsal. A moment later, the tractor beam cut off, and the shuttle began to drift away from the ship. Both the *Revere* and *Endeavor* fired thrusters to smoothly put some distance between them, avoiding any chance of accidental collision.

When the shuttle and ship had reached a kilometer or so apart, Rosenzweig had Gossenberger power up the impulse and warp engines on the sled, and the engineer soon reported that both systems were fully operational and ready.

"Steve," said Rosenzweig, "you have the course filed at your station, correct?"

"Yes, I have it right here."

"Transfer it up to my station, would you?"

Penik smiled. "Transferring."

A computer projection of their planned course lit up on a small viewer in front of Rosenzweig, along with data regarding the course itself, ETA at various key waypoints, and so forth. Rosenzweig finished laying in the course, and then glanced to his right.

"Bob, give me impulse power, warp point nine."

"Warp point nine, aye," acknowledged Gossenberger. He tapped controls on his console. On the sled, the two impulse power efflux vents glowed to life, a brilliant orange giving testimony to the powerful fusion engines contained within the housings. Inside the *Endeavor*, the crew could feel the acceleration as Rosenzweig smoothly guided the shuttle away from the *Revere* and onto the first leg of its course. Switching the main viewer to aft sensors for a moment, he watched the image of the scout-class starship shrink rapidly as they left it behind. As the ship vanished, he switched the viewer back to displaying the fore view and glanced around the cabin. Confirming that everyone was occupied with assorted tasks, he switched on the log recorder.

"Mission Log, Stardate 7607.22. Entry Number One, Lt. Commander Rosenzweig recording:

The warpshuttle *Endeavor* has departed from the *U.S.S. Revere*, and is currently moving at warp point nine, as we make readiness to go to warp. All systems appear to be functioning extremely well, especially given the amount of very new and previously-untried hardware

we're using. The crew are in good spirits and I, myself, am looking forward to an interesting three weeks."

Rosenzweig switched off the recorder, thought for a moment, and switched the recorder back on, this time resetting the log from "Mission" to "Personal". He spoke softly, so as not to have his comments heard by his crewmates.

"Personal Log, Stardate 7607.22:

It's a fascinating collection of personalities I've collected for this trip. So far, things seem okay, though I remain watchful. Lt. Commander Bergelson has relaxed quickly enough, though I am still somewhat concerned. I take her current increasingly friendly stance as as much a symbol of her resignation to the situation as any particular acceptance of me. I knew it was a potential risk to ask for her on this mission, given our rather tempestuous history, but I judged it worth the risk. I guess we'll see over the next few weeks if I was right.

I do not have such concerns about Lt. Commanders Penik, Gossenberger, and Miles. Steve, Bob, and I were very much a trio back at the Academy, and while our careers have taken us in different directions, we're very much still friends. Steve and Bob, especially, enjoy tossing jibes back and forth, but no two men would stand by each other more in a pinch, and of course the same is true for each of them and myself. Shirley sometimes joined in, too, and while she couldn't exactly be called a fourth in our little band, she was close enough to all of us that there are a lot of good memories involved of what we all did in those days.

Lieutenant Germain and I were once very close for a time, but that's cooled, though we remain friends. I sometimes wonder if that might change, but I'm not precisely holding my breath. Ensign Brennan is still very green, just having finished her Academy training recently. She's a young woman full of potential, something I saw quickly at the Academy, and I'm glad to be able to nurture that in the field, as well. It's Lieutenant J.G. Stewart I know the least, being the only one who got selected for this flight based almost completely on her service record. We have talked a bit during the mission prep, and I have the utmost confidence in her. She's quite brilliant, and we'll hopefully have a chance to see that brilliance at work on this flight.

More updates as developments warrant."

Rosenzweig turned off the recorder again, and this time left it off. He doubted that anyone other than perhaps Gossenberger had heard him record his log, and there wasn't anything in it that Bob didn't already know, anyway. That logging done, Alex returned his attention to his controls, and busied himself calling up and reviewing various status displays.

By the time they had been flying for about forty minutes, Alex turned to Bob and said, "So, think she's ready for warp drive?"

Gossenberger smiled. "I don't have a single reason to say no, Alex. Let's go for it."

"All right. Going to warp factor one." Rosenzweig grasped the lever that offered manual control of the ship's velocity and eased it forward. As it reached the "warp engage" point, there was a slight vibration as the shuttle crossed the threshold into warp, and on the main viewer, the stars streaked out into long spectra. A moment later, the computer compensated, and the starfield resumed a fairly normal appearance. Rosenzweig started to lean back in his chair.

Suddenly, a klaxon sounded through the cabin.

"I have trouble lights on the connection circuitry," said Germain.

"Computer indicates some sort of data flow disruption," Penik added.

"I'm seeing major distortions across the entire EM spectrum, Commander," called Stewart.

Rosenzweig himself was struggling to keep the ship under control. "Shut down the warp drive," he ordered. Gossenberger and Germain both tapped control commands into their stations, and the shuttle seemed to stabilize as it dropped back into normal space.

"We're stable at warp point five," reported Germain. "Fault analysis is proceeding, but it looks like the trouble's in the engine connection circuits."

"I'm still getting erratic sensor readings," said Stewart.

"All right, Karen, hold on," said Rosenzweig. "Bob, run some circuitry checks at engineering to verify Ilene's data. Ilene, get up here and take Bob's station." Smoothly, the two officers exchanged places, all business.

After studying the readouts for a few moments, Gossenberger shook his head. "These readouts don't make any sense. Steve, tie in the main computer to my station, will you? I need some extra analysis here."

"You've got it," Penik said. He activated the analysis functions and tied the computer into the engineering station, reading the data that was coming in from the interface with the circuitry.

"It's still feeding gibberish," said Gossenberger.

"Let me take a look," said Miles.

"All yours," Gossenberger told her. He rose from the chair and Miles deftly slid into the seat. After a few tests, she shook her head.

"I think it's in the circuitry, not the engine."

"What I'm getting from the computer diagnostics seems to confirm that," Penik added.

"Damn," said Rosenzweig. "It's got to be in the mating hookups between the shuttle and the sled."

"That's what I'm thinking, too," Miles commented.

"Bob," Rosenzweig asked, "can you fix it?"

"Let me get under there," said Gossenberger, gesturing toward the console. Miles stood up and stepped back, and Gossenberger crawled under the console and pulled off an access plate. Gazing into the revealed space, he held out a hand with the plate, and Miles took it and set it on the console. "Somebody get me an engineering tricorder," he said a moment later.

Brennan dashed for the supply bay, and returned a moment later with the requested tricorder. Miles took it from her and handed it down to Gossenberger.

"Thanks," muttered the engineer.

"Need any help?" asked Miles.

"Maybe," was Bob's response.

"Leslie, get me a scanner," Miles said.

Brennan made a second trip to the supply bay, and again returned with the requested piece of equipment. "Here, Shirley."

"Thank you," Miles said, and dropped down on her back next to Gossenberger. She pulled off another access plate, and soon had the scanner nestled into the opening, checking circuits.

After a while, they both crawled back out from under the console. Gossenberger rubbed a sleeve across his eyes.

"Any luck?" asked Rosenzweig. Gossenberger shook his head.

"It's not in the console circuitry, it's not in the lines within the cabin, and it's not in the software, as far as we can tell," said Miles.

"We think it's in the physical connections between the shuttle and the sled," Gossenberger elaborated. "It looks like we'll have to go out and fix it directly."

Rosenzweig sighed. "Okay." Glancing over his shoulder, he said, "Ilene, cut power. Slow us to zero velocity. Thrusters to station-keeping."

"Aye, aye, sir," responded Germain, as she executed the commands.

Gossenberger and Miles clambered into thruster suits. As they locked their helmets into place, Germain, who had set her console to automatic function while the ship held steady, passed them service packs and tricorders. Gossenberger nodded his thanks and stepped into the airlock, Miles right behind him. Gossenberger touched a control to the left of the inner doors, and they slid shut and sealed. The status light shifted from green to yellow and then to red, as the air was pumped out of the lock. By the outer doors, a similar light cycled through the colors in the reverse order.

With the lock fully depressurized, Gossenberger touched another control by the outer door, which itself slid open, leaving them standing and gazing out into the starry void. Carefully, they pushed off from the shuttle, guiding themselves down and around with brief bursts from their thruster units.

Reaching the warp sled, they eased just above the horizontal section on which the shuttle proper sat, and came to a careful landing, feet first. A light press on the forearm control panel activated the magnetic boots, adhering them to the metal surface of the sled. Slowly, moving one foot at a time, they moved to the connection point between the shuttle and the sled, and then knelt down by several access plates to the connection equipment. Snapping open the plates, they hooked them to brackets on their suits, drew out their tricorders and service packs, and began investigating the circuit lines.

"There," said Miles, after a few minutes. She gestured to a discolored module. "Looks like the circuits fused in this one."

"Yeah," Gossenberger agreed, after he'd checked it out himself. "I think we'll do best just replacing the module."

"We should have spares in the shuttle." She tapped another control. "Miles to *Endeavor*."

"*Endeavor*. Rosenzweig here. What can we do for you, Shirley?"

"We need a couple of replacement circuit modules, type..."

"Type ECM-382," supplied Gossenberger.

"ECM-382. Got it," confirmed Rosenzweig. "We'll leave them in the lock."

"Acknowledged," said Miles.

"Shirley," Gossenberger added, "after you get me the backup unit, you better check on the lines to the other engine."

"I thought of that," Miles commented, with a hint of a smile in her voice. "That's why I asked for two modules."

Gossenberger chuckled. "Okay. Sure I couldn't talk you into transferring into engineering?"

"'Fraid not, Bob, sorry."

As Gossenberger returned his attention to the open access port, Miles jettied over to the shuttle's aft hatch. Tapping a command into the external panel, she opened the doors. The requested modules were resting on the deck. Miles scooped them up and hurried back to Gossenberger's location.

"Here you go," she said, proffering a module.

"Thanks. Take a look here." Miles guided herself to a point so she could look just over Gossenberger's shoulder, and he indicated the damaged area. "I had to reroute the circuits here, and here, to the backup channel. If the ones on the other side are as bad, and I have reason to believe they will be, you'll have to do the same." He showed her where he'd made the changes, step by step, and which tools she'd need to use to duplicate the repairs. Finally, she nodded.

"Okay. I've got it. Let me take a look at those other circuits and I'll let you know how bad off they are." Miles did a little jump to separate herself from the warp sled, and started to maneuver herself over the shuttle. Gossenberger watched as she disappeared over the top of the craft, and then he bent to his work. He was about halfway through the repair job when Miles's voice sounded in his helmet.

"Bob, Shirley here. You were right about those circuits. Looks like whatever went through these lines was symmetrical. The damage in these is pretty much identical to the ones you're working on."

"Acknowledged. Repair it like I showed you," Gossenberger told her.

"Will do."

Inside the shuttle, Rosenzweig paced nervously around the cabin, occasionally glancing at the main viewer, which was currently split-screened and displayed images of Gossenberger and Miles as they worked. Miles was shifting around, trying to get a better angle from which to work, and Stewart was having trouble keeping the exterior pickups trained on her. As Miles shifted out of view for the third time, Rosenzweig went over to Stewart.

"Trouble, Lieutenant?"

"She's at an odd angle for the external pickups. Keeps shifting out of their visual range."

"Do what you can, but keeping a visual lock should be considered a priority, just to be safe."

"Yes, sir, I know."

Alex sighed just slightly. "Yeah. Sorry, Karen. This whole situation just has me a bit nervous."

"I understand. I'll do my best."

"Thanks." Rosenzweig decided that hovering over Stewart was not going to help matters, and walked across to his seat in the middle of the cabin. He dropped into it and reclined it back a bit. He closed his eyes for a moment, but opened them again when he heard footsteps crossing the deck. Penik was standing next to the seat.

"Are you all right, Alex?"

"Yeah. I'll be better when Bob and Shirley get back inside."

Penik nodded, satisfied, and returned to the sciences console. The group waited in silence as Miles and Gossenberger completed the repairs. Finally, they snapped the access plates back into place over the circuitry.

"I hope this works," said Miles.

"So do I," responded Gossenberger. He turned slightly and pushed off from the warp sled. Floating up a little way, he tapped a control. "*Endeavor*, this is Gossenberger. Shirley and I are coming in. See you in a few minutes." The engineer then proceeded to jet around to the aft hatch, where Miles floated, waiting for him. Re-entering the lock, they waited while the doors closed and the chamber repressurized. When the lock's displays confirmed pressure equalization and the lights flashed to green, they removed their helmets and stripped off the suits, leaving them in the standard undergarments while the standard sterilization procedure ran. They hung the suits up in the tiny lockers, hooking up the power leads to recharge the suit-batteries. They then changed into regular uniforms and stepped out into the cabin.

Almost instantly, they were surrounded by the others. Questions abounded. "How did it go?" "Were you successful?" and so on. Finally, Rosenzweig raised his hands and spoke firmly to cut through the cacophony.

"Okay, everybody, enough is enough. Bob, can we restart procedures to get back into warp?"

"I think so, Alex. It should work this time."

"Good. Stations, everyone. Bob, you and Shirley rest this time. Leslie, take engineering. Ilene, you're at the co-pilot console. Come on." Rosenzweig strode forward to his pilot seat. The others took their seats at various stations, while Gossenberger and Miles settled into their seats in the center part of the cabin.

"Okay," said Rosenzweig, "let's try this again." A glance at his displays confirmed that the same course was laid into the shuttle's nav-computer. "Ilene, warp factor one. Leslie, watch those readouts."

"Like a hawk," replied Brennan.

"Let's go," said Rosenzweig.

"Warp engines on-line," Ilene reported.

Rosenzweig grasped the velocity-control lever, and slowly eased it forward. The shuttle accelerated. As the lever passed the "Warp Engage" mark, on the viewer, the stars stretched out into spectra, and then returned to normal as the computers caught up to the imagery. For a long moment, no one spoke or even breathed. Finally, when nothing happened that wasn't supposed to, there was an exultant cheer in the cabin.

"Leslie," asked Rosenzweig, "how are those readings?"

"Beautiful," Brennan reported. "All green now, running just great."

"We've done it," whispered Gossenberger. "We're on our way."

Rosenzweig smiled as he watched the stars sliding past on the viewer. "Guess I'd better record another log entry." He reached out and switched on the log recorder.

"Mission Log, Stardate 7607.22. Entry Number Two, Lt. Commander Rosenzweig recording:

After a delay of approximately two hours, the *Endeavor* is once again underway, this time at warp one. The delay occurred during our first attempt to engage the warp drives. A few seconds after warp engage, major failures occurred in the connection circuitry between the shuttle

and the engines themselves. It was determined that the circuits had fused and was scrambling both sensor data from the engines and control commands being sent to the engines. Once the location of the problem was determined, Lt. Commanders Gossenberger and Miles conducted an EVA to replace the fused modules. Following the EVA, we have successfully engaged the warp drive and are beginning the mission's normal routine, as originally planned."

For several uneventful days, the shuttle cruised through space. On board, the crew tested the engine systems and other hardware, while mapping the sector through which they traveled. Penik and Miles switched off at the sciences station, while Stewart worked off and on at the sensor monitor console. Brennan and Germain took turns at the engineering station, with Gossenberger periodically standing a watch there, as well, though he was most often at the co-pilot's station. Bergelson continued to oversee the general purpose station, while Rosenzweig manned the pilot's console.

Late on the third day, Penik called Rosenzweig over to the sciences console. "Look," he said, as Rosenzweig approached. He pointed to one of the viewers at his station. "We're passing close to UFC-15308. Should we go in for a closer look?"

"Can you read any Class M planets in the system?"

Miles was standing to one side of the station. She shook her head. "No. I ran that scan. The star has eight planets, in generally typical orbits along the stellar ecliptic. No planets in the life zone, though." She pointed to a blue shaded area on the viewer display, fairly close to the yellow sun. Rosenzweig studied the display for a long moment, then shook his head.

"I think we'll skip this one. Continue scans as we do the flyby, though. We'll see if we can't find a more promising system for the close-in survey."

Stewart leaned back and muttered something softly to herself, but Rosenzweig caught it, and turned. "Something, Karen?"

"Sorry, I was just hoping for something a bit more interesting to do than starmapping."

"We'll find that, I'm sure, don't worry," Rosenzweig replied, hoping he'd struck a reassuring tone. "In the meantime, take a bit of relax-time. Listen to some music." Walking over to her seat, he glanced at her data carts. Seeing one labeled "Lyrette Performances by Sorek of Vulcan", he paused thoughtfully. Then, guiding Stewart to the seat, he plugged in an earpiece receiver, handed it to her, and plugged the cart into the reader. Karen leaned back, closed her eyes, and let herself drift off into the music. Alex smiled, then glanced over to the sciences and pilot's consoles. "Steve, Bob, you're both in charge. I'm taking a nap." The two men acknowledged, and Rosenzweig dropped into his own seat. A tap on a chair-arm control, and the slid shifted, the back dropping and the front extending, to become a small but serviceable bunk. Resting his hands on the chair-arms, Alex closed his eyes. After a moment, though, something niggled in his awareness, and he opened them again. A glance over his shoulder found Bergelson sitting in her own seat, gazing pensively at him. He gave her a wink, and getting a small smile in return, reset himself and closed his eyes again.

It wasn't long until the "more promising" star system that Rosenzweig was hoping for turned up on the long-range sensors. The afternoon of the next day, Rosenzweig was at the pilot's console and Germain sat next to him. Penik and Gossenberger were off-duty, so Miles was at the sciences station. She was running the standard starmapping routines, and monitoring the displays for anything of interest, when the star listed as UFC-8198 appeared. Preliminary findings indicated a world which fit the profile of a Class L or M planet. Miles focused the sensors on the planet itself. She smiled. This was looking more promising all the time.

Looking toward the front of the cabin, she said, "Alex, could you come here a minute?"

"What's up?" asked Rosenzweig.

"Something here I think you might want to see."

"Okay." Rosenzweig walked over.

Miles touched a control, and the data scrolled down on one of the viewers at her station. "Planet IV in the system ahead of us reads as Class L or M. Supporting data look promising. Now shouldn't we investigate this one?"

"Well..." said Rosenzweig thoughtfully.

"We have to test the system-survey capabilities of this shuttle sometime," Miles reminded.

Rosenzweig hadn't forgotten, of course. He smiled. "Okay, let's do it." He moved back to the pilot console, and turned to Germain. "Ilene, lay in a course for UFC-8198. Warp two."

"Right, Alex." Ilene tapped in the course and speed requirements, set the course, and transferred the data to Rosenzweig, who guided the *Endeavor* onto its path toward the system.

As the craft approached the system, Miles summarized the data as the sensors gathered and synthesized it. "Okay, let's see... The star is Type F, and it's orbited by 16 planets. Surface temperature of 6,700 degrees Kelvin, diameter 2.08 million kilometers."

"And the planets?" asked Brennan.

"Sensor reports aren't clear enough yet for planetary data," Stewart told her.

"We'll have it in a few minutes," Miles added.

"Lori," Rosenzweig said, "buzz Steve and Bob's alarms. They should be awake for this."

Bergelson did so, and Penik and Gossenberger were up in short order. "What's going on?" Gossenberger asked.

"We're going into the UFC-8198 star system," Rosenzweig explained. "We'll be getting planetary data in a few seconds."

"Need any help, Shirley?" asked Penik.

"No, thanks, Steve. I've got it."

Gossenberger chuckled. "See? She's got it. You're not going to get to do anything. I'm sure you're disappointed."

"Quiet, Bob," said Rosenzweig, as Penik gave Gossenberger a sidelong look. "Steve'll have plenty to do."

"Data coming in," interjected Miles, herself hoping to short-circuit Gossenberger's teasing.

"On main viewer," Rosenzweig requested.

"Right," Miles answered, and the viewer lit with readouts of the planets' details. Type, diameter, distance from the star, etc. all spread out across the screen.

As the data readout completed, Rosenzweig turned to the others and asked, "Suggestions on how to proceed?"

Penik leaned forward. "Shirley, put a diagram of the whole system up on the big screen." Miles did so, and Penik stood up to walk closer to the viewer. "Look," he said. "Planets V, IX, and XI are on the other side of the star from us, but there are similar worlds on this side that we could get to more quickly. Planet IV we want to investigate, anyway, since it's Class M. Planet XIV has an interesting ring system. I suggest we do flyby examinations of planets XIV and X, which appear the least like known worlds of their types in other systems. Then we orbit planet IV and do a detailed checkout."

"I like it," said Gossenberger. Germain nodded agreement from the co-pilot's station.

"So do I," Rosenzweig said. He turned to the pilot's station. "Steve," he said over his shoulder, "set up a flight plan and relay it up here."

"Okay." Penik went to the sciences station and took over from Miles. He plotted the course through the system and then forwarded it up to the co-pilot's station. By then Gossenberger had taken over from Germain, and he locked the projected course into the navigation computer. On his confirmation that the computer had accepted the course input, Rosenzweig eased the ship onto a long, sweeping curve into the system.

"Mission Log, Stardate 7607.26, Lt. Commander Rosenzweig recording:

The *Endeavor*, as part of the detailed exploration phase of the vehicle's testing, is entering star system UFC-8198. This system has 16 planets, including one Class M world. We intend to do flybys of planets XIV and X, as well as an orbital survey of planet IV, the Class M planet. This will pave the way for a future starship mission to do a more detailed examination of the planet, including on-surface examinations. Our plans do not include a landing."

Rosenzweig switched off the log recorder and looked up at the main viewer, which displayed an image of planet XIV. The planet, a Class B gas giant, glowed a rich shade of green, interspersed with lighter clouds of orange. Penik read off the data on the planet.

"Clouds are a mix of ammonia, methane, hydrogen, helium, and an unusually high concentration of carbon dioxide. This last might be the result of life activity within the atmosphere."

Rosenzweig nodded. "See if you can pick up anything."

"I'm plotting a course for a flyby about 10,300 kilometers above the cloud tops," Gossenberger said.

"Keep deflectors up, in case we encounter ring material," Rosenzweig ordered. He indicated the viewer, where four dark rings could be seen silhouetted against the planet.

"Each of the rings is approximately 4,700 kilometers wide, but only 1.2 kilometers thick, and all four are roughly consistent in composition and organization," reported Stewart.

"I'm getting indications of carbonaceous material in the rings," added Penik. "If there is life there, it's likely carbon-based."

"Is there any indication of internal heating?" asked Rosenzweig.

"Some," Penik replied. "Enough that I wouldn't necessarily write it off as too cold for carbon-based life, at any rate."

"Intriguing," was Alex's reply. Penik chuckled slightly.

The shuttle approached the planet and swung below the ring-plane. The closest approach came as Rosenzweig guided the shuttle up between the innermost ring and the cloud tops. As they swept out and away from the planet, Rosenzweig reduced the impulse engine velocity slightly, to allow for the most efficient use of the gravity boost from the planet itself, much as Terran space probes did in the 20th and 21st Centuries.

"How are we doing, Leslie?" Gossenberger asked. Brennan had taken over the engineering console, letting Germain get some down-time.

"All status lights are green," Brennan reported back.

"Fine." Gossenberger looked over at Rosenzweig. "Alex, I'm going to push a bit more speed out of her, so we can spend more time in the vicinity of the planets."

"How much more time do we need?" asked Penik. "We're already set for just a flyby for planet X, and the plan's to stay in orbit around IV for a few days."

"I'd still like to see how the systems handle more speed inside a star system," Gossenberger countered.

"All right," said Rosenzweig. "Bob, you can have your speed." Gossenberger nodded and, with a smile, ramped up the engine power. Rosenzweig adjusted the velocity control lever to .75 impulse.

As it turned out, planet X was conspicuously similar in many respects to Jupiter. It was a deep red-orange in color, with belts and zones of color variation, much like the Jovian atmosphere. Several large, oval-shaped storms spun through the atmosphere. On the planet's night-side, flashes lit the clouds, and Penik confirmed that the flashes were indeed lightning. Miles concurred, noting the turbulence in the areas where the lightning discharges were occurring.

Penik and Miles both requested that the shuttle make a single orbit of the planet, so they could take more thorough readings. They admitted to finding the similarity to other known gas giants quite fascinating, and were trying to see if there was anything to be learned from this one. Although he really wanted to move on to the Class M planet, Rosenzweig acquiesced and established a roughly circular orbit. During the next hour, Rosenzweig linked his own data display to the sensors, so he too could watch the readings as they came in. Although, as a mission commander, he wanted to keep things moving, as a science officer he was no less fascinated by the complex world over which they orbited.

As they came up on the completion of the orbit, Rosenzweig looked over at his science team. "Did you get what you wanted?"

"No," said Penik. After a pause, he added, "But we got enough to satisfy us for now." And then he winked.

"I'd love to get back here," Miles said.

"Maybe you will," Rosenzweig replied. "Work up a mission proposal to Headquarters."

"That's a thought," Miles said. Rosenzweig grinned.

Its survey orbit of planet X complete, the shuttle sped off toward planet IV. The crew wondered what they might find there. A potential colony world? An indigenous civilization? And if the latter, what kind? Penik, Miles, and Stewart were hard at work as the *Endeavor* approached the planet.

Penik had called up the full sensor readout on the planet. "As we'd determined before," he said, "diameter is 11,597 kilometers, smaller than Earth but still within Class M parameters. Distance from the sun is 159 million kilometers. Mass is 5.5 times 10²⁷

grams, or .92 of Earth. Orbital period is 1.13 Terran years. Orbit is inclined 6.3 degrees to the local ecliptic, and 44.8 degrees to the galactic plane. The surface is 61% land and 39% water, a good deal dryer than Earth. The land area is 47% open plains, 19% forested, 27% mountainous, and 7% desert. Vegetation is similar to Terran types, as well as varieties found on other similar worlds. Planetary rotation's a bit faster than Earth's; a day is 21 hours and 19 minutes. Atmosphere is 67% nitrogen, 29% oxygen, 3% carbon dioxide, and 1% trace gases. Gravity is .84 of Earth normal, and temperature ranges from -16 degrees Celsius at the poles to an average of 52 degrees Celsius at the equator. The atmosphere is slightly thicker than Earth normal, which largely accounts for the higher temperatures."

"All right," Rosenzweig acknowledged. "I'm bringing us into orbit." He guided the shuttle into a standard orbit about 2,800 kilometers above the surface.

For nearly a day, the shuttle orbited the planet. Stewart, Penik, and Miles worked for hours at a time studying readouts, graphs, maps, analyses, and so on. Scans of the moons revealed their possible composition. At the end of the day, Penik approached Rosenzweig.

"Alex, we haven't gotten any definitive readings of intelligent life. We've detected lots of animal and plant species, but nothing that appears to classify out as sapient."

"Recommendations?" asked Rosenzweig.

Miles joined them. "Alex, I think we should drop into a lower orbit. I'd like to get better optical readings, specially some aerial shots. If this is a potential colony site, the more topographical information we have, the easier it will be for potential settlers to plan."

"Shirley's right," Penik agreed.

"All right," Alex acknowledged. He looked back toward the front of the cabin. "Bob," he instructed, "drop us to a 1,000-kilometer perigee."

Gossenberger nodded and, reaching across to Rosenzweig's currently unoccupied station, adjusted the shuttle's impulse velocity. In accordance with the perpetual dance between velocity and gravity, the shuttle steadily decreased its orbit.

"Karen," said Miles, "set the optical cameras to run the same sweeps we used for mapping."

"On it," said Stewart.

"Shirley, put the images up on the main viewer," Rosenzweig said.

"Okay," Miles responded. A moment later, the large forward viewer lit with close-ups of the planet's surface. Occasionally, when Miles switched to infrared or computer-enhanced scans, the greens, blues, browns, tans, and whites of normal-spectrum images became the reds, yellows, oranges, greens, and blues of infrared scans, or the violets, oranges, reds, and almost every other basic spectrum color of the enhanced scans. For thirteen hours they scanned the surface, getting detailed images of nearly 79% of the total surface area. As they began the fourteenth hour, though, something happened.

At the sensor console, Stewart noticed an unusual radiation point-source, emanating from a region that had not yet been scanned in the northern part of a continent in the northern hemisphere. She turned forward.

"Alex, I've got something unusual here. I'm picking up a—"

Her alert was cut off as the shuttle jolted violently. Germain, hurrying across the cabin to assist Brennan, momentarily lost her

balance, dropping to one knee. Rosenzweig, who had been looking over Brennan's shoulder at the engineering readouts, whirled around and caught Germain by one arm, preventing her from falling completely. She smiled at him and came back to her feet.

"We've been grabbed by a tractor beam from the surface," Penik called from the sciences console.

"A tractor beam?" Rosenzweig said, surprised. "Location?"

"56 degrees north latitude, 89 degrees west longitude from arbitrary prime meridian," Miles supplied.

"It's similar in basic properties to a standard Federation tractor beam," Penik said, "but this one is more powerful than most of our starship-based units."

"Can we break free?" asked Bergelson.

"I don't know," Brennan answered.

Germain, now leaning over Brennan's shoulder and holding the back of the chair, added, "The odds are against it. We're already reading increasing engine stress."

"Let's try," Rosenzweig said. "Bob, push the engines to the limit."

"Right," said Gossenberger. Laying in an escape course, he pushed the velocity control lever up. As it reached the mark for .95 impulse, lights all over the engineering console glowed red.

Germain whirled forward. "Bob, cut speed! We're getting emergency lights throughout the system!" Bob quickly pulled the lever back down to .1 impulse, and the lights switched back to yellows and greens.

"Alex, we can't do it," he said. "That beam's just too powerful."

"Can we hold our own?"

"If the beam doesn't intensify."

"Forget it, Alex," Penik interjected. "It just stepped-up. It's now 42% more powerful."

"We're losing altitude," Gossenberger said, his eyes on a display.

"Descent velocity is increasing fast," added Germain.

The shuttle dropped into the planet's atmosphere. Although the speed was increasing, the angle of approach was a very shallow one, and Gossenberger was projecting landing in twelve to fifteen minutes. Neither he nor Germain, though, predicted anything other than an uncontrolled landing, a crash.

For nearly ten minutes, they still fought against the beam. Finally, they yielded to the inevitable. Rosenzweig shook his head. "We can't do it," he said. "Set your stations to automatic, get to your primary seats, and set them to crash positions." Quietly and efficiently, the crew did so, the seating dropping back and restraints extending over the crewmembers' bodies and around their heads.

In the last moments, as the main viewer showed the image of the surface rushing up toward the shuttle, Rosenzweig's gripped the chair arms tighter. "Hang on, everybody!" he called. Then there was a loud thump, a powerful jolt, and blackness engulfed Alex's consciousness.

Rosenzweig's vision slowly returned. His head ached and he'd wrenched his shoulder, but otherwise didn't seem to be seriously injured. Realizing that the shuttle was motionless, he released the seat restraints, sat up, and flexed his shoulder, rubbing it briskly. He looked around the cabin. It was empty. He stood up, and methodically moved around the cabin. He checked he personal hygienics unit, the supply bay, and the airlock. Nothing.

He was alone.

Moving forward, he went to the main console, and did a quick systems check. Amazingly, with the exception of some minor hull scoring from the impact, everything seemed to be in working order. Something, he concluded, had apparently cushioned the landing. The shuttle and sled were tough, but they weren't tough enough to easily survive a high-speed impact. The one oddity was some sort of programmed routine in the computer which was designed to prevent the shuttle from lifting off again.

A check of the shuttle's chronometers, verified against his wrist-unit, confirmed that roughly 90 minutes had passed since the crash.

Dropping into the pilot's seat, he reached forward and tapped the log recorder switch.

"Mission Log, Stardate 7607.27, Lt. Commander Rosenzweig recording:

I am alone aboard the *Endeavor*. Upon our crash-landing on UFC-8198-IV, I lost consciousness, and when I came to, everyone else was gone. There are, thus far, no clues as to the whereabouts of the other seven members of the crew. The shuttle's systems are operational, but a new program has been inserted into the computer which acts like a governor circuit, preventing lift-off. There's no question that our situation is the result of intervention by intelligent beings. My next challenges are to locate the rest of the crew, and attempt to discover who or what brought us here, and why."

Ending the log entry, Rosenzweig switched off the log, stood up again, and walked back to the supply bay. Pulling out a field jacket, tricorder, communicator, and phaser, he shoved the equipment into the tan jacket's pockets. He touched a control to extend a ladder from the outer hatch down the sled for egress. Then, squaring his shoulders, he opened the hatch, left the shuttle, descended the ladder, and stood alongside the warp nacelle. Then he turned and looked out beyond the craft.

The shuttle and sled had hit the ground and, owing to their descent angle, had carved a furrow for several hundred meters. The craft rested in a trough of broken-up soil in the midst of a broad, flat plain. The ground was tan in color, and very dry. Scrub vegetation was scattered about, and in isolated spots, blades of blue-green grass poked out, fighting their way into the sun.

Off to one side, about 70 meters away or so, was a wide, low structure. From his vantage point, Rosenzweig guessed that it was built of something similar to concrete. It had a flat roof, supported by rows of large, blocky columns. Seeing no one around, and nothing else for at least a few hundred meters in any direction, he walked toward the building.

When he reached it, he walked along one side, investigating. He found that the columns were square and about five meters on a side. One thing he hadn't realized from a distance was that the columns weren't just on the edges of the structure, but were arranged in ranks all the way through, with roughly three meters between columns on each side, leaving long open spaces. Rosenzweig looked down one of the spaces, seeing that it stretched across the building, opening out on the other side. He realized that the open areas ran through the length and breadth of the structure, like a grid. Looking through the odd structure, he could see the plain on the other side, extending until it met the

lavender sky in the distance. Rosenzweig looked back over his shoulder. The sun was fairly high in the sky; it was spring in this area of the planet.

Turning back to the structure, he walked to one of the hallway-like open spaces and started down it, moving into the building. As he reached an intersection with one of the perpendicular "hallways", he noticed that the big square columns had doors set into them, facing into the intersecting hall. Each door was about 2.5 meters high, easily enough for a human being. Next to each door, a small circular keypad was set into the column's wall, with the keys themselves arranged in octants of the circle. The doors appeared to be mounted to slide on tracks, and each had a small silver handle mounted on it.

"Manual, then," Alex said to himself. He tried to slide open a door, but was unable to budge it. "Okay. Locked." He considered the keypad for a moment, but opted instead to move to the next column and try its door. This time, the door wasn't locked, and he carefully slid it open. It ran smoothly along a plastic-looking track. Within the column was a square room. Rosenzweig drew out his tricorder and scanned the room, verifying that it measured 4.8 meters on each side.

Across the room from the doorway, a placard was mounted on the wall, with alien symbols written in rows across it. Rosenzweig switched the tricorder to linguistics mode and scanned the symbols. Unfortunately, there weren't enough of them, and the tricorder couldn't make much sense of the sign's message. Alex continued his investigation of the room.

Below the large sign was an instrument panel. Readouts flashed on viewers set into the wall above the panel, all using the same alien symbology as the sign. On the wall to the right of the panel was a large viewer. This device was inactive, showing a blank face of featureless gray. On the opposite wall was a large physical chart, showing a series of diagrams and symbols identifying various features on the diagrams. Rosenzweig continued scanning the symbols, trying to gather as much data as possible for the tricorder to begin an analysis. In bits and snatches, the tricorder was starting to identify patterns and begin to make sense of the information, but too many of the symbols were apparently either abbreviations or jargon, and the small device was still having difficulty.

When he had gathered as much information as he could, he stepped outside the room and switched on his communicator. "Rosenzweig to Penik. Come in, Steve." No answer. "Rosenzweig to Penik. Steve, can you read me?" Still nothing. Inspecting the device, Rosenzweig couldn't see anything wrong with the communicator. He tried again. "Rosenzweig to Gossenberger. Rosenzweig to Gossenberger, come in." Again, there was silence.

Alex shrugged, switched the communicator back into passive mode, and began walking down the "hallway". As he walked, he let his gaze drift down the length of the building ahead of him, and out beyond it onto the plain. He lifted the tricorder, intent on trying again to get readings that might lead him to his crewmates. As he did so, he heard a noise. He stopped in his tracks, listening. The noise came again, a tapping, as if someone or something were walking nearby. Rosenzweig moved close to one of the columns, drew his phaser, and carefully peered around a corner.

The intersecting "hallway" was empty.

The noise came again, and Alex whirled. The "hallway" he was in was also empty. He crossed to the column on the other side, and again peered around a corner. Again, nothing. But when he

looked the other way, he almost jumped in surprise. Several "hallways" down, facing away from him, was a slim, gray-clad, human female. He kept his silence until she shifted her arm to balance herself against the column next to which she stood. On her sleeves, just above her wrists, was a single solid line and a single broken line of gold braid. As she shifted her stance, her long, straight brown hair slipped over her right shoulder, and Rosenzweig knew who it was.

"Shirley!" he exclaimed. Miles spun around on her heel, a mixture of surprise and relief etched across her features.

"Alex!" They ran toward each other, and caught up in a hug. They held each other close for a moment, and then Miles pulled back. "Alex, what happened? What's going on?"

Rosenzweig shook his head. "I don't know. I lost consciousness when we crashed. When I woke up, I was the only one on the *Endeavor*. I've tried to reach both Steve and Bob by communicator. No luck."

"I think we all must have lost consciousness," Miles said. "When I came to, I was inside one of the little rooms that are in these columns. At first I thought I was trapped, but the door opened right up when I tried it. I walked around a bit and tried some of the other doors. Some are locked, but I could open others. There are all sorts of rooms in there. Some look like living quarters, some look like storerooms, and some even look like labs or control rooms."

Rosenzweig studied Miles as she spoke, and as he did, he decided that she wasn't in quite as good shape as he'd first thought. She'd been badly frightened, although she was quickly regaining control. Her uniform was disheveled, but not damaged. Her hair, normally tied back, now hung straight down her back. Rosenzweig wondered who or what would have removed the tie, assuming that she wouldn't have done it herself.

"Alex," she continued, "we have to find the others."

Rosenzweig nodded. "I know. Come on, we'll get back to the shuttle, get you a field jacket and gear, and we'll go look for them."

Carefully, they left the structure and crossed the open ground back to the shuttle. Passing through the lock, Rosenzweig hurried into the craft. Miles followed more slowly. As she passed through the inner doorway, she abruptly slowed down, caught herself with one hand on the doorframe, and put the other to her forehead. Rosenzweig noticed the gesture, and reversed his direction to hurry back to her.

"Shirley, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I think so." She still looked a bit unsteady, and Alex put an arm around her shoulders and guided her to her seat.

"You sit here and rest. I'll get things ready." Hurrying into the supply and storage bay, he pulled out Miles's field jacket. Bringing it out, he gave it to her and returned to the bay.

"Let's see," he thought to himself. "Medikit, a few days' rations, field equipment..." Methodically he gathered the necessary supplies and then stepped back into the cabin. Miles was already wearing her jacket, and was at the sciences console. Rosenzweig joined her there, handing her ration packets, a phaser, and a tricorder. He slipped the medikit and the remaining rations into his own pocket, along with the other tricorder and phaser.

"What were you scanning?" he asked her.

"Trying to get any readings on the rest of the crew."

"Any luck?"

"I'm not sure. I got what might be a promising reading on a bearing of 122 degrees relative." A relative bearing meant that

the direction the ship was facing was considered zero. I think we should try searching that way."

"Okay. You head on outside. I'll be there in a moment."

"Alex?" In that one questioning expression, he could clearly see how scared she still was.

"It's okay. Go ahead, and I'll be right behind you." He smiled at her, trying to strike a reassuring tone. It worked...sort of.

"All right, but you'd better." Shirley turned and went through the lock.

Once the door had closed, Alex walked forward to the pilot's station and thumbed the log recorder switch.

"Mission Log, Supplemental, Lt. Commander Rosenzweig recording:

Leaving the shuttle, I entered a nearby structure, and located Lt. Commander Miles, who was alone and very frightened. Her condition is improving, however. We've briefly returned to the shuttle and secured more equipment and provisions. We now intend to begin a serious search for the remainder of the crew. Commander Miles has run a sensor scan, which yielded potentially promising readings. We don't know how far we may have to travel, but hopefully we will reach our goal quickly and our crewmates will be safe."

Turning off the log recorder, Rosenzweig followed Miles out of the shuttle. He sealed the hatch, climbed down the ladder, and looked around...and around again. He seemed to be alone.

"Sh-Shirley?" he asked, a hint of worry creeping into his voice, despite his best efforts to keep calm.

"Here, Alex." Miles came from around the side of the warp sled. "I was checking some of the engine circuitry. It looks okay, but there are some things I'm not certain about how to read. Bob or Ilene will have to look to be sure."

"Well," Rosenzweig replied, "let's go find them." He stepped up and out of the furrow from the drive nacelle, turned back, and held out his hand to Miles. She took it and he levered her up to solid ground. They strode off toward the structure.

When they reached it, Miles pointed toward one of the "hallways". "That way," she said, glancing at her tricorder. They went in the indicated direction, and walked all the way through the building. Reaching the other side, they stopped to take stock of their surroundings. Just ahead of them, the ground remained flat for another 70 meters, then sloped down onto the plain, a wide, rolling expanse covered with blue-green grass, stretching out until it met the horizon in the distance.

"Nothing," Alex said, "as far as the eye can see."

"The readings I got on the shuttle are beyond the tricorder's range," Shirley added. "We'll just have to keep walking until it can pick up something."

Rosenzweig nodded, looked back to the shuttle, sitting alone on the other side of the building, turned back to the plain in front of them, and shrugged. "Let's go," he said simply, and they started forward.

For the next several hours, Rosenzweig and Miles walked across the rolling land. As the sun gradually dropped lower in the sky, Miles noticed the planet's two moons rising off to the left. She pointed them out to Rosenzweig.

"It'll be getting dark soon," he responded. "We'd better look for some shelter."

They couldn't see any likely spots close by, so they continued walking for another hour. As they came to the top of a rise, they saw a rocky outcropping partway down the slope. They headed toward it. When they reached it, they sat down and leaned back against it. Rosenzweig reached into a pocket in his jacket and pulled out a ration packet. Miles did likewise, and they chewed quietly, gazing out into the darkening night.

When they'd finished eating, they sat in silence for a few more minutes. Then Miles pulled out her recorder, aimed it away from them, and ran some scans.

"Anything?" Rosenzweig asked.

"The readings are a bit stronger. Looks like maybe another day's travel ahead of us, though. Assuming, of course, that no one or nothing decides to move them."

Alex nodded and sighed softly. "Well, get some sleep. I'll stand first watch. I'll wake you in a couple of hours."

"All right." Shirley curled up next to the rock and rested her head on her arm. As she closed her eyes, Rosenzweig watched her for a long moment, then got to his feet. He slowly walked around the rock, looking out across the plain. High above them, the planet's moons hung in the sky, one appearing four times as large as Luna from Earth, while the other was slightly smaller. The larger moon shone slightly off-white, while the smaller one was a bluish-green color, which made Rosenzweig wonder about its composition. He knew that both had surface features much like those of Luna, but the smaller moon, in addition to its odd coloration, was far less cratered. This was also intriguing, because the two moons were close enough that the disparity in surface conditions couldn't be explained by differences in location. Some other mechanism had to be at work, but they hadn't had an opportunity to do a detailed or extended study of the moons as yet.

As Alex watched, he noticed a curious yellow-green glow appear on the limb of the smaller moon, and then fade away after a few minutes. That was when the realization struck him. It was a volcano! It had to be! The smaller moon was geologically active, much like Io in the Jovian system. That could explain both the reduced amount of cratering and the odd surface coloration. Alex smiled to himself, as he often did when explanations for mysteries presented themselves.

Squaring his shoulders, he climbed to the top of the rock outcropping. Standing on its summit, maybe a couple of meters above ground level, he turned slowly and looked out all around, taking in the rolling land and the deep purple night sky. He then glanced down to where Shirley slept below him, and then sat down atop the rock.

While Rosenzweig and Miles were beginning their trek in search of their crewmates, Lt. Commanders Penik and Gossenberger were awakening in small cubicles. Consciousness had returned abruptly to Penik, and he sat up and looked around. He was in an almost perfectly cubical room, three meters on a side. There was a doorway in one wall, which faced out into a corridor. Across the doorway was a screen, thin wire arranged in a close-set grid. Very carefully, Penik touched the screen, and then pushed slightly harder. Though the wire seemed light, almost fragile, it proved completely immovable, suggesting that whatever it was

composed of was very dense and very strong. Penik ceased any efforts to break through the screen.

Looking through the screen and across the corridor, he could see another cell, with another screen door identical to his own. In that cell, Gossenberger lay, still unconscious, on a bunk identical to the one on which Penik and found himself when he awoke.

Penik glanced around his own cube, and observed that whatever had brought him there had provided small facilities to deal with basic bodily necessities. On one wall was a panel, inscribed with a stylized drawing of a hand placing food in a mouth. Next to the panel was a button. On the side wall was a mechanism clearly intended to be a toilet and, next to that, a washbasin. "Not much for privacy," he thought, "but good enough." Looking back across the corridor, he could see that Gossenberger's cell was virtually identical to his own.

"Bob," he whispered. There was no reaction. Penik tried again, slightly louder. "Bob!" This time, Gossenberger stirred. The engineer sat up in his bunk.

"Steve?"

"Here, Bob."

Gossenberger began to get his bearings, and looked across the hall to Penik. "What happened? The last thing I remember was *Endeavor* going down."

"I don't know. I think that as we crashed, something must have knocked us all out. Try your door, and see if it's any looser than mine."

Gossenberger tried. "No good."

"Have they taken anything from you?" Penik asked.

"No," said Gossenberger. "I still have both my communicator and perscanner."

"Okay. Try to reach Alex. I'll try the others."

For several minutes they attempted to make contact with their crewmates, with no result. Testing the devices, they found that they couldn't even contact each other, despite being less than 10 meters apart. Penik checked his communicator's power cell reading.

"It's still got power. I suspect there's some kind of interference field set up in this building."

Gossenberger nodded. "I think you're right."

After two hours, Rosenzweig climbed down off the rock and knelt by Miles's sleeping form. She was curled into a ball, her hair slightly disarrayed. Looking at her expression, softened by sleep, Alex felt an urge to just let her be. After all, he could manage another couple of hours on watch, and still be able to keep up when they got underway again. The urge passed quickly, though, and the cold realities of their situation reminded him of his responsibilities. Bravado and chivalry aside, he wouldn't function as well without the sleep as he would with it, and it wouldn't be fair to Miles if he wasn't in his best possible condition.

Reaching out, Alex touched Shirley's shoulder gently and whispered her name. No response. He shook her gently, and she groaned and tried to pull away. "Come on, lass, wake up," he said softly. Finally, she opened her eyes. "It's your watch," Alex told her.

"I'm awake now," she said. "Try and get some sleep." She got to her feet and started walking around to the other side of the rock.

Alex pulled off his field jacket and wadded it into a somewhat lumpy ball. He placed it against the rock, rested his head on it, and closed his eyes.

Two hours later, Rosenzweig was awakened by Miles. He jumped slightly, and then returned to full wakefulness. Miles was looking intently at him.

"You didn't sleep well, did you?" she asked. She was right. Rosenzweig's concerns, and his feelings of guilt that he'd led them on a failed mission, had troubled his dreams. But he didn't want to burden Miles with his concerns. As the mission commander, dealing with the situation was his responsibility.

"What's wrong?" Miles pressed.

Rosenzweig shook his head. "It's not important. Do you want to take another turn sleeping?"

"It's still dark. I think we should each take another turn."

Rosenzweig nodded and got up. As Miles lay down again, he climbed up the rock and returned to the perch he'd occupied for his previous watch.

In the same structure in which Penik and Gossenberger had found themselves, Germain, Brennan, and Stewart all found themselves in cubicles, as well, clustered near each other. Bergelson was there, too, but her cubicle was isolated from the others. The three younger women talked together in low, worried tones, while Bergelson, having no one nearby to speak to, chose not to say anything at all. As she tested the screening in her doorway for the third time in an hour, with no change in the effect, she swore silently to herself.

In another area of the building, two beings stood before a viewer, observing. The viewer was splitscreened into six images, one of each of the cubicles within which the Star Fleet officers were held. The creatures were bipedal, but more insectoid than humanoid. Their "skin" was a hard, chitinous, shell-like structure, colored black as onyx. They had a pair of eyes more like those of mammals or reptiles than insects, set within bony structures not too unlike those of humanoids. Exaggerated crania suggested larger-than-human-sized brains. As they observed the images on the viewscreen, they chattered back and forth to each other.

"Chief," said the one on the left, indicating the screen, "they have now all awakened."

"What do the scanners say about them?" asked the senior scientist.

"The computer has not yet prepared conclusions, remaining in the data gathering mode. But the data say these creatures are intelligent, and likely fairly highly-evolved. The raw data is there." The first being gestured to a console set against the opposite wall of the room.

"And the other two?" asked the senior scientist.

"As we planned, the one we left in the spacecraft, and the one we moved to the outlying structure, awakened first. The have located each other, gathered some of their equipment, and moved on foot into the Ayan Sector. They were proceeding in our direction until they reached a rock outcropping, where they stopped and seem to be sleeping. They are taking turns. One sleeps, and then stays awake while the other sleeps, and so on."

"Is there an estimate for when they will enter the Test Sector?"

"Not yet. We do not know how long they will continue their sleep cycles, nor how fast they will move when they resume travel."

"Very well. Maintain observation. If there are any new developments, from any of the test subjects, signal me." The scanner tech executed a complex salute, which was returned by the chief scientist, who then ambled out of the room.

Rosenzweig and Miles had switched places again. As Alex dropped off to sleep, Shirley sat midway up the rock, watching him. She was concerned, not about his physical condition, but rather about whatever was happening in his head. He'd slept fitfully during his first two hours, and his sleep again seemed troubled.

When she woke him two hours later, the sky was beginning to lighten, and they decided to press on. Rosenzweig pulled on his jacket and shook out the stiffness from his nap, and Miles helped him to his feet. With an "I'm all right" gesture, he waved her off. Without a word, she took another tricorder reading, and then indicated the direction they should take. They again started walking.

For the first few minutes, they walked in silence. After a while, though, Miles decided that the silence was just too oppressive, and it was time to try to find out what was on Rosenzweig's mind.

"Alex," she began, "I know something's wrong. Please let me help."

"Y'mean, aside from our current situation?" he asked sardonically. At the look she flicked in his direction, he shook his head. "It's nothing you need to worry about."

Shirley was not deterred. "Uh-uh. You don't get off that easily. You slept poorly both times while I was on watch, and I know you know enough about survival strategies that you know how important good sleep is. Please, if there's anything I can do..."

Rosenzweig turned toward her, starting to open his mouth, intending fully to rebuke her. But something in her expression stopped him. He looked at her for a long moment, then sighed.

"All right," he said. "Honestly, I feel terrible about the situation we're in. I mean look around. We've crash-landed on an alien planet, brought down by something technological, something we don't know anything about. Three fourths of the crew is missing. The whole mission's a shambles. My first command, and I've made a complete mess of it. How do I go back and face Captain Nielsen, never mind the people I trained with, and under, at Command School?"

"But, Alex, how can you take the blame for this?" Miles asked him, doing her best to keep her voice even and reasonable-sounding. "You couldn't have known. We had no indication that anything was wrong 'til that beam hit us, and when it did, it was just too powerful. You acted properly, Alex; you don't bear any blame for this. All you can do now is your best to find and recover our crewmates."

The debate went on for some time, but as it progressed, buoyed by Miles's steadfast belief in him and encouragement, Rosenzweig began to feel less convinced of his own culpability. Finally, Shirley had said all she could.

"Alex," she finished, "like I said, the blame's not yours. If anything, now you have the opportunity to show how you deal with a situation when the textbooks go out the window and you have to

face that. If you bring us home from a situation like this, Star Fleet may have even a better opinion of the whole mission than if it had just been a simple by-the-numbers thing."

Rosenzweig might not have been completely convinced, but the will to argue more was sapped. "I guess you're right," he said. He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "Well, we still have a way to go yet. Let's get moving."

Miles smiled. "Aye, aye, sir."

They walked onward. After a while, Rosenzweig noticed that the grass was thinning. More and more barren spots were cropping up.

"Shirley," he said, "take a reading, will you? Check for soil shifts, mineral content variations...anything that might explain why the vegetation pattern's shifting."

Miles complied, sweeping the tricorder over the ground both ahead of and behind them. She studied the results for a short time, and then looked over at Rosenzweig. "There're a few minor shifts, but how they're interacting to change how well the ground will support vegetation's not clear. The scans give some clues, but not enough for a solid conclusion."

In the alien structure, the scanner technician observed that the two humanoid subjects were crossing out of the Ayan Sector and into the Test Sector. He quickly signaled the chief scientist.

"This is Scanner Technician Golrat for the chief scientist."

"This is the chief scientist. What is your report?"

"The scanners report that the two humanoid beings outside have crossed into the Test Sector."

In another chamber, the chief scientist rose from his seat in front of the desk of another officer. "I shall be there presently." Returning his attention to the officer, he continued what he had been saying. "Prepare to begin the testing process on the being we have inside. Inform me when those preparations are complete." The officer acknowledged, and after the two had exchanged salutes, the chief scientist left the room.

The scanner tech was working rapidly at his controls, trying to improve his data, when the chief scientist arrived. As the door dropped into its slot in the floor and the chief scientist stepped over the threshold, the tech rose and saluted. This time, the scientist merely nodded and approached.

"Where are they now?"

With just the barest blink, the technician responded, "Approximately four rekas past the border between the Ayan and Test Sectors."

"Show me the testing sequence currently in the computer."

"Yes, Chief Scientist." The tech entered commands, and the information scrolled across the viewscreen: "Test 1 – Geological Instability; Test 2 – Atmospheric Phenomena; Test 3 – Amoeboid Life-Form."

As the information completed its scroll, the chief scientist said, "Very well. Wait until they have reached twenty rekas past the sector border, and then initiate Test 1."

"Yes, Chief Scientist." The scanner technician activated a control panel, and entered a command sequence.. Looking back at the chief scientist, he asked, "What shall I define as the tremor force?"

"Enter Force 2 tremors."

"Acknowledged."

A moment later, the communications unit emitted a buzz, and a voice came through its speaker. "Scientist Dydrat to chief scientist."

"Chief Scientist here. Have you prepared internal testing?"

"Yes, Chief Scientist. A Type-1 labyrinth has been prepared in Chamber 1."

"Take them to it individually. Give each subject a standard scanner and demonstrate its use. If they are intelligent, they will understand and use the scanners to their benefit. Send each subject into the labyrinth and record the time it takes the subject to transit the labyrinth."

"Yes, Chief Scientist. Dydrat out."

When the chief scientist had cut the connection, Golrat looked up. "I have entered the tremor strength. Standard operation has been supplied. The beings are now eighteen rekas past the border."

"Follow your orders, technician. I will be in my office. Report test results to me." The chief scientist turned and left the room.

Penik sat quietly on his bunk. He had given up his attempts to break free, and neither he nor Gossenberger had had any new brainstorm on how to proceed, so they'd decided that a rest was in order, and perhaps something might come to them if they weren't struggling with it.

Penik heard a sound, and looked up. A being, oddly insectlike, but not enough to just fall into the description of "intelligent insect", walked down the corridor and came to a stop in front of his doorway. Keying a mechanism set into the wall alongside the screening, the alien shifted slightly, and the screening dropped into a slot in the floor. Stepping back slightly, the alien motioned for Penik to follow it. After just a moment's hesitation, he stepped out of the cubicle, studying the alien as he did so. It wore few clothes, but it did have a belt or harness that evidently was used to carry equipment. Its black, shell-like skin—which reminded Penik of a beetle's carapace—seemed to be nearly rigid, apparently alleviating the need for protective clothing. The alien chattered at him and again motioned for him to follow along behind it. Penik nodded and did so. In a few moments, they passed through an archway and into a large chamber.

Looking around intently, Penik judged the ceiling to be about twenty meters high. He couldn't see the far wall, because right near the doorway was a low wall around three meters high. Directly in front of him, there was an opening in the low wall. The alien turned to a panel on the wall of the chamber and pulled it open, revealing what looked like a supply cabinet. It removed a device from the cabinet and handed it to Penik, who accepted it carefully. It seemed very simple in design, with only a small viewscreen and a square, green button. The alien pulled a second, identical device out of the cabinet, and held up the device until it was sure it had Penik's attention. As he watched, it pressed the button.

The viewscreen on the alien's device came to life, and as the alien pointed it toward the opening in the lower wall, it displayed a graphic representation of the plan view of a maze. That was when Penik realized that the opening in front of which he stood was the entrance to the maze evidently being portrayed on the screen. The alien then turned back to the cabinet and drew out two devices that looked like headsets. A moment later, it confirmed that that was indeed what they were, by placing one on its head. The other, it handed to Penik. Echoing the being's actions, he placed his

device on his own head. The alien chattered at him again, but this time, he suddenly felt understanding flood his brain, and he realized that this new device was a translator.

"I am," said the alien, "called Scientist First Order Dydrat. You will enter the labyrinth and proceed through it as quickly as possible. Your transit time will be measured. Good luck." With that, Dydrat waved him in.

As he passed through the doorway, Penik glanced back to see Dydrat touch a control on what he took to be a timing device. Turning his attention to the task before him, he glanced down at the device he held and began proceeding down a straight pathway flanked by featureless walls. Dydrat had pointedly said nothing about the device, and Penik concluded that he was intended to figure out its use for himself.

Rounding a corner, Penik found himself greeted by two possible pathways. Remembering that the device had shown a graphic of the maze, he held it up and pointed it in the direction of the openings. The display lit again when he pressed the button, and he realized it was a scanner of some sort, or at least a guide unit linked to a scanner somewhere in the facility. The display showed that one pathway ran to a dead-end just around the corner at the end of a long, straight stretch. The other continued clear until it ran off the screen. Penik smiled slightly and moved down the path that showed as clear.

Rosenzweig and Miles continued walking. They had passed the last few blades of grass just a few meters back. The ground on which they trod was now dry, sandy, and hard. Alex stopped and looked out toward the horizon, shading his eyes against the late-morning sun.

"I still can't make out anything," he said.

"The tricorder says that the Human readings are still over seven kilometers away," Shirley replied.

"Guess it's too soon to expect to see anything, eh?" Alex commented wryly. "Let's keep moving, then."

After a few more minutes of walking, Rosenzweig felt a slight shiver run through the ground beneath his feet. He stopped in his tracks and glanced over at Miles. She was standing still, as well, staring wide-eyed at the ground.

"Did you feel what I felt?" she asked. Rosenzweig nodded, and a second later, the ground shook again, more violently.

"Tricorder," he said, gesturing to the device. "Shirley, did we have any reason to believe this area was tectonically unstable?"

Miles had the tricorder out and was scanning the ground. She shook her head. "There's nothing. No indication of underground pressure buildups or stress fracturing."

"Could the tremors be artificial?"

Miles shrugged. "I don't know. The tricorder's not giving me enough to guess."

"We've got to keep going, then," Rosenzweig said. Another tremor shook the ground, and Rosenzweig stumbled, almost losing his balance. Glancing over his shoulder, he called, "Let's move!", and then hurried onward, Miles following close behind.

The tremors got worse. Soon, both Rosenzweig and Miles were keeping a firm hold on each other's forearms to help keep their balance. Moving steadily, they crossed onto a wide, very flat bit of land. It seemed just a little firmer than the surrounding land, and they quickly traversed it, but just as they were almost across, a loud *crack!* ripped through the air. From slightly behind Rosenzweig, Miles cried out. The flat area was revealed to be a

single plate of rock, rock which was now tilting, the end on which Miles stood rising into the air and the other end dropping down into a rift in the ground. Miles was hanging onto the high end, but it was clear she was struggling. Rosenzweig spun around and leaped forward, grabbing Miles's wrists as her grip failed. He staggered forward as she began to slide, but regained a stable footing and was able to pull her far enough forward that she could clamber over the edge of the rock and jump back down onto solid ground. They both ran, hoping to put some distance between them and the center of the instability, which Miles's tricorder had registered as being right under where they'd been standing.

The ground under and around them was riddled with cracks as the tremors continued. They had several close calls as they ran, when weakened soil would give way under their feet, or cracks would yawn open directly in front of, behind, or even between them. Finally, though, the tremors gradually lessened in severity, and then stopped altogether. Rosenzweig and Miles slowed down from their mad dash, looking around at the fractured ground left by the quakes. In front of them, they could again see grass breaking through the gritty surface in isolated spots.

"It's...over," gasped Miles.

"I think you're right," Rosenzweig said a moment later, when he caught his own breath. "Are you okay?"

"I think so, yeah. And you?"

"I'm okay."

"I wonder what caused that instability."

"I don't think it was natural. Maybe whoever brought us here is involved. Do you still have the bearing?"

"Yes," Miles told him. "It's clearer now."

"Let's keep going." Rosenzweig took a deep breath and started off, Miles close behind.

Penik again consulted his scanner. If the diagram was to be believed, he was nearly through the labyrinth. The display showed an exit just around the next bend. Penik smiled slightly and hastened around the indicated bend. Sure enough, a doorway stood in front of him. As he passed through it, Penik noted that the wall beyond was the same as the ones he'd seen outside the labyrinth's entrance, further confirming that he'd successfully completed the run through the maze. Bare moments later, he heard a chittering sound, and as he turned toward it, he saw Dydrat approaching him.

"You have done well," the scientist said, Penik's translator supplying the necessary words for Dydrat's chitters. "Your transit was, among test subjects similar to yourself, quite rapid, only 6.3 letrins in duration. Now, I will escort you back to your room. I must repeat this experiment. Tell me, what is your name, and what is your function?"

"I am Lt. Commander Stephen Penik, science officer of the *U.S.S. Perseus*, a starship of the United Federation of Planets. I am currently serving as senior science officer on a survey mission aboard a small spacecraft which was forced down onto this planet's surface yesterday."

There was just a hint of inquiry in Penik's comment, the unspoken question of whether Dydrat's people had been the ones who forced down the *Endeavor*. But the question was to remain unanswered. Dydrat was impassive, saying only, "I see. Come with me." Taking the scanner from Penik, he led him back into a corridor. After several turns, Penik found himself back in front of his own cubicle.

Dydrat keyed the mechanism next to the door and then opened it. At the scientist's gesture, Penik obediently stepped into the room, and Dydrat closed the door. The scientist then turned to Gossenberger's doorway, through which the engineer had been watching intently. He opened Gossenberger's door, just as he had Penik's previously, and motioned him out.

As Gossenberger stepped into the hall, Dydrat abruptly paused, becoming motionless for a moment. Then he turned back to Penik's room and opened the door once again.

"Please yield your headset," he said. "I know that this will render you again incapable of understanding my speech, but you need not be concerned. If I or one of my colleagues has need to speak to you, we will provide you with another." He extended a limb, and after a moment's hesitation, Penik reached up, removed the headset, and handed it to the scientist. Dydrat nodded once and stepped back out of Penik's cubicle. The scientist escorted Gossenberger down the corridor and out of sight. Penik watched after them for a long moment, and then shrugged to himself and sat down on his bunk.

Gossenberger followed Dydrat down the corridor. The alien held out the headset and gestured for him to place it on his head, as Penik had evidently done before, from what Bob could see. He did so, watching Dydrat's reactions. But the alien didn't speak to him until they reached the entrance to the labyrinth. Then Dydrat repeated the brief instructions he'd given to Penik, provided Gossenberger with a scanner, and sent him into the maze.

The tremors having ceased, Rosenzweig and Miles continued on their trek. Unknown to them, they were being monitored, as Scanner Technician Golrat studied his readouts and the data flowing across them. Both of the beings were alive and apparently well, although the body function readouts indicated substantially elevated internal stress levels over the baseline readings that had been collected. Golrat reported the findings to the chief scientist.

"How complete are the readings?" the chief scientist asked, when Golrat was finished.

"97 percent of ideal," Golrat responded, "an excellent rating, especially considering the conditions under which the scanning equipment was required to function."

"How soon can Test 2 be ready?"

"I would recommend," said the scanner technician, "a short wait for more extensive readings on the beings' recovery rate, as well as allowing them time to rest before we initiate the next test."

"Very well. Wait for two letrins, and then begin Test 2. Chief Scientist out."

The channel closed, and Golrat returned to his work.

Gossenberger took slightly longer than Penik to traverse the maze, owing to a missed turn near the beginning and a close examination of the scanner before he got started. Still, as he exited the maze and was met by Dydrat, he thought the scientist seemed pleased.

"Not a substandard performance," said the scientist. "You took 6.42 letrins to complete your transit through the maze. Not quite as rapid as Commander Penik, but certainly within expected ranges." He followed the same procedure as before, asking Gossenberger his name and function, and then returning him to his cubicle.

For a while after the tremors had stopped, all was quiet. Rosenzweig and Miles continued to progress toward the source of the Human life readings which the tricorder continued to receive. Miles rechecked the device frequently, and after one such check, she looked over at Rosenzweig.

"Alex, I've got something here. Take a look." She touched a control and handed the tricorder to Rosenzweig. "There, and there," she said, pointing. "It suggests that a couple of our people are moving, though still in a confined area."

"Strange," said Rosenzweig. "I wonder what's happening."

"Some of the readings suggest they're in a structure of some sort. It seems fairly large, but I can't get precise details. I am reading substantial power generation nearby, though."

"Can you tell what type?"

"Of power?" She shook her head. "Nope. It's too well shielded." She reached up to brush some hair out of her eyes, and stopped. "The wind's picked up."

"It has?" Rosenzweig stopped, too, paying attention now. And now that he was paying attention, he realized Miles was right. Where before there'd been just light breezes, the wind was now steadier, and stronger. Shading his eyes, he looked skyward. A few clouds scudded across the field of lavender, but it wasn't clear what might be causing the increase in wind.

"This does not bode well," he said. "Shirley, see if you can detect any rock formations or ground topography that we could use for shelter." At her look, he went on, "I just have a feeling this is going to get worse."

It turned out that Rosenzweig was right. Only a few minutes later, the winds had built to nearly gale force. Miles pointed in the direction of where her tricorder said there might be shelter, and they both staggered that way, fighting against the wind. Soon they found a small ditch, sloped from end to center and flanked by small, sheer vertical walls. The ditch itself reached a depth of about three meters, not huge, but enough to afford some protection against the wind. They were standing at roughly the center of the ditch's length. Rosenzweig turned to walk along the edge of the ditch, hoping to find a part shallow enough that he could safely jump in. As he turned, a heavier gust caught him, and for a moment, he lost his balance, teetering at the edge of the ditch. Then Miles was there, grabbing onto his arm and pulling him back from the edge until he could steady himself.

His balance regained, they continued moving, holding onto one another to keep steady. Finally, they reached a shallow enough point and jumped down into the ditch. Hunkering down and moving deeper again, they settled in, kneeling against one of the walls and listening to the wind whistle overhead.

"Thanks," Alex said to Shirley, as they listened.

"Hey, Alex," Shirley said softly, "mutual support, eh?" She smiled, took his hand, and held up their clasped hands, emphasizing the symbolism. "Star Fleet tradition. Even between you and Lori, it holds up." He shot her a look, and she went on, "Oh, I heard about it. The grapevine's alive and well. She wouldn't leave you there, despite the danger to herself." She paused, then said, more softly, "I hope she's all right."

"Me, too," said Alex, "but don't tell her you know about Omicron Hydri. She'd just deny it, or be embarrassed. Even after all this time, I don't think she wants to admit that there's a bond of any sort."

"I think she feels one, though," said Shirley, "at least a little. She always seemed to at least appreciate your persistence."

"Well, maybe you're right, but it's more than I think is there." Alex shrugged a little, and then cast an apprehensive glance at the sky, where a heavy layer of clouds had formed. He wasn't sure if those clouds presaged rain or snow, but neither outcome filled him with enthusiasm.

They learned the answer soon enough. The temperature dropped, and soon the occasional snowflake was drifting down beside them.

"At least the wind's died down," Shirley commented wryly.

Alex fished around the inside of his field jacket. With a brief "Ah" of satisfaction, he held up a small rectangle of silvery, folded plastic. "Thermal blanket for bad weather. Don't leave home without it," he said with a smirk. He unfolded it and spread it over them, and they huddled together to wait for the snowstorm to pass.

Leaving Gossenberger, Dydrat proceeded to Bergelson's cubicle. She was standing, staring out through the screen in the doorway, as he approached. He opened her door and motioned for her to step out. Narrowing her eyes at him, she did as she was instructed. Dydrat handed her a headset and had her put it on, miming each step. Once she had done so, he began to speak.

"You will come with me," he said.

"Not until you tell me what you've done with my crewmates, and why you brought us here." Dydrat was brought up short, and looked more closely at Bergelson to be certain he understood her reaction. He couldn't claim to be an expert in these types of life-forms, but he was fairly sure the belligerence was not feigned.

"You will be told everything, in due time. Now, come with me." He started to turn away, assuming the woman would follow, just as had Penik and Gossenberger. In this case, though, he was in error. Bergelson broke and ran, instead, moving in an erratic, shifting course down the corridor. Dydrat gave his race's equivalent of a shrug, and took a small stunner from his belt. Aiming the roughly pistol-shaped weapon at Bergelson's retreating form, he touched the firing trigger. A narrow, amber beam cut through the air to strike Bergelson on the shoulder. She staggered, took another two steps, and sank to the floor. Dydrat walked over to where she lay, and waited quietly until she regained consciousness. Then, gently, he helped her back to her feet.

"It is fruitless to attempt to escape. If you try again, I will simply stun you again, and you now see that the stun is effective, do you not? Now, come with me."

This time, Bergelson followed him, and he led her to the labyrinth and repeated the introductory lecture and instructions, following which he sent her in, as he had the others before.

After nearly an hour, no more snow fell in the Test Sector. Miles and Rosenzweig were nowhere to be seen, their presence marked only by two mounds of white snow. Underneath, huddled beneath the thermal blanket, they were dry, if not warm. Miles glanced at her tricorder.

"Snow stopped," she said. Rosenzweig nodded. Carefully, they stood up, making sure to shift the blanket so that the snow fell off to their side, as opposed to on their heads. They looked around. All around them, the ground was covered with a fluffy blanket of snow, but Rosenzweig noticed that the snow was already starting to melt. A moment later, Miles confirmed his observation.

"Tricorder says the temperature's up. There's a lot of melting happening very quickly."

Rosenzweig looked up. "The cloud cover's thinning a bit, too, but I wouldn't trust that." Turning to Miles, he asked, "Feel warm enough to go on?" At her nod, they started walking up the slope, the remains of the melting snow crunching beneath their boots.

At his station, Scanner Technician Golrat signaled the chief scientist. "Sir, they have passed through high winds, as well as precipitation in the form of frozen water. The readings indicate essentially no ill-effects, save the discomfort of the cold. I did observe, when they reached the ditch, a momentary elevation of heart and respiration rates, although I attribute this to the fact that one of them nearly fell into the ditch, due to a loss of balance in the high winds. The question, sir, is whether to submit them to precipitation of liquid water, or bypass that test and switch to excessive heat, using the focusing lens orbited several nalettrins ago in preparation for this test."

"What is the saturation level of the clouds at this time?" asked the chief scientist.

"Approximately 42%."

"It would be difficult to rapidly supersaturate the clouds. Very well. Switch to excessive heat. Monitor their readings. If there appears to be any danger, end the test, as per standard procedure."

"Yes, Chief Scientist." The chief scientist then ended the communication.

Rosenzweig and Miles walked out of the ditch and stopped. Miles swung her tricorder around. After a minute, she had the reading again.

"Okay," she said, "I've got it."

They again started walking. As they walked, the clouds dissipated and the sun shone down on them. It grew steadily hotter.

Rosenzweig whipped his forehead with his sleeve. "Whew," he said, completely unnecessarily, "it's getting hot." He pulled off his field jacket and slung it over his arm. Miles did likewise a moment later, then consulted her tricorder.

"Tricorder says temperature's up to...34 degrees Celsius." She looked up. "And rising."

When Bergelson exited the maze, she found Dydrat waiting for her. She wasn't surprised, though she'd briefly entertained hopes that it might not be the case. With a mental shrug, she listened to Dydrat and answered his questions. He took her back to her cubicle without further comment.

When they got there, she stopped at the door. Turning, she asked, "But why? Why are you doing this?"

"Lt. Commander Bergelson, you **are** persistent!" Dydrat gave his race's equivalent of a shrug. "Oh, very well. We brought you here to test you. Very little more. We are researchers studying life in the universe. When we have completed our tests, if we are satisfied that you do not pose a danger to us, you will be released."

"And if you feel we do pose a danger to you?" Bergelson pressed.

"Then the decision would be up to the chief scientist, and I couldn't guess what it would be. The likelihood, however, that you would pose a danger is quite small. In my judgment, the

characteristic that will weigh most heavily in your and your crewmates' favor is that you are generally friendly and at least reasonably cooperative, your earlier actions notwithstanding. Now, please yield your headset to me and reenter your cubicle." Bergelson acquiesced, and Dydrat closed the door without further comment.

The heat eventually stopped rising. Rosenzweig and Miles continued to walk, almost constantly wiping sweat from their brows to keep it from getting into their eyes. Rosenzweig recalled something from his survival training, and licked the sweat from his fingers. When Miles gave him a look, he explained, "Preserves as much salt as possible. The ration kits don't have salt tablets, and I didn't bring any extras. I didn't imagine it'd get this hot."

"There was no reason to," Miles said. "This heat, especially coming out of nowhere like this, shouldn't be part of the climate of this part of the planet."

Rosenzweig nodded, and they walked on. A short time later, Alex held up a hand. "I don't know about you," he said, "but I need a rest." Shirley agreed, and he pulled out the thermal blanket and again unfolded it. They both sat down and draped the light fabric over their heads. After a few minutes, Alex asked, "What do you think?"

"It's a little better," Shirley answered absently.

"At least the sun's not beating down on us."

"It must be the aliens that are doing this," Shirley mused. "I wonder how."

"I wish I knew," said Rosenzweig. They sat silently for a while, until the temperature began to drop.

The chief scientist entered the scan room. Golrat looked up, and nodded acknowledgment. "Sir, we have increased the temperature. The snow has melted. Readings on the two beings indicate that after traveling for a time, they ceased moving and have minimized physical exertion. They appear to be stationary at this time. I have switched off the heat sequence and stowed the focusing lens, and the temperature is returning to the expected norm for this planet."

"Very well. Prepare for Test 3. Open the amoeboid's pen, and encourage it in the direction of the two beings. Assuming it travels as is typical, how long will it take to reach them?"

"Assuming they also resume travel imminently, and at their previous rate, I would estimate approximately 24 cediletrins. I project that they will encounter it just before crossing over the ridge at gridpoint (98,62)."

"Very well. Continue, and report your results to me." The chief scientist turned and walked from the room.

Dydrat's progress improved as he continued the experiment. Germain proved very cooperative, and traversed the maze quickly. It thus wasn't long at all before Dydrat had returned her to her cubicle, and collected Karen Stewart from hers. As she stepped into the corridor, Stewart looked questioningly toward Germain, who nodded assent. Stewart shrugged and followed Dydrat.

As she walked along after the alien scientist, Stewart studied the corridor around her. A Lieutenant J.G. for several years now, she was hoping to see promotion to full Lieutenant at her next promotion review. This mission, she'd hoped, would be her stepping-stone to that, though she certainly hadn't expected the

current situation! As it was, she hoped that if she could contribute by being observant, it couldn't hurt.

When they reached the entry to the maze, and Dydrat had given her the headset, her first reaction was to give the scientist a steady look and ask, "Are you holding all of us in this building?"

"All but two," Dydrat responded, the translator rendering his comment into a matter-of-fact tone. He handed her the scanner. He began to repeat the same speech he'd given the others, but the blonde woman interrupted once again.

"Wait a minute. What do you mean, all but two? Two of our party are free? Which ones?"

Dydrat considered for a moment, but then continued to speak. In addition to the beings near your own cubicle, we are holding Lt. Commander Penik, Lt. Commander Gossenberger, and Lt. Commander Bergelson."

"Then Alex and Shirley are free?" Stewart said, before she could stop herself. She wondered if she'd given anything away that she shouldn't.

"Alex? Shirley? Are those their names?" Stewart relaxed a little. Clearly that there were others in their crew wasn't new information to this creature. The next comment returned the tension to her frame, though. "I do not believe it would be correct to call them 'free', though they are not being held as you are. They are traveling from your spacecraft toward this structure, and are within the Test Sector. They are in the process of undergoing three tests."

"Tests?" Stewart asked. "Like this one?"

"Not exactly," Dydrat said. "Come. Enter the maze, and once you have traversed it, I will explain further." He finished his instruction on the use of the scanner, indicated the maze's entryway, and Stewart went in.

She hurried through the maze as quickly as she could, utilizing the scanner when she couldn't make a decision based purely on the visual evidence. Even so, she made several wrong turns. She grew frustrated, knowing that she was rushing, but driving herself on anyway. But the temptation of getting more answers was just too great for her to slow down.

Finally, she reached the end. As she burst out of the maze, she exclaimed, "Okay, I'm through! Now finish telling me what's going on!"

"One moment," Dydrat replied calmly. He took the scanner from Stewart and examined a small gauge set into the back. He then snapped it onto a clip on his belt. Returning his attention to Stewart, he went on, "Now, let us return to your cubicle. I will explain as we go."

As they walked, the scientist made good on his promise. "the two beings who are outside have passed through two tests thus far," he explained. "They have experienced conditions of geological instability, that is, quake tremors, breakup of the ground surface, and so forth. Later, they were tested for response to atmospheric phenomena, including high winds, snowfall, and extreme heat. According to the reports I have seen, though, they dealt with these conditions very well."

"Are those the only tests?" Stewart asked.

"There will be one more," Dydrat replied. "They will encounter, in a short time, an amoeboid life-form native to another portion of this planet...although its makeup is such that it could survive anywhere within this ecosystem. The results of the encounter will be compared to computer simulations of various

possibilities, and if they are deemed satisfactory, the two beings will no longer be impeded in their travel to this structure."

"How might they **not** be...deemed satisfactory?"

"I am not conversant with the assessment protocols, but one possibility that definitely exists is that the creature could kill them...or they it." Dydrat looked ahead. "We have reached your cubicle. Please yield your headset to me and reenter." Stewart followed Dydrat's instructions, and then watched as the scientist took Brennan from her cubicle and led her down the corridor.

After Dydrat and Brennan had vanished around a corner, Stewart hurried to the doorway of her cubicle and whispered, "Ilene!" Germain came to her door.

"What is it?" she whispered back.

"We've got to do something," Stewart said. "Commanders Rosenzweig and Miles are still free. Dydrat says they're heading this way, through an area he called the 'Test Sector'. He says they've been through two tests already, but there's one more, an encounter with some sort of amoebalike creature. He says there's a chance it might kill them."

"Karen, I can understand your concern. I'm worried, too. But so far, I haven't found a way out, short of these aliens letting us out. Maybe if we're taken out of our cells more than one at a time, we can make a break for it, but I don't see it working until and unless that happens."

"Are you sure we can't do anything?" Stewart asked.

Germain sighed. "I can't think of anything. If I do, I'll let you know."

Far away, on the *Revere*, Captain Nielsen paced across the ship's bridge. As he walked to the communications station, the officer on duty looked up.

"Still nothing, Captain," he reported.

"I don't like it," said Nielsen. "It's been nearly a day since we lost telemetry from the shuttle. What could be happening out there?"

"The automatic transmitter could be damaged," offered Lieutenant Yaworski from his position at the sciences station.

"But if that had happened, by itself, and the crew were aware of it, Alex would have either sent us a message to let us know or they would have come back for repairs. No, it can't be that simple. I hope they're not in trouble out there."

On UFC-8198-IV, Rosenzweig and Miles began walking again, as the temperatures had dropped again to a comfortable level. The land they were now traversing was getting increasingly uneven, with dips and rises becoming common.

"How far does the tricorder say we are from that structure?" Rosenzweig asked.

Miles consulted the instrument. "We're within five kilometers. If we don't run into any more trouble, we could reach it by nightfall."

That sort of fortune would not quite bless them, though. In the scanner room, the chief scientist was conferring with Golrat's relief, Scanner Technician Tacjot. "You have been briefed thoroughly on the situation up to the current status?"

"I have," Tacjot said. "I am fully aware of the status of the tests and I have ready access to all readings taken before my shift." She gave her race's equivalent of a nod.

"Good," said the chief scientist. "Now, where are the two beings—named Rosenzweig and Miles, according to what Scientist Dydrat has learned—in relation to the location of the amoeboid?"

"The amoeboid," reported Tacjot, after a check of the scanner readings, "is on the near side of the ridge, at gridpoint (93,57), and it is continuing to travel along the predicted course. The two beings are on the ridge's far side, at gridpoint (108,70). They are also moving as predicted."

"That would indicate encounter in less than ten letrins from now. Be prepared to monitor it very closely." The chief scientist turned and left the room. As he went down the corridor, he received a call from Dydrat, requesting a meeting in the chief scientist's office. The chief scientist acceded to the request.

Dydrat was waiting when the chief scientist reached his office. The two traded salutes.

"Well?" asked the chief scientist.

"I would like to have your approval," Dydrat began, "of the secondary test battery for the beings we have here in the structure. In the labyrinth test, they have all demonstrated approximately the same level of intelligence, not varying more than 8.3 points on the scale."

"And what is their average rating?"

"Approximately 76 on the 1-to-100 scale. To return to the subject at hand, though, I would like your approval for this battery of tests of their physical, mental, and emotional characteristics." He handed the chief scientist a printout.

"Interesting," noted the chief scientist, as he looked over the information. "I observe an unusually large proportion of tests focusing on friendship and team bonds."

"We have observed that most of the members of this team are friends, as well as colleagues, or at least that this species makes little distinction between those roles. I believe that this situation can be beneficially explored."

"I see." The chief scientist continued his perusal of the proposed tests. When he finished, he looked up at Dydrat. "Yes. I approve." Picking up a writer, he placed his name in the space provided, and then handed the printout back. "Proceed, Dydrat."

"Thank you," Dydrat said, and after another exchange of salutes, he hastened away to begin preparations for the next tests.

"How close are we to the structure?" asked Rosenzweig, as he and Miles crossed the plain.

"About 4,700 meters. We might be able to see it when we cross that ridge up ahead." She pointed to where the ground sloped upward to end in a scarp shadowed against the lavender of the sky.

"Good," said Rosenzweig. "I hope they're not expecting us." They started up the slope. Suddenly, Miles's tricorder beeped. Studying the viewer, she raised her eyebrows. Rosenzweig looked over at her. From his angle, he couldn't see the data, but could see the life-form indicators glowing.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I'm getting a life-form reading, bearing 350 mark 330 degrees. It reads as amorphous, non-constant... But it's definitely alive."

"Any specifics?"

"Roughly elliptical, though as I said, it's also changing its shape. Currently about 1.2 meters in length by .7 meters in width."

"Composition?"

"Just a second... Okay, I've got it. It reads as..." Her eyebrows shot up in surprise. "...as protoplasmic, surrounded by a thin membrane-like skin. No conventional cellular structure that I can read. There do seem to be bodies of some kind within the organism, including what appears to be a nucleus, food vacuoles, plus one or two that the tricorder can't identify."

"Protoplasmic..." muttered Rosenzweig. "Covered by a membrane, with a nucleus... Shirley, that sounds like you're describing a big, macroscopic amoeba."

"Sure does, doesn't it..." Miles said thoughtfully.

"There's precedent," Rosenzweig went on. "About eight years ago, *Enterprise* encountered one, but it was 18,000 kilometers long..."

Miles interrupted Rosenzweig's momentary woolgathering. "Alex, it's moving. It's coming up the other side of the ridge, roughly toward us."

"We have to cross that ridge, or detour a kilometer out of our way, if your readings are correct. Maybe the creature will ignore us."

"I hope so," Miles said, though her voice suggested she was far from sanguine about the prospect.

They were still about ten meters from the top of the ridge when the creature crested the highest point. They continued moving forward cautiously, until a small rodent scurried across the ground a few meters in front of the amoeboid. The creature reacted at once. Rearing up, it extended a pseudopod. It drew back, and then slung the pseudopod forward, whiplike. It split from the main body of the creature and lashed through the air, striking the rodent squarely in its side. With one strangled squeak, the rodent froze in its tracks, stiffened, and toppled sideways, as the blob of protoplasm flowed around and engulfed it.

"Good gods," muttered Rosenzweig. "Give that thing a wide berth." With Miles sticking close by, he shifted to a diagonal path, away from the amoeboid. For the moment, the creature didn't seem to be aware of them, concentrating instead on the stunned rodent, and they aimed to keep it that way. While they moved slowly and non-threateningly, the amoeboid slithered down to the rodent, and extended a second pseudopod, which merged with the loose protoplasmic blob that had englobed the rodent. The loose blob, which had been inanimate, came back to life, and finished wrapping itself around the rodent, swaddling it in layer upon layer of translucent goo. Then the tension on the pseudopod increased, and steadily, the amoeboid pulled the rodent entirely into itself, its body now a shadow within the amoeboid's mass.

"Oh, my god..." whispered Miles. She turned to move past Rosenzweig, and slipped on a loose rock. She staggered slightly, and the rock skittered down the slope. Rosenzweig reached out to steady her, and as he did, he saw surprise and fear on her face. She pointed silently. Twisting around, Rosenzweig saw that the amoeboid had turned and was moving directly toward them, and quickly.

Rosenzweig turned completely and drew out his phaser. "On stun," he said, as Miles emulated his action. Dropping to one knee, they leveled their phasers at the oncoming creature. "Fire." Two blue beams cut through the air and struck the creature. Apart from a slight rippling of the membrane, there was little effect. "Increase power," said Rosenzweig. Again, the only immediate effect was a slightly more pronounced rippling in the creature's

membrane. But a moment later, the amoeboid drew back and lashed a pseudopod.

"Get down!" Startled, Rosenzweig didn't have time to react as Miles shoved him down and out of the way of an airborne blob of protoplasmic material. His phaser slipped out of his hand and slid down the slope for a few meters. Miles had no time left, either. The blob struck her in the left shoulder. She winced in pain and staggered back, her whole arm a mix of pain and numbness. With her other hand, she ripped the protoplasm free before it could do any more damage and quickly hurled it aside. It landed with a squishy "thump", wriggled, and lay still.

Rosenzweig had scrambled down the slope and retrieved his phaser. He ran back up, and immediately had to duck to avoid another protoplasmic blob flung in his direction. Miles was firing again at the creature, still with no significant effect. Rosenzweig shook his head.

"Okay, stun's not working. Switch to disrupt. Let's try firing around it first, before directly at it."

Miles reset her weapon and again raised the weapon to fire. Her reflexes had been slowed a bit by the previous attacks, though, and before she could squeeze the trigger, she was hit by another blob of protoplasm, this time in one knee. The knee promptly gave out, and she toppled over. Rosenzweig swore under his breath and fired, his phaser beam striking the ground about a decimeter in front of the amoeboid. The ground at the point of impact erupted into a small explosion, but the amoeboid didn't even slow down. It just shifted sideways and kept coming, rearing up again. Rosenzweig tried again, again firing in front of the creature. This time, the amoeboid utterly ignored the small cloud of vaporized soil mushrooming in front of it, and threw another piece of itself, this time hitting Miles—who had managed to regain her feet and was standing unsteadily—squarely in the stomach. She doubled over, and fell back to the ground. Rosenzweig fired yet again, this time directly at the amoeboid. The beam tore a hole right through the creature, but as soon as it stopped, the amoeboid reformed itself, filling in the gap left by its disrupted sections.

"Damn!" swore Rosenzweig. "How the hell do you stop this thing?" Then he had an idea. Quickly, he reset his phaser to "heat" and jacked up the power. He leveled the weapon, aimed at the amoeboid, and fired. This time, he was rewarded with a sizzling sound, and a large cloud of vaporized protoplasm boiled up from the amoeboid, which fell back on itself with a gurgling sound. Inside the creature, he could see he blackened section, though the amoeboid was layering uninjured protoplasm over it. With a wicked smile, he fired again, and again the beam burned away a chunk of the creature. By now, the creature had finally evidently decided that this prey wasn't worth the trouble, and was slithering back and away. Rosenzweig fired once more, just to make sure, and—convinced that the creature was indeed fleeing—he ran to Miles's side and dropped to his knees beside her.

The amoeboid might have been gone, but Miles wasn't out of danger yet. The blobs of protoplasm had spread across her stomach and constricted around her knee, and it was obvious she was still in considerable pain. Alex lowered the power on his phaser and focused the beam down to a needle-thin width. Carefully, he burned off the blob around Shirley's knee enough so that he could peel the rest of it away with his fingers, ignoring the pinprick-feelings of whatever remained of the chemical or other type of toxin the blob had possessed.

With the blob on Shirley's stomach, though, the situation was riskier. It had spread across her lower torso, and as a result was very thin. Alex wasn't at all sure he could burn through the protoplasm without also burning right into Shirley's clothes or skin, especially not in less-than-optimal field conditions. Instead, he first attempted to peel it off by hand. It was no use; the blob was stuck tight. Alex shrugged. Slowly, he raised the phaser. He gazed at it for a long moment, then reduced the power setting to its lowest level and verified it was still set to heat. Aiming carefully so as to just skim the surface of the blob, he fired. The beam neatly split the blob into two sections, each of which promptly loosened their grip on Shirley and shrank into small, inert lumps which Alex could pull away by hand and toss away.

With all the blobs having been removed, Alex drew out the medikit from his jacket. He opened it up, took out the medical scanner, and passed it over Shirley's unconscious form, taking careful stock of the readings. As best as Alex could tell, they indicated that the blobs had had an effect on her internally, which he'd suspected from the sensations when he'd handled them. There was some form of foreign substance in her bloodstream. To make it worse, this substance was affecting the injuries she'd suffered previous to this mission, back on Starbase 24. Alex turned off the scanner and put it back in the 'kit. He pulled out the hypospray and snapped the drug vial into place, switching it until the proper drug was in place. Setting a standard dosage and hoping that it would be right, he pressed the hypo against Shirley's upper arm. The drug took effect, and Shirley began to creep back to consciousness.

"Al-Alex..." she whispered, "what happened?"

"The creature attacked you," Alex told her gently. "I was able to drive it off. How do you feel?"

Shirley groaned. "Lousy. How does the mediscanner read?"

"Life functions depressed, and a foreign substance in your bloodstream. I gave you a dose of sanguiline to try and counteract it."

"We've got to get going," said Shirley, and she started to push herself up.

"Wait—" said Alex, but Shirley had gotten as far as her knees. That was about when everything around her started to spin. Alex caught her as she toppled to one side, and lowered her back to a sitting position, leaning her up against him.

"Shirley, you're not going anywhere until you've recovered a bit."

"I don't want to hold us up. We need to get to that..." Her voice trailed off, and she put a hand to her head. "Dizzy," she muttered.

"You shouldn't travel," Alex said firmly. He looked around. "There's another rock outcropping over there," he said, pointing. "We can take shelter by it."

"You go on, then," Shirley told him. "I'll just crawl over to the rock and wait for you."

"Not a chance. Here, let me help you." Half-supporting her, Alex helped Shirley to the rock. He helped her settle comfortably, and then sat down beside her. Even that small effort had exhausted her, and she slumped back against the rock and rested silently, her eyes closed, for about ten minutes. Then she opened her eyes.

"Alex?"

"I'm here, Shirley."

"Go on. Find the others. I'll be all right. I still have a phaser."

"Sure, and you can barely sit up, let alone hold a phaser steady. No. I'm going to stay here with you until you can travel."

"But..."

"No arguments. I **am** going to stay with you." He reached out and took Shirley's hand, gripping it firmly in his attempt to show his support. She smiled slightly and gripped tightly back.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Dydrat proceeded down the corridor to the chief scientist's office. Reaching the door, he pressed a control, and a tone sounded from within. "Enter," said the chief scientist. Dydrat stepped into the room, and paused, as he saw the chief scientist speaking into the communication unit.

"...acceptable, Scanner Technician Tacjot. You believe that Miles has a good chance for survival?"

"Yes," came Tacjot's voice from the 'com. "Her life functions are reduced and slightly unstable, but they are within acceptable limits. Rosenzweig is with her, according to the scanner."

"How did the amoeboid fare?"

"Not well. Rosenzweig utilized an energy weapon against it and wounded it severely, after it attacked Miles. It retreated in the direction of its pen, and should reach this building in a few letrins."

"Very well. Maintain scanning. Chief scientist out." The chief scientist switched off his communication unit and regarded Dydrat. "Yes?"

Dydrat lifted a long, thin plastic strip. "I have the psychological aptitude test results. After completing those tests, I moved the beings to individual test cubes to begin the emotional tests. I will be utilizing simulations as well as questioning to establish results."

"Very well. How long do you estimate that this will take?"

"Approximately four setuletrins, sir."

"Very well. You may initiate."

"Yes, Chief Scientist." Dydrat saluted and left the room. He returned to the testing room, where the six Humans sat in their cubes, facing viewer screens. Entering a booth in the back of the room, Dydrat checked a bank of monitors. Satisfying himself that everything was in order, he switched on the preprogrammed test battery. The screens in the cubicles lit, and the soft voice of the computer began speaking. Based on the data available, it could now be translated so the Humans could understand it.

"HELLO," it said. "HOW DO YOU FEEL?"

Brennan glanced down at the keyboard in front of her, and was startled to find that the keys were marked with letters and numbers in Federation Standard. She reached forward and keyed a response to the computer's question.

"NOT GOOD."

"INDEED?" replied the computer voice. "WHY NOT?"

"I HAVE BEEN SEPARATED FROM MY FRIENDS, HELD PRISONER IN A CELL, PUT THROUGH TESTS LIKE SOME KIND OF LAB ANIMAL... HOW SHOULD I FEEL?"

"YOUR FEELINGS ARE REASONABLE," the computer responded. Brennan blinked at that. Apparently the computer had some basic understanding of sarcasm. Pictures of Penik, Gossenberger, Bergelson, Germain, and Stewart appeared on the screen. "ARE THESE YOUR FRIENDS?" asked the computer.

"YES," Brennan responded, "BUT TWO ARE MISSING."

"THE OTHER TWO ARE NOT IN THIS CONSTRUCT."

"WHERE ARE THEY?"

"HERE." An image flashed onto the viewer, and Brennan jerked forward in her chair, staring aghast. On the screen, Miles lay flat on the slope of the ridge, completely encased in a mass of protoplasmic-looking goo, completely motionless. Rosenzweig was not only encased, but it looked like his body was already being broken down, and a large creature that looked like nothing so much as a big amoeba was perched atop the corpse, apparently feeding on it.

"No!" Leslie cried, almost involuntarily. What she typed was, "YOU LET THIS HAPPEN?? MURDERERS!"

The image abruptly vanished, and the computer said, "DO NOT FEAR. WHAT YOU JUST SAW WAS AN ILLUSION. THEIR TRUE CONDITION IS MUCH BETTER." A new image appeared, with both Rosenzweig and Miles asleep, leaning against a rock.

"HOW DO I KNOW WHICH IS THE TRUTH?" Leslie typed.

"TRUST," the computer responded.

Leslie paused for a moment, and then typed, "DON'T DO THAT AGAIN."

The computer did not respond to that, but went on to other questions and images.

Shirley quickly fell asleep, and Alex settled himself against the rock. After a while, he became aware of her shifting uneasily as she slept, and he glanced over at her. Shirley was very pale, and she periodically shivered, even though it wasn't that cold. If he'd stopped to think about it, he might not have done what he did next, but for once Alex acted without thinking. He moved over to Shirley and slipped an arm around her. Very gently, he lowered her so her head was in his lap and her shoulders rested against his crossed legs. He drew the thermal blanket out of his jacket pocket and spread it over her. Shirley didn't awaken. Alex sighed slightly and settled back against the rock, and soon fell sleep himself.

After several hours, Shirley awoke. Without moving, she opened her eyes and looked straight up. She vaguely realized that she wasn't in the same position she'd been when she fell asleep. More directly impinging on her awareness through the haze that clouded her thoughts was the fact that the sky was a deep purple and the sun had almost set. With a groan, she tried to get up. She'd gotten as far as propping herself on her elbows, and was about to sit up, when, once again, her environment reeled. She fell back.

The movement woke Alex, who leaned forward. His eyes swept across the landscape. Seeing nothing save the planet's two moons hanging in the sky above them, he looked down at Shirley. She was trembling slightly. An expression of ineffable tenderness crossed Alex's face, and he very gently stroked a few wisps of hair from Shirley's forehead. She shifted slightly and murmured, "Alex," but he patted her head, saying, "Shh. You still need to rest. Sleep now. We'll wait 'til morning and see how you feel."

"You're...still here," Shirley whispered.

"Of course I am, Shirley," Alex answered softly. "I care about you, and I won't leave you. Now sleep." He stroked her hair gently, until she seemed to relax, and then he closed his eyes and drifted off again, himself.

Dydrat was very pleased. After approximately four setuletrins of simulations and questioning, he had the results of the emotional test battery. He had sent the Humans back to their cubicles, and he took the printout of the test results to the chief scientist.

"Here," he said, pointing, "and here. At this point, near the beginning, the computer told them that Rosenzweig and Miles had been killed by the amoeboid. As you can see, all of them showed greatly-increased stress levels. Penik and Gossenberger showed exceptionally high levels, consistent with their self-description as close friends of Rosenzweig. In general, during all simulations where friends or companions were injured or killed, stress reactions went up. Further, clarifying data indicate that friendship and family are very important to this species."

"Do we as yet have any information on their culture or society?" asked the chief scientist. "Your results do not address that."

"The third and final test battery," said Dydrat, "involves questions about their society and their place within it. It will also provide further information about their mission and why they are here."

"Very well. Implement the testing after the subjects have had a suitable rest period. And Dydrat?"

"Chief Scientist?"

"Are there any further physical tests planned?"

"I had not intended to. Medical Scientist Visnot tells me that scanner readings taken during the single test battery have been enough to give her a sufficient understanding of how their bodies work and what their limits are. She does not feel that any more are necessary."

"All right. You are dismissed." Dydrat saluted and turned to leave. The chief scientist returned to his desk, nodding slightly as he heard the hiss of the door.

It had been nearly three hours since Dydrat had returned them to their cubicles, with the suggestion that they sleep until he came for them again. Germain had tried that, but had woken up after only an hour. Too keyed-up to sleep, she paced her cell, occasionally glancing across the corridor to where Stewart lay sleeping. Ilene was worried. The images she had viewed were unsettling, to say the least, and she wasn't at all sure she believed the aliens' computer when it told her they were merely illusions created by a simulation program. Still, she knew for certain that at least both Stewart and Brennan still lived, which gave her some comfort.

Germain heard a clicking sound, and she stepped close to the doorway of her cubicle, peering through the screening. Dydrat was coming down the corridor. Noticing Germain watching, he nodded to her, stopped near her doorway, and touched the control that opened the door. Germain stepped out and waited. Dydrat gave her a headset.

"I trust you are refreshed?" he asked.

"Not really," Germain responded dryly. "Do we go through more testing now?"

"One more test battery," Dydrat told her. "Your companions, excepting these two, have been returned to their test cubes. You three will now accompany me there." Dydrat opened Stewart's and Brennan's doors, and then touched another control, which sounded a low tone in the cubicles. Stewart jumped slightly, shook herself, and got up. She exited the cubicle as directed by Dydrat, and then received a headset. By this time, Brennan was also awake, and the procedure repeated. When all three women were ready, Dydrat shepherded them down the corridor. The three walked together, whispering tensely.

"How strong do you think he is?" whispered Leslie to Karen.

"I don't know," was Stewart's answer. "I'm a physicist, not a physiologist."

"Okay, okay," said Leslie. She'd raised her voice slightly, and Ilene made a "keep it down" gesture.

"Shh," she said softly. "We don't want Dydrat to hear."

"I am sorry to disappoint you," said Dydrat, "but my auditory sense is quite acute. Just to be clear about this, I do not recommend any attempts to overpower me. They would end in failure, and would merely damage your standing in our eyes." The scientist turned forward and continued walking.

After a short time, they reached the testing room. Dydrat ushered them inside and directed them to their test cubes. When they had all taken their seats, Dydrat proceeded to the control booth, settled himself at his control panel, and initiated the final test battery.

Germain sat in her cubicle, waiting. After several minutes, the viewer in her cube came to life, glowing softly. An image of a Star Fleet insignia appeared on the screen.

"WHAT INSIGNIA IS THIS?" asked the computer voice.

Germain typed in her response, as she had in the previous tests. "IT IS THE INSIGNIA OF STAR FLEET, THE ARMED PEACEKEEPING FORCE AND PRIMARY EXPLORATORY AGENCY OF THE UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS."

"WHAT ARE THE MEANINGS OF THE COLORS AND SYMBOLS?"

"THE STAR HAS NO SPECIFIC MEANING, THOUGH AT ONE TIME IT REPRESENTED A SPECIFIC DIVISION OF STAR FLEET. DIVISION IS NOW DENOTED BY THE COLOR OF THE CIRCLE BEHIND THE ARROWHEAD-SHAPED SYMBOL. THE RED SHOWN HERE INDICATES ENGINEERING SERVICES."

"WHAT IS THE 'UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS'?"

"AN ORGANIZATION OF ALLIED WORLDS LOCATED NOT FAR FROM HERE."

"HOW LONG HAS THIS 'FEDERATION' BEEN IN EXISTENCE?"

"APPROXIMATELY 160 OF OUR YEARS."

"DO YOU MEASURE YOUR YEAR BASED ON THE SUN OR A MOON OR MOONS?"

"BASED ON PLANETARY REVOLUTION AROUND A SUN."

"WHAT IS THE DISTANCE OF YOUR HOMEWORLD FROM YOUR SUN?"

"ABOUT 150 MILLION KILOMETERS."

"WE HAVE GLEANED SOME INFORMATION FROM THE COMPUTERS ON BOARD YOUR SPACECRAFT. IT CAN BE GATHERED, THEN, THAT THE UNITED FEDERATION OF PLANETS HAS BEEN IN EXISTENCE FOR A LONG TIME, AND IS WELL-ESTABLISHED?"

Germain shook her head, wondering what the point of the questioning was if these aliens already had much of this information. But what she typed was, "YES."

The questioning continued for a while longer. As it progressed, Dydrat found himself becoming very interested as he monitored the responses of the Humans.

After the computer finished the questioning, Dydrat returned them to their cubicles and went to his office to review the data printouts. Not long after he had settled himself in his sling and begun reading, his comm unit buzzed. It was the chief scientist.

"Have you finished the testing?"

"Yes, Chief Scientist. I am reviewing the results now. They are quite fascinating."

"Good. Are the beings back in their cubicles?"

"Yes."

"Hold them there until dawn. Barring anything unexpected in your report, we will plan to release them then. We will then observe to see if they locate the two others, and will monitor their reunion."

"Yes, Chief Scientist. Should we make contact and help them depart this planet? They might need our assistance in removing the restrainer program from their craft's computer."

"If your report confirms non-hostility, we will aid them. Now, return to your work. Chief scientist out."

"Dydrat out." The screen faded.

The light of UFC-8198 awakened Rosenzweig early the next morning. The star, tinted by the atmosphere to a deep golden color instead of its normal pale yellow, washed the landscape with its rays. The moons were low on the horizon, and the smaller one looked like it was about to set. Rosenzweig looked around, and saw nothing significantly changed since he'd fallen asleep. Glancing down, he saw that Miles's head still rested in his lap, and she was still asleep. He smiled slightly, and then a soft rumble in his stomach informed him that he was hungry. Reaching into his jacket pocket, he pulled out a ration bar and a water capsule. Slowly, he ate the bar and then drank the water. By the time he'd finished, the sun had risen slightly, and he decided to reconnoiter their surroundings. Very gently, he lifted Miles's head and shoulders, slid out from under her, and lowered her back to the ground. She remained asleep, and he decided to let her be. Standing, he pulled out his own tricorder and scanned the area. The readings told him that the structure that was their destination lay only 4.7 kilometers away. In the other direction, he couldn't detect anything amiss, and the shuttle's beacon flickered near the edge of the instrument's range.

Taking a few steps away from where Miles slept, he moved around the lee of the rock and activated the recorder.

"Mission Log, Stardate 7607.29, Lt. Commander Rosenzweig recording:

Shirley Miles and I have spent the last two days crossing approximately nine kilometers of ground between our downed long-range shuttle and warp sled and our current location. During that time, we experienced a variety of conditions that have led us to suspect we were being 'tested' by the beings who forced our shuttle down. One of these tests may have been our encounter with a life-form which closely resembled a macroscopic version of an amoeba. During this encounter, Lt. Commander Miles was attacked and wounded. The creature was driven off before it could do more harm, and I am hopeful that Ms. Miles's injuries are minor. If she has recovered sufficiently to resume travel, we will proceed the last almost five kilometers to what we hope will be a reunion with our missing crewmates."

Rosenzweig switched off the log, took one more sensor sweep, and walked back around the rock to where he'd left Miles. He found her sitting up, running her fingers through her long hair. She looked up as she saw him.

"Morning, Alex," she said simply.

"How are you feeling?"

"Better. Not a hundred percent, but better." Shirley gave him a crooked smile. "I had something to eat, and I don't feel dizzy anymore, at least."

"Can you stand?"

"I haven't tried. Let's see." Slowly and carefully, she stood up. She wobbled a bit, and Alex held out his hand to steady her, but she waved him off and steadied herself. She smiled again, gently. "I'm okay. Thanks anyway. I won't be running for a while, but I think I can walk."

"Good." Alex smiled back at her. "It might take us a while to get to the structure, but we'll go slow."

"Thanks." Shirley took a step forward, and then stopped and turned back to Alex, fixing him with a look. "Alex, about last night... Did you mean that?"

"Last night?" Alex paused, and then realized what Shirley probably meant. "Ah. I meant it. I wouldn't have said it otherwise."

"Alex, I care about you, too, but...I don't know if you're asking me for...more..."

"I wouldn't refuse it out-of-hand, but no, I wasn't. Nor did it have any expectations involved. It was just an expression of feeling, not a proposition. You're my friend before all else."

"All right. I just had to make sure we were clear on that."

"Of course." Rosenzweig smiled, even if the smile didn't quite make it to his eyes. He shrugged and turned forward. "Come on, we'd better get going." They walked toward the ridge and their goal beyond.

Gossenberger lay on the bunk in his cubicle. He had just awakened, and had not yet gotten up. After a minute he sat up. To his surprise, a packet of food of the type normally dispensed through the wall panel was sitting on the floor near the doorway. Rising from the bunk, he made use of the toilet and washbasin, and then went over to the doorway.

"Steve!" he called in a loud whisper. "Are you awake?"

Across the hall, Penik groaned. "I am now," he grumbled.

"Something's happening. They gave us breakfast."

"The panel works. That's nice."

"No," said Gossenberger, "I mean there's food in packets inside our doorways."

That woke Penik up. He sat up and saw that Gossenberger was right. There was a packet inside his door, too. "I wonder what's going on," he said.

"I don't know," said Gossenberger, "but I don't like it." Still, not liking it didn't stop him from picking up the food packet, sitting on the bunk, and opening it up. Nibbling carefully, he raised his eyebrows. "Tastes okay," he said. He finished the food and went back to the door. Penik had also eaten. "What's our next move?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Penik, with no small amount of irony in his voice. "We're still locked in, remember?"

"I know, I know," Gossenberger said frustratedly. Then, hearing a familiar clicking sound, he looked up. Dydrat was walking down the hall toward them. He nodded to Gossenberger, opened the door, and held out a headset. Gossenberger took it, and then Dydrat repeated the process with Penik.

"Hello," he said. "I am pleased that you are both awake and active."

"What's going on now?" asked Gossenberger.

"You are being freed today."

"Excuse me," said Penik. "You said freed?"

"I did. Our studies are complete, and we have decided that you are to be released. Your group will be taken to an exit on the side of this structure closest to your friends who are approaching us. You will then be allowed to go, and seek them out."

"Where are they?" asked Gossenberger.

"Not far, but as for the rest, it will be up to you."

"How are they?" Penik asked.

"Rosenzweig is in acceptable condition. Miles is experiencing difficulties related to her injuries sustained from the amoeboid, but she is improving." Dydrat led Penik and Gossenberger into the corridor. "Come with me."

Germain, Brennan, and Stewart were all awake when Dydrat reached their cubicles, with Penik and Gossenberger in tow. The situation was quickly explained to them, and soon the three excitedly joined the two Lt. Commanders out in the hallway. With one more person left to be gathered, Dydrat led the group in the direction of Bergelson's cubicle.

Lori, too, was awake and alert by the time Dydrat and the group arrived. She was immediately suspicious when she saw the excited, happy expressions on her companions' faces.

"Okay, what's going on?" she asked, once Dydrat had handed her a headset.

"You and your companions are being released," Dydrat told her. Bergelson's eyes widened, then narrowed.

"Really? It's not just another test, is it?" She had chafed at having to do tests, and had been gaining a new appreciation for lab animals.

"It's true," Germain affirmed. "I was skeptical, myself, at first, but I've decided that Dydrat really means it."

"Of course I mean it," Dydrat said dryly.

"That's wonderful," said Bergelson, favoring Dydrat with a smile. The scientist inclined his head in response. His face wasn't constructed to be able to replicate the humanoid smile expression, but the tone of his reply seemed to suggest a smile, nonetheless.

"Lt. Commander Bergelson, you and your friends are the type of subjects that do make my role here a rewarding one, if somewhat challenging," he said. Bergelson couldn't help but chuckle at the ironic tone the translator delivered with Dydrat's qualifier. "Now, if you will come with me, it is time to proceed to the exit." He resumed traveling down the corridor, with the *Endeavor* crew following behind, chattering excitedly.

"How are you doing, Shirley?" Rosenzweig and Miles had been moving for nearly an hour now. The tricorder said that they had covered about six hundred meters. Miles, though, had been slowing down considerably over the past few minutes, and Rosenzweig could see that, as much as she was trying to minimize it, she was favoring her injured leg, as well.

"The pain in my leg's getting worse. I guess I'm not doing as well as I hoped."

"Where does it hurt?" Rosenzweig asked. He realized it was probably a useless question, but he asked it anyway.

"Around my knee and a little in my ankle. Both places were where I was hurt on Starbase 24."

Rosenzweig's eyebrows knitted in concern. "Why don't we sit down for a bit? You can rest your leg, and I'll try to find something for you in the medikit."

Miles shook her head. "I'd like to try to go a little farther, Alex. I'm slowing us down too much already."

Rosenzweig almost made as if to argue, then thought better of it, and simply said, "Okay." Barely ten minutes later, though, Miles was gritting her teeth with each step she took. "All right, that's enough," Rosenzweig said.

"But—"

"I'm pulling rank," Rosenzweig replied firmly. "Put your arm around my shoulders." Miles did as instructed, and Rosenzweig lowered her to a sitting position, making sure her weight was on her good leg. "Keep as much of your weight as possible off the injured leg," he told her. Miles shifted position slightly, and Alex opened the medikit and scrutinized the vials nestled inside. Selecting one, he snapped it into the hypospray and turned to Miles.

"This should help, I hope."

"What are you giving me?"

"Doloremedicine, a painkiller. Hopefully, between that and some rest, we'll get you functional again pretty quick." Carefully, he set the dosage and pressed the hypo against Miles's leg. A few seconds later, the tension in the leg visibly eased. "Better?" Rosenzweig asked.

"Yeah," Miles answered. "Thanks."

"You're welcome. Now, stay here for a couple of minutes. I'm going to scout around for a bit. I'll be back." Miles nodded, and Rosenzweig moved off.

Dydrat reached the exit door, and Penik and Gossenberger hurried up behind him, peering through the window set into the door.

"There's another room in there," Gossenberger said, his suspicions returning.

"What's this about?" Penik asked, looking at Dydrat.

"There is nothing to be disturbed about," Dydrat reassured them. "It is merely an airlock unit, to minimize contamination of this facility from outside environmental forces."

Penik stopped in his tracks. He looked at Dydrat. Then he looked back through the door, and saw what he'd missed before, another window in a door on the opposite side of the room. Through **that** window, he could see a bit of sky and a sliver of the grassy plain upon which the structure sat.

"Dydrat's right," he said, a trifle sheepishly. "I shouldn't have missed that." He turned toward the scientist. "My apologies, Dydrat."

"Yeah, me, too," said Gossenberger.

"I accept," Dydrat responded. "Considering the past days, I should have anticipated the potential for greater suspicion." Then he brightened again. "Come, then, let us enter." He touched a keypad set into the wall next to the door and entered a code combination. The door obediently dropped into the floor.

Gossenberger glanced down at the door slot. "That must be a real pain to deal with in multiple-story buildings," he quipped, "strictly from an engineering standpoint."

"We do use sideways-opening doors when the situation demands it," Dydrat replied.

"Oh," said Gossenberger. Dydrat led the group into the lock area, and when he had satisfied himself that everyone was safely inside, closed the inner door. He touched a switch, and then turned to face the *Endeavor*'s crew.

"You will likely feel a slight vibration around your bodies," he explained. "This will be normal. We are simply passing through a standard decontamination procedure, so that any substances you

may have encountered within this structure cannot be carried into the outside planetary environment.” When the decontamination procedure was completed, Dydrat opened a small panel in the lock’s wall. He pulled out a small package, opened it, and handed two packets of a gel-like substance to each member of the *Endeavor’s* crew. “These contain a food substance. It is compatible with your physiology, and each packet will support you for a period of two planetary rotations. You should reach your companions considerably before that, however.” Dydrat finished speaking and handed Gossenberg another plastic bag, containing the group’s wristband communicators. He then turned to the keypad set next to the outer door and entered yet another code sequence. The outer door also dropped into the floor, and the scientist accompanied the Humans outside. The door slid up again, and a sound like a blower was heard.

Penik gave Dydrat a questioning look, and the scientist explained, “The air is being drawn out of the lock and purified, which will minimize the entry of impure air when I go back inside.”

“Oh, I see,” Penik said.

“Should we get going?” asked Gossenberg.

“Might as well,” said Penik. The other members of the *Endeavor* crew returned their headsets to Dydrat, and Gossenberg distributed their communicators. Before Penik could remove his headset, Dydrat held up one claw, and the science officer hesitated.

“Good luck,” Dydrat said. “I may see you once more, if we contact you again. If not, then goodbye.”

“Goodbye, and thank you,” said Penik. He finally did take off his headset and handed it back to Dydrat. The others in the party, who were moving out ahead, turned back and waved to the alien scientist, as Penik strode to catch up with them. Dydrat waved back, and then stood and watched as they moved out across the plain.

As Penik caught up with the others, Gossenberg turned to him. “Dydrat said that Alex and Shirley were coming from this direction, didn’t he?”

“Yes,” Penik answered. “I wish I had a tricorder. It’d make things a lot easier.” He gazed out ahead of them, and shrugged.

“How are we going to find them?” asked Stewart.

“For the moment, let’s just keep walking this way and see what happens,” Penik answered. “At least we know that the shuttle’s this way, too.”

“I have a suggestion,” Bergelson said. “If we divide up into two or three teams, and spread out over a few hundred meters, moving in parallel, we’d stand a better chance of running into them.”

“But we could also lose each other,” said Gossenberg.

“Not now that we have our communicators back,” Bergelson said, holding up her arm to emphasize the device on her wrist.

“We might as well try it,” Brennan put in. “We’ve got nothing to lose. If it doesn’t work after a while, we can always regroup.”

“We should try it,” agreed Stewart. Finally, Penik nodded assent.

“Okay. We’ll divide into two groups. Bob, you and Leslie are with me. Lori, you take Ilene and Karen. Check in every fifteen minutes by communicator. Any questions?” There being none, Penik said, “Good. Let’s go.”

Miles rested quietly, massaging her leg. The pain was virtually gone now, and she was anxious to move on. She hoped that Rosenzweig would get back soon. She leaned back a little and looked up into the lavender sky.

“Shirley!” Miles heard Rosenzweig’s shout, and her gaze snapped in the direction in which he’d disappeared. He scrambled over the rise and ran back toward her. “Shirley, I’ve got life-form readings. Human readings!”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” Rosenzweig replied firmly. “See for yourself.” He handed her the tricorder. “That way.” Miles pointed the tricorder in the indicated direction, and sure enough, she saw the same results, indicating that Humans were, indeed, near the structure.

“Six persons,” she said. Rosenzweig nodded.

“The rest of our crew.”

“We’d better get going again,” Miles said, starting to get to her feet.

“I’ll try to contact them,” said Rosenzweig. Pushing up his sleeve, he tapped the activation control on his wrist communicator. “Rosenzweig to Penik. Come in, Steve.” There was no response. Only a slight hiss showed that the communicator was in fact functioning. Rosenzweig tried again. “Rosenzweig to Gossenberg. Do you read me, Bob?” Still nothing. Miles also was trying, and between the two of them, they attempted to contact each of their crewmates. But in no case were they successful.

“What do you think?” asked Miles.

“I’m not sure. Maybe some sort of interference field?”

Rosenzweig pulled off his communicator and checked a readout set into its inner surface. “Power looks almost at full, still. Has to be something external, then.”

“The aliens?”

“Could well be,” Rosenzweig answered thoughtfully. “But why?”

The other members of *Endeavor’s* crew were also discovering that their communicators weren’t working. Bergelson had attempted to call Penik for her first scheduled check-in when she found she couldn’t make contact. Neither, it turned out, could Germain or Stewart.

“What should we do now?” asked Stewart.

“I think we should continue on, though if you both feel we should go back to the others, I won’t argue,” Bergelson answered.

“The other question is what Steve will do when he realizes he can’t contact us,” Germain commented. “If I were in charge, I’d want everyone to regroup.”

“Thinking practically, though,” Stewart put in, “we’re still not that far away from the others, and we’ll stand a better chance of finding Alex and Shirley if we stay as two groups. I think we should continue on.”

“All right, then,” said Bergelson. “We continue on. Keep a close watch for any of our shipmates.”

Brennan shook her head. She looked up from her seemingly operating, but also apparently useless, communicator. “It’s no use,” she said. “I can’t make contact with any of them.”

“Interference, y’tthink?” Gossenberg asked. “What could be causing it?”

“I wouldn’t be at all surprised,” Penik said, his voice tight, “if it was Dydrat and his friends, just to see if we could find Alex and Shirley without any technological tricks.” He shrugged. “Well, for

the moment we can't do anything about it. I'd prefer that, if Lori and her team realize what's happening, they'll come back and rendezvous with us, but Lori might just reason that we'll cover more ground in two groups. Bob, do me a favor and keep a watch for them, though, in case they do come back."

Miles and Rosenzweig had resumed a steady pace. Rosenzweig periodically took sweeps with his tricorder, tracking the Human life readings. Every few minutes, hoping that their luck would improve as the distance reduced, Miles tried again to make contact with one of their crewmates.

After one of his sweeps, Rosenzweig said to his companion. "Shirley, remember that I said it looked like they'd split into two groups?" At Miles's nod, he went on, "I'm sure of it now. One group of three is coming right toward us, and the other is moving off on a tangent, away from us."

"How far away are they?" Miles asked.

"The first group is about 3,100 meters from us, and the second is 2,850." He looked at her for a moment. "How are you feeling?"

"No pain. I guess that's a good sign."

"If any pain comes back, let me know, okay?"

"I will." Rosenzweig gave Miles a smile, and they went on.

"What is the status of the Humans?" asked the chief scientist.

"The two coming from the direction of the craft are still some distance away," reported Scanner Technician Tacjot. "The group we have released has divided into two. One is proceeding directly toward the two from the craft, while the other has diverged slightly and is now angling away. Shall I put a diagram on the display?"

"Yes. Include projections of their relative paths." The chief scientist turned as Dydrat entered the room.

"What is the status of our former guests?" wondered Dydrat.

"Tacjot is preparing a diagram of the locations of the Humans."

"Ready," said Tacjot. The large display on the wall above the console lit, and a map of the terrain surrounding the structure appeared. Three blips pulsed on the map.

"Three groups?" commented Dydrat. "I wonder why."

"Did any of your sociological tests suggest they might do something like this?" asked the chief scientist.

"No," said Dydrat. "In fact, the tests suggested instead that they would remain as close together as possible. Is the interference field still on?"

"Yes," the chief scientist replied.

"I do not understand this, then. We should continue monitoring to gather additional data."

"Agreed," said the chief scientist. "Tacjot, continue scanning."

"Yes, Chief Scientist." Tacjot continued to concentrate on her instruments.

For another hour, Rosenzweig and Miles walked across the rolling land. Miles had had to stop briefly once when the pain started to return, and Rosenzweig had given her another dose of doloremedicine. Soon after they had resumed walking, Rosenzweig was scanning the terrain again.

"Reading anything new?"

"The group still basically heading for us is 2,070 meters away, and the one on a slant from us is 2,110 meters away. They're diverging by about ten degrees, it looks like."

"We need to keep moving," Miles said, with determination.

Tacjot continued to monitor the three groups of Humans. Rosenzweig and Miles were now moving considerably faster than they'd been before. The chief scientist and Scientist Dydrat had returned to their offices, so Tacjot was alone in the scanner room. Noting the change in speed in the blips she was observing, Tacjot ran some additional calculations. If all the groups of Humans maintained their present pace, she determined, then the groups currently heading directly for each other would meet within 45 letrins. She contacted the chief scientist and gave him the updated information.

"Very well," was his response. "When they reach terminal range, activate the high-resolution cameras, so that we may monitor their reunion in detail. Out."

"Tacjot out."

Penik again tried to reach Bergelson, still with no luck. Disgustedly, he tapped off the device. A short time earlier, he and Gossenberger had decided to test the strength of the interference field, and, separating a little at a time, they'd kept testing their communicators. By the time they'd gotten thirty meters apart, they could no longer read each other. He'd decided to try Bergelson just once more while Gossenberger was walking back to him.

"Don't know why you thought it'd work," the engineer teased him.

"Me, neither, but who knows? The aliens could get bored with blocking our communications any minute."

Gossenberger snorted softly. "Not likely." He paused for a moment and then said, "It's gotta be a very powerful field, to block communications this much, over this large an area."

"And what kind of power source would be needed to maintain it?" asked Brennan. "Never mind how it would be projected."

"Good questions," Penik said. "Unfortunately, we don't seem to be in much of a position to discover the answers just yet. Meanwhile, we do have more immediate priorities, like finding our crewmates."

"Right," agreed Gossenberger. "We'd better get a move-on." He lengthened his stride.

"Should we turn back?" asked Germain. "I have a feeling that we're not going in the right direction."

"You might be right," Bergelson said. "I wish we could contact Steve or Bob. That'd make this a whole lot easier." She sighed softly and pointed off to their left. "Let's go that way."

Rosenzweig and Miles maintained their own heightened pace. Rosenzweig was monitoring the distance to the other *Endeavor* crewmembers, becoming steadily more cheerful as at least one group was getting closer.

But just after they passed the 1,900 meter mark, Miles stumbled. She winced and dropped to one knee, favoring her injured leg. "Pain again," she said through gritted teeth, in response to Rosenzweig's concerned look. He knelt beside her, opening up the medikit.

"Want some more doloremedicine?"

"I think you better give me some. I think I may need to rest a while, too." Shirley's unhappy expression told Alex all he needed to know about how she felt about **that**, but he gave her a reassuring smile, and then pressed the hypo to her leg.

"Give yourself ten minutes. Let's see how you feel after that."

"I'm sorry, Alex."

"Don't you be," he answered. "I know you're doing your best."

They waited for the ten minutes, and then Rosenzweig took another sweep with the tricorder. "They're less than 1,830 meters from us. How are you doing?"

"Better," Miles told him. "Just another couple of minutes?"

"Okay."

"Thanks, Alex."

Rosenzweig smiled. "You're welcome."

After a few more minutes, Miles gingerly felt her leg. The muscles had loosened up again, and the pain had ebbed. Rosenzweig was watching the horizon ahead of them, shading his eyes with his hands. Miles touched his arm, and he turned to her.

"Ready?"

"I think so, yeah. Give me a hand up?" Rosenzweig stood and held out his hand. Miles gripped it, and using Rosenzweig for leverage, she regained her feet. "Let's go," she said.

As they resumed their trek, Rosenzweig kept his gaze focused on the horizon. Then he glanced back to the tricorder. Watching the data scroll across the small viewer, he nodded.

"What is it?" Miles asked.

"They're only 1,800 meters from us now. We should have visual contact in 20-30 minutes, maybe less."

"Not much longer," said Tacjot. Both the chief scientist and Scientist Dydrat had returned to the scanner room to be on-hand for the *Endeavor* crew's reunion.

"Do you have the proper monitoring equipment ready?" Dydrat asked.

"Yes. I have prepared high-resolution visual scanners, which will monitor from both surface and aerial vantage points. I have also set the biological scanners to monitor any physiological reactions which may occur."

"Physiological reactions?" asked the chief scientist.

"In this species," Dydrat explained, "emotional states, particularly strong ones, can result in significant reactions within their bodies. For example, strong emotions of anger, excitement, or fear result in the release of epinephrine into the bloodstream, which in turn increases heart action and breathing. And so forth."

"I understand," said the chief scientist.

"All this information will be in the report that Medical Scientist Visnot will be submitting, appended to my report. You will be able to examine the data in greater detail then."

"That will be satisfactory," the chief scientist responded. He turned back to the wall display, which continued to show the area map.

"I wonder how far we've got to go," Gossenberger said as he, Penik, and Brennan strode across a flat area of ground. Ahead of them, the landscape sloped gently upward toward another rise.

"I don't know," said Penik. "Maybe a few hundred meters, maybe several kilometers." Gossenberger shot him a look that said, "You're a **big** help", and Penik shrugged.

"I hope it's not too far," Brennan said. She got a faraway look for a moment, and then added, "I hope the others are all right."

"Try signaling again," Gossenberger suggested. It might be futile, but it was something to do. Brennan attempted to contact Bergelson, but the interference was as strong as ever, and prevented any communication.

The three of them reached the top of the rise and looked around. Below them, the land dropped down into another trough. Penik estimated the depth from the top of a rise to the base of the trough as roughly 10-15 meters. He wasn't thrilled with the unevenness of the terrain, but since there was nothing they could do about it, he didn't waste energy complaining. He just led them onward, hoping that the next rise they ascended would bring them to the end of their search.

The increasing hilliness of the terrain wasn't lost on Rosenzweig and Miles, either, and they weren't any happier. "I don't like this," Miles grumbled.

"Neither do I. I don't like anything that prevents extended range of vision. But there's a plain ahead, just beyond these hills, and it's bounded by more hills on the other side."

"Ringed by them, maybe?" suggested Miles.

"Looks like," Rosenzweig agreed. He paused for a moment. "Crater, you think?"

"I thought of that," Miles said.

"If so, I wonder if it's meteoric, or a caldera."

"Hard to tell," Miles replied. She shrugged. "How far away is the nearest group now?"

"They're in the hills on the other side of the cra—plain."

The two of them continued to climb, until they stood on the innermost hill, overlooking the plain. Rosenzweig shaded his eyes and squinted. He could see the hills on the other side, but couldn't tell if there was anyone there.

"I wish we had some telefocals with us," he said.

"Guess we'll have to make do without," Miles answered matter-of-factly. "Let's start down." Carefully, she began to move down the slope. Rosenzweig took one more look across the circular plain, and then followed.

After a short rest, Penik, Gossenberger, and Brennan moved on. They had known for a while now that they were approaching a plain, thanks to a well-positioned rise that let them get a glimpse ahead. Finally, they clambered up the last rise that bordered the plain, and looked out across the expanse of land.

"How big is it?" Gossenberger wondered.

"Not sure," said Penik. He gestured to the far hills. "Looks like it's at least a kilometer wide."

"Should we go down?" asked Brennan.

"We have to go that way to find Alex and Shirley," Gossenberger pointed out.

"Correct," said Penik. "Let's go." He started down the hill, with Gossenberger and Brennan trailing him.

As they completed their descent to the base of the hills ringing the plain, Rosenzweig took a tricorder reading. As he studied the readout, his eyes widened slightly.

"What is it?" Miles asked.

"Life-form readings, on the plain. Getting close."

"Human readings? How close?"

"Yes, Human," Rosenzweig said, studying the readings. "Looks like about 1,400 meters away, near the opposite edge of the plain."

"Part of our crew?" asked Miles.

"I'm assuming so, unless there are other Humans on this planet. Unfortunately, the tricorder isn't picking up on any perscan data, so we're still short of an absolute identification."

For another twenty minutes, the two groups approached each other. By that time, too, Bergelson, Germain, and Stewart had also made it into the hills surrounding the plain. Rosenzweig and Miles could just make out the Humans by then, but couldn't tell who they were looking at. The atmosphere was also swallowing attempts to shout, to the point where the sound could be heard, but not identified or made out intelligibly.

Finally, they got close enough. "That's Steve and Bob," Rosenzweig said, "with one of the women, Leslie I think."

Almost as if on cue, the call finally came more clearly. "Alex! Shirley!"

"That's Bob!" exclaimed Rosenzweig. "Bob! We're here!" He and Miles exchanged big grins. "Come on!" Rosenzweig started to run forward. Miles followed, slightly more slowly.

Fueled by a surge of adrenalin, both groups closed the remaining distance rapidly, and soon were dashing to each other.

"Alex!" cried out Brennan as the two groups finally coalesced. "Thank god you two are okay!" Rosenzweig hugged her, then turned to Penik. The two gripped hands.

"How have you been doing, Steve?"

"Well enough," said Penik. "Apparently a bit better than you and Shirley, by the look of things."

"It's been a challenge, yeah. Where are the others?"

"Lori took Ilene and Karen, and we split up into two groups to try to increase our chances of finding you. But we found out that there's some sort of interference field which is blocking communicator transmissions beyond about 30 meters. We lost visual contact with them, too, so we're not sure exactly where they are."

"They're in the hills, that way," said Miles, pointing. She held up her tricorder, and Penik nodded, comprehension lighting his expression.

"We both have tricorders," said Rosenzweig, "and we brought four extra phasers." He and Miles gave two of the weapons to Penik and Gossenberger.

Rosenzweig drew out his tricorder and proceeded to scan in the direction they believed the others of their crew to be, about 60 degrees around from the point where Penik, Gossenberger, and Brennan had come out of the hills. The look of concentration on his face lessened abruptly, and he nodded. "They're there, almost through the hills."

The others looked, as well, hoping to catch a glimpse of their friends. As a result, no one noticed Miles put a hand to her head and waver slightly. She recovered quickly, though, and gave no further sign of the weakness she was feeling, determined not to slow them down, now that they were so close to reuniting the whole crew.

The group decided to head in the direction of their three crewmates, and quickly moved off across the plain.

The aliens, meanwhile, were still watching in the scanner room of their structure.

"Well, Tacjot?" questioned Dydrat, as two of the blips on the display closed, merged, and became a single, brighter blob.

"We were correct about physiological reactions, the scanner technician reported. "All of the beings heart and respiration rates have elevated considerably. Some tension levels have dropped, but others remain high, perhaps suggestion concern about the remaining beings still separate from them. I am continuing full physiological monitoring, as well as continuing visual and enhanced-spectrum tracking."

"Very good," said the chief scientist.

"When shall we release the interference field and make contact?" asked Dydrat.

"I believe," said the chief scientist, indicating the smaller blip on the screen, "that it will be most effective to wait until they have rejoined the last three."

"I agree," Dydrat said.

"We're almost there," said Stewart, pointing ahead to where she, Germain, and Bergelson could see the plain ahead of them. "After the next rise."

"Not much longer, then," Bergelson answered with resolution.

The three moved on, descending into the last of the troughs. They crossed the valley, and then ascended the next rise, finally reaching its crest and standing, overlooking the plain. Looking out into its expanse, they saw a group of five humanoid figures coming toward them.

"Is that them?" asked Germain.

"I think so," Bergelson said. "Come on, let's go."

Rosenzweig and his compatriots had made good progress across the plain. They were less than three hundred meters from the base of the innermost hills when Bergelson, Germain, and Stewart reached the top of the rise. Rosenzweig was looking upward, and saw them.

"There they are!" he cried, and strode ahead. Bergelson saw him hurrying toward them, and for the first time in a long time, felt unabashedly happy to see him. She glanced to her left, and suddenly found herself standing alone, as both of her companions had taken off like shots and were dashing down the slope.

Rosenzweig had covered more than a hundred meters in just a few minutes, and was within fifty meters of the base of the rise at the plain's rim. Looking up the slope, he saw the two younger women running toward him, and Lori not far behind.

"Alex!" He heard Ilene's shout, but saw Karen taking a slight lead over the engineer. The three of them met at a run, and Rosenzweig, reacting instinctively, hugged them both. Then, releasing them, he looked just up the slope and saw Lori as she caught up to them. He gave her a smile, though a bit cautiously, and was taken aback to see her return it, a good deal less cautiously. He moved past Karen and Ilene.

"Lori?" he asked, still having a hard time comprehending the joy in her expression. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Alex, I'm okay. How are you and Shirley?"

"We're okay. Come on, let's go meet the others." He extended his hand, and Lori took it. Alex looked at their hands, just for a second, shook his head ever so slightly, smiled at her again, and then turned to take Ilene's arm. The four started back toward the others.

When the crew was all reunited, and amidst all the hugging and happy chatter, Rosenzweig felt a tap on his arm. It was Penik, who motioned him off to one side. The two men stepped off to one side, joining Gossenberger.

"Okay, Steve, what's up?" Alex asked.

"That, Alex, is what we wanted to know," Steve pointed toward Lori, who stood talking with the other women.

Alex shrugged. "Hell if I know, Steve. She's been really friendly all of a sudden. Maybe it's just that we're all back together and have a shot at getting out of here, but I won't argue with it. I'll check with her later to see where things are at." With that, they rejoined the rest of the group.

After a few more minutes of celebrating their reunion, Rosenzweig decided it was time to get a handle on things, so he stepped to one side and raised his hands for attention. "All right, everybody, we have a few things we need to take care of, and then I want to hear..." His voice trailed off as, without a sound, Miles's eyes closed and she toppled backward. He was too far from her to react in time, but both Penik and Gossenberger were standing just behind her, and caught her. They lowered her to the ground, and then Penik looked up.

"Alex, do you have a medikit with you?"

"Yes." Rosenzweig pulled it from his field jacket. He also realized he still had the two extra phasers, and handed the medikit to Penik and the phasers to Bergelson and Germain. Penik pulled out the medical scanner and ran it over Miles's still form. After a moment, he said, "Hand me the tricorder?" Rosenzweig complied, and Penik began correlating data between the scanner and the tricorder. A few minutes later, he stood up and pulled Rosenzweig off to the side.

"Alex, she's in a bad state. It's amazing that she's come this far without completely collapsing."

"I know. I've been keeping up a positive front with her."

"What happened out there?" Succinctly, Rosenzweig recounted the tale of the encounter with the amoeboid creature. When he was done, Penik nodded. "I'm still detecting a toxin in her bloodstream, and it's not doing her any good. I don't think it's done anything to her internal organs yet, but I'm just not sure."

"I know exactly what you mean," Rosenzweig said softly.

"I am detecting significant amounts of dolorecicine in her blood, though."

"I gave it to her several times to try to fight the pain. It seemed the most reasonable thing to do. I'm not sure how the other drugs might affect her, and I couldn't take the chance of her getting worse while we were out there."

"We're not going to be able to do much more 'til we get her back to the shuttle," said Penik. "I don't know enough to do much more out here, either. We need the onboard computer."

"Hopefully we can move more quickly getting back than we did coming this way, or it's going to take us a few days."

"I hope time isn't critical," Penik said with a sigh. Rosenzweig nodded soberly.

Gossenberger had come over to join them in time to hear the last comment. "What shape was the shuttle in?" he asked.

"All things considered, not too bad," Rosenzweig told him, "but we do have a problem. There's a new program in the computer, and it's acting like a governor circuit, effectively preventing liftoff. I'm hoping Steve can excise it, but if not, we may have to try to contact these aliens again."

"I don't know how willing they'll be to help us," Germain said, as she joined them. "They seemed far more interested in studying us than helping us." She shrugged.

"In any case, we'd better figure on a long walk ahead of us." Rosenzweig let the words hang in the air, turned, and stared off into the distance.

In the ensuing silence, the simultaneous beeps of all eight of their communicators made a loud and startling sound, especially considering that the devices had been effectively inoperative. Rosenzweig hiked up his sleeve and tapped the activation control.

"This is Lt. Commander Alex Rosenzweig."

A soft, masculine-sounding voice came from the communicator's speaker. "We are the scientists who have been examining you and your crew for the last several days. I am Scientist Dydrat, and I have been responsible for the project to study you. As your entire crew is now reunited, we shall shortly be making direct contact with you, and we shall return you to your spacecraft. Please remain where you are, and we shall soon arrive via an airborne conveyance."

"Wait a minute!" shouted Rosenzweig into the communicator. "I need answers to a few questions!" But the communicator was silent. Alex sighed and switched it off again.

"That was a translator, by the way," said Gossenberger. "These creatures aren't humanoid at all."

Rosenzweig looked at both of them, and then at the women. "All right, you'd better fill me in on what happened to you."

Penik nodded, and began. "As the shuttle crashed, we lost consciousness." Rosenzweig nodded. "When we woke up, I don't know how much later, we were in individual cells inside the aliens' outpost..."

Penik continued, with the others interjecting, to describe the testing process, the labyrinth, the physical tests, and then the "interviews" by what they took to be a form of AI.

"Alex," Leslie said, as Penik paused for a breath, "at one point they told us, using very realistic imagery, that you and Shirley had been killed by that amoeba creature. Then they said it was just an illusion."

"Nice people," Rosenzweig muttered sarcastically.

Penik again picked up the narrative, describing events from the remainder of the "interviews" to their release from the building and reunion with Rosenzweig and Miles.

"So," Rosenzweig said when he finished, "they did nothing to harm you?"

"They actually seemed to want us alive and in good health," Stewart commented. Bergelson nodded agreement.

"And now it's your turn," Gossenberger said. "What happened to you and Shirley out there? We know about this amoeba thing, but it can't be all."

"No, it's not." And then Rosenzweig began his own story, from finding Miles in the small building near the shuttle to the journey across the plain and the situations they went through, which they both couldn't help but believe were being orchestrated by some external force. The others nodded several times. It seemed they'd all been tested, in their own ways.

"Whew!" Brennan exclaimed when he finished. Alex smiled slightly.

"It must have been difficult," Germain said.

"It was, at times," Rosenzweig confirmed, "but Shirley and I helped each other through it. I guess that's what it's really about..." His voice trailed off.

"What is it?" asked Stewart.

"Shhh..." Alex said. He seemed to be listening to something.

"I hear it," Gossenberger said softly, and then fell silent again.

A moment later, they could all hear it, an unmistakable hum, growing louder.

"It's coming from the direction of the building," said Germain.

She was right. A hovercraft sped over a rise and down onto the plain. It cruised up to them, halted, and settled gently to the ground. Three of the aliens were aboard—Dydrat, the chief scientist, and a technician at the controls. Dydrat and the chief scientist got out. Dydrat raised two arms and chattered to them, then turned around and pulled a case out of the hovercraft. Opening it, he distributed headsets to the *Endeavor* crew.

After they'd put on the headsets—Penik showed Rosenzweig how—Dydrat resumed speaking. "Greetings once again, and for a first time to you, Lt. Commander Rosenzweig."

"Hello," Rosenzweig replied cautiously.

"I am Scientist First Order Dydrat. This is our chief scientist."

"Nice to meet you," Rosenzweig said. "Are you the people responsible for bringing down our shuttlecraft?"

"Yes, we are."

"May I ask why?"

The chief scientist spoke then. "We desired to study you. You have made most interesting subjects."

"Subjects..." Rosenzweig said. He took a breath, and then asked, "Are you native to this planet?" Penik snapped a glance at him, realizing it was a question that, in the midst of everything, he hadn't had a chance to think of.

The chief scientist answered. "No, we are not. We have traveled from a world located in the spiral arm of this galaxy closer to the rim than this one. We have a spacecraft awaiting us on the larger satellite of this planet. Our mission here is scheduled to last 1.5 of this planet's revolutions around its star. That time is nearly up; we will be departing in less than 30 more rotations. However, nothing we had encountered on this planet was nearly as interesting as you and your crewmates. The news of the existence of your Federation will be well-received on our world."

"I see," said Rosenzweig. "Why didn't you just make contact with us, instead of forcing our shuttle down and putting us through all your tests? You can see that one of our group has been hurt, maybe seriously, by your actions." He indicated Miles, who still lay unconscious on the ground, with Brennan crouched near her.

"It was necessary," Dydrat said, and to Penik it seemed he was just a bit defensive. "We had to remain detached, in order not to influence the results of our studies. Also, we did not know what type of beings you were until after your craft was brought down, although our analysis of its structure had revealed that it was capable of landing."

"We ask nothing more of you," the chief scientist added, except that you allow us to return you to your craft. We do surmise, however, that you might require our assistance in removing the governor program from your computer system."

"Governor...?" Penik started.

"You're referring to the restraining program?" asked Rosenzweig. "The one that's preventing most of our systems from functioning?"

"Yes. Please join us aboard the hovercraft." The two aliens stepped back into the vehicle, and gestured for the *Endeavor*'s crew to join them. Rosenzweig motioned to Gossenberger, and the

two men lifted Miles and carried her into the hovercraft. They settled her onto a seat in the back, and Rosenzweig sat next to her, an arm protectively around her. Gossenberger reacted to that only with a raised eyebrow, before taking his own seat.

When everyone was settled into their seats and the safety systems had activated, the chief scientist spoke to the technician, who worked the controls. The craft's engines revved, and soon they were airborne.

"It will take approximately 4.9 letrins to reach your craft," Dydrat said. "Please be comfortable for the ride."

The hovercraft sped off in the direction of the shuttle. The *Endeavor*'s crew sat mostly silently, watching the landscape go by beneath them. It wasn't long, though, before Rosenzweig saw the first structure he'd encountered, and just beyond it, the *Endeavor*:

"There it is," he said to no one in particular. Bergelson, who was sitting directly in front of him, nodded.

Defly, the technician brought the hovercraft around the structure, sweeping it around the corners and guiding it to a smooth landing several meters from the shuttle. As the engines' hum faded, the chief scientist opened the door in the side of the craft and stepped out, followed by Dydrat. The *Endeavor*'s crew scrambled after them.

"Lori, give me a hand here," Rosenzweig said, indicating Miles. Bergelson nodded and helped him lift Miles and carry her to the base of the ladder. Gossenberger, meanwhile, had climbed up the ladder and gone into the shuttle. Dydrat moved to follow him, but Rosenzweig put up a hand. "You shouldn't go inside."

"Lt. Commander, if you are concerned about us learning anything we shouldn't, please do recall that several of my colleagues have already been aboard your craft, both to remove your crew and install the governor program, and then again after you and Lt. Commander Miles had departed. We have no intention of stealing your secrets."

Somehow, despite the fact that Dydrat's people couldn't manifest humanoid facial expressions, Rosenzweig could hear the amusement in the translator's rendition of Dydrat's comment, and he couldn't help but chuckle wryly. "All right, go ahead." Dydrat bowed just slightly and climbed up the ladder, moving carefully because his feet were not what the ladder was designed for. He disappeared into the craft, and a moment later came back into the doorway of the outer hatch.

"Lt. Commander, you will require my aid in removing the governor program from your computer system. Shall we begin?"

"I'll be right up," Rosenzweig said. He called Penik over and left Miles in Penik and Bergelson's care. "Get her on board," he told them. Then he climbed up to the shuttle's hatch, and then led Dydrat forward to the flight control console, where Gossenberger had taken the co-pilot's seat and was staring at his displays with a mix of annoyance and admiration.

"I've just been looking at that governor program," the engineer said. "It bypasses all of our control routines. **All** of them! It's a very, very thorough job!"

"If one knows the program, it is not difficult to remove," Dydrat said. He pointed to where Gossenberger was sitting. "May I?"

"Sure." Gossenberger rose and stepped to one side. Dydrat settled into the seat, albeit a bit awkwardly, and studied the instrumentation.

"Bob, take engineering. I'll monitor from here," Rosenzweig told him. Gossenberger nodded.

"The codes to disable the governor program," Dydrat explained, "are a mathematical representation of several words in our language which have no direct translation into yours. This is the main reason why, even if you had detected them, you would not have understood what you were seeing." For a time, Dydrat entered codes into the system and it fed responses back to him. Rosenzweig, studying the status displays, was completely mystified. To him, it all looked like so much gibberish. But there was no mistaking it when the status display abruptly read out, "Command and engine systems released. Returning to normal operations." Dydrat turned to face Rosenzweig.

"It is complete. The governor program has released all of your systems and terminated. You now have complete control."

"I confirm that," Gossenberger said. "Everything's working again."

"Good," Rosenzweig answered. "Thank you, Scientist Dydrat."

"You are welcome," said the scientist.

"We should let the rest of the crew know. I'm sure they're anxious to leave."

"I completely understand," Dydrat said, and there was that amusement again. Rosenzweig smiled slightly and led Dydrat back to the airlock. They passed Penik and Bergelson settling Miles into her primary seat and reconfiguring it into bunk mode, then went through the lock and descended the ladder. The others met them at the base.

"Is it done?" Germain asked.

"Yes. We have control again. Bob's checking the systems." He turned to the others. "Is everyone ready to leave?"

"Absolutely," said Germain.

"Let's go," said Stewart and Brennan simultaneously. They looked at each other and burst out laughing, perhaps as much from relief as anything else.

After a last round of farewells, and the return of their translators, Dydrat and the chief scientist re-boarded their hovercraft, and Rosenzweig, Germain, Stewart, and Brennan boarded the shuttle.

"Ilene," Rosenzweig said, as they entered the cabin, "you take engineering. We'll let Leslie rest for liftoff." Germain nodded acknowledgement. Penik, meanwhile, had pulled rank and taken the sciences station, with Stewart handling the sensor monitor console. They were all soon running diagnostics, just to make sure that Dydrat had been telling the truth.

"Engine systems look good," Germain reported.

"Prepare for liftoff," Rosenzweig said. He began touching controls at his station, and the shuttle's engines began to hum.

Outside, the chief scientist and Dydrat had re-seated themselves in the hovercraft. As the rising hum of the shuttle's booster engines became audible, the chief scientist looked at Dydrat.

"We should withdraw to a safe distance from their engine emissions." He turned to the technician. "Please relocate us to the far side of the building." The technician complied, and the hovercraft lifted and flew around the building, to touch down on the opposite side. The hum from the shuttle was still audible, and increased until it reached a crescendo. As they watched, the shuttle slowly lifted from the ground. It steadily gained speed and thundered into the lavender sky. As it disappeared, the chief scientist turned to the technician again and instructed, "Take us back to the main structure."

"We've achieved orbit," Gossenberger reported.

"Good" said Rosenzweig. "We'll go into high orbit and stay here until we've all had a chance to fully rest and make certain the ship's in good condition."

"You got it."

"Once we're settled in orbit, I want us to do a full systems check. We'll coordinate with Steve at sciences and Lori at the general purpose console."

"Will do."

A few minutes later, the shuttle had settled into a high standard orbit around UFC-8192-IV. Gossenberger, Bergelson, and Penik began working on their systems checks, and Rosenzweig was coordinating among them. The initial checks seemed to come up clean, but then a call from Bergelson alerted the crew to trouble.

"I think I've found a problem," she said.

"What's wrong?" asked Rosenzweig.

Gossenberger was following the signal flags that Bergelson had set up in the system. "It's the telemetry unit, Alex. It's sending normally now, but the system red-flagged a period of about two and a half days when we weren't sending anything."

"Good gods," Rosenzweig growled. "Captain Nielsen must be frantic. Lori, piggyback an explanatory note into the telemetry signal. Emphasize that we are safe and are continuing our mission."

"All right, Alex, I'm on it."

Penik, the sciences systems in the midst of an auto-diagnostic, had gone back into the supply and storage bay. He came back with a medipouch, a larger and more comprehensive package than the standard medikit, and moved to where Miles lay in her bunk. He pulled out a scanner and set up a link to the library computer. "Lori," he said, "I'll be sending the readings to the computer. Can you ask it to correlate with any known conditions and suggest a course of treatment?"

"Okay, Steve." A moment later she added, "Go ahead."

Penik patched the readings through to the computer. A few moments later, it responded with some suggested treatments. Penik tried them all, with no visible result. Penik was looking frustratedly at the medipouch when Rosenzweig joined them.

"How is she?"

"I don't know." Penik looked up at his friend. "I've done everything I can at this point. I think we're just going to have to wait now."

"I'll stay with her for a little while," Rosenzweig said. Penik nodded and moved back to the sciences console to check the diagnostic results. Rosenzweig stood, his hands clasped behind his back, and gazed down at the unconscious Miles.

A few minutes later, Bergelson came over to where he stood. Alex noticed Lori's approach, and looked up to face her.

"You look like you could use a rest, too," she said softly. Alex smiled at her.

"I guess I am tired," he admitted. He paused for a long moment, then, deciding that Miles was stable for moment and it was as good a time as any to ask, he gestured to her primary seat and said, "Sir down for a moment, would you?" Lori gave him a curious look, but complied, and he leaned up against the back of his own seat. "I had to ask, I guess. Ever since we were all reunited, how you're reacting to me has...changed. Now, don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining." He chuckled just slightly. "I'm

enjoying that we seem to be on a lot better terms. But I have to admit, I'm not sure I understand it."

"Well..." Lori said. "I guess I shouldn't be too surprised that you're confused. It has been sort of a mixed message, eh?" At Alex's nod, Lori took a deep breath and glanced around. Brennan seemed to be aware of them, but the others were occupied. "Alex, I had a lot of time down there, sitting in those cells, to think. I wasn't being held near the others, so there wasn't anybody to talk to. And I got to thinking about the last few times we'd seen each other, and about what happened on Omicron Hydri VII. And it made me think that hanging onto the old bad feelings, from years ago wasn't doing any of us any good. We've all moved on, and it's time to let the past be the past. We might not ever be **great** friends, but at least we can be friends." She held out a hand, and added, "Right?"

"Right," he said, taking her hand and giving it a squeeze. / *hope*, he added to himself, remembering that they'd reached this point once or twice before, but it hadn't lasted. But he was never one to reject the possibility that a new move to let down the walls might work, so he accepted it in good part.

Lori smiled, and as Alex let go of her hand, she rose and said, "I better get back to work." She walked back to the general purpose console, Alex's eyes following her. Then he smiled slightly, and turning back toward the aft section of the cabin, he saw Brennan flash a smile at him. He winked in response, gave Miles one more look, and moved forward to his station.

Twelve hours later, the crew of the *Endeavor* were rested and alert, except for Miles, who remained unconscious. She'd been on injection feedings for several hours, and Rosenzweig was worried. He finally caucused the crew.

"In view of Shirley's condition, should we turn back and head for the *Revere*, or continue our mission?"

"She's stable at this point," Penik said. "There's reason to believe that she's simply remaining unconscious while her body heals itself. I'd recommend that we continue on, at least for another day or two."

"Are you and Karen able to keep up with the science task load?" Rosenzweig asked.

"I think so," was Penik's response.

"Let's try, at least," said Gossenberger. The others nodded.

"All right, then," said Rosenzweig. "Stations, please. Prepare to leave orbit." There was a flurry of activity as the crew made ready to resume their mission in earnest. When they'd all reported readiness, Rosenzweig glanced at Gossenberger, who was sitting to his right. "Ready?" Gossenberger nodded and flashed a thumbs-up.

"Ready."

"Okay, then. Bob, impulse power. Warp point-eight. I'm plotting a course out of this system and farther out from Federation space."

"Acknowledged," said Gossenberger, all business now.

While Rosenzweig entered the course requirements, Gossenberger fed power to the impulse drives. Alex then gripped the velocity control lever, pushing it forward to the correct setting. The shuttle smoothly accelerated out of orbit, and then on out of the system.

Achieving warp speed soon after, the *Endeavor* settled on course for a Type M red dwarf star. Penik reported that the star, labeled UFC-2593, was called Alquezon, and was approximately

three days distant at warp factor two. Rosenzweig brought the *Endeavor* to that speed, and then activated the log recorder.

"Mission Log, Stardate 7607.30, Lt. Commander Rosenzweig recording:

We have departed the UFC-8198 system, and are now on course for the red dwarf UFC-2593. Despite the fact that Shirley Miles remains unconscious, we have decided to continue the mission for another day. If by that time she has not regained consciousness, we will turn around and head back to the *Revere* at maximum speed. Meanwhile, we check on Shirley by scanner every fifteen minutes. Thus far, she remains stable, and there is no other detectable change in her condition. The rest of us are in good health, and the details of our experiences on UFC-8198-IV will be appended to this log."

Rosenzweig ended the entry and switched off the recorder. He rose from the pilot's seat and walked silently to Miles's primary seat. She lay still, her eyes closed. After watching her for a long moment, Alex turned, walked to his own primary seat, and sat down heavily, suddenly feeling very tired. "Bob," he said, "take over." Leaning back, he closed his eyes.

After a few minutes, he gradually became aware that someone was standing near him. Opening his eyes a crack, he saw enough to tell that it was a female lieutenant in a beige Class A uniform. He closed his eyes again for a second, then opened them completely and looked up at Ilene Germain's concerned face. She flashed him a soft smile, and he gestured to the seats on either side of him. "Have a seat."

She sat. "Leslie took over for me. It's really affecting you, isn't it? Shirley's condition, I mean."

"It is, yeah. I wish I could be sure that we're doing the right thing. I'm a science officer, not a medical officer. The medical scans say she's stable, and they aren't detecting any changes, but what if something's happening that a scanner can't read, or what if there's a variance that none of us are trained to recognize as significant? Right now, we're operating on a bit of hope, a bit of faith, and field medic training. What if that's not enough?"

Ilene came over, sat on the edge of Alex's seat, and took his hand. "Sometimes, a bit of hope and a bit of faith are all there is. You're making a command decision for the good of the mission, too, you've asked your crew their opinions, and your crew are behind you. You've done what you need to do. And what happens, will happen. But I think you've done the right thing, if it matters any."

"It does, Ilene. It matters a lot. Thank you." He impulsively leaned forward and gave her a hug. She returned it for a moment, before they let go and pulled back into a slightly more formal bearing. "I do appreciate it, really," he continued softly.

"You're welcome," Ilene replied, her eyes twinkling in that way she had.

Just under a day later, the crew was preparing to turn the *Endeavor* around and head back to the *Revere*. Miles had shown no change, and the others had decided that playing guessing games in the field just wasn't the best choice anymore. Rosenzweig was again standing near Miles's primary seat. Gossenberger had been taking a rest, and was getting up to return to his post. He stopped next to Rosenzweig.

"Just 20 minutes more," he said, after glancing at his wrist chronometer.

Rosenzweig nodded, and turned to join Gossenberger back at the pilot console. They'd only taken a few steps forward when they both heard the sound from behind them of the padding on a primary seat shifting. Spinning back, they saw that Miles had in fact shifted position. "Bob, get back up front," said Rosenzweig. He in turn hurried back to Miles's seat. As he reached her, her eyes flickered open slightly, but then closed again. A moment later, though, she opened them again, slightly wider this time.

Rosenzweig knelt at the side of the seat. "Shirley?" he said.

Miles's gaze focused on him, and she smiled. "H-hi, Alex," she said softly. Not taking his eyes off Miles, Rosenzweig gestured in the general direction of the sciences station. "Steve, get over here with a medical scanner. Now." Penik was on his feet immediately and hurried over, scanner in hand.

"How long have I been out?" Shirley asked.

"About a day and a half," Alex told her quietly. "We've left UFC-8198 and are on course for another nearby star, UFC-2593. But if you'd still been unconscious 20 minutes from now, we'd have been turning around and going back to the *Revere*."

"Hello, Shirley," said Steve, as he arrived next to Alex. "Rest quietly for a minute." He waved the medical scanner over Miles, setting it to transmit the data to the computer. Lori, at the general purpose console, again had the system running correlations with the medical database.

"Steve," she said a moment later, "Shirley's life functions have returned to her normal baseline. The computer's recommending that we stop all treatments, so she can complete recovery on her own now."

"Any aftereffects we should be watching for?" Alex asked.

"Nothing the computer suggests," Lori answered.

Alex smiled. "Good. How are you feeling, Shirley?"

"Still a bit tired, but better. And I think I'm feeling draggy because I haven't moved for over a day. I'd like to get back to work."

"Well, just in case, let's ease you back into a full schedule a little at a time," said Steve.

"Right," said Alex. "We saw what happened when you overpushed on the planet. And just in case, I'd prefer that we be careful here, too. Okay?"

"Okay," Shirley said with a smile. Alex reached out and clasped her hand. After a second, he let go and stood up. He turned to the rest of the crew, who by now had—except for Bob—clustered around Shirley's seat.

"Stations, everyone. Strike that return course from the navigation computer, Bob."

"Aye, sir!" Grinning, Gossenberger turned to his console and, with a spring in his step, Rosenzweig went back to his own station.

The mission continued. The next two weeks turned out to be fairly routine, at least in comparison to the first week and a half. The *Endeavor* went on to explore the UFC-2593 system, where seven planets orbited the red dwarf star. It was a more-or-less textbook example of a system that had endured the expansion of its star, several billion years ago, into a red giant. The inner planets—those that had survived—had been baked by the star before it had begun its shrinkage into a white dwarf and the long cooling period that led it to its current red color. The shuttle reached the system on stardate 7608.02, and remained there for

two days, surveying, cataloguing, and analyzing the system. Following that survey, Rosenzweig ordered the shuttle out into interstellar space to run a full gamut of tests of the engines and the shuttle/sled mating systems. During the testing phase, Gossenberger was mainly in charge, since this portion of the flight was his responsibility as senior engineer.

The test phase was planned to take four days. It was cut a day short, however, when the shuttle's long-range sensors detected a system that seemed unusual enough to merit a closer look.

What the crew found was an abandoned ringworld. Canted at a 40-degree angle relative to the plane of the system's ecliptic, it seemed intact, but devoid of intelligent life. Orbiting the central star several million kilometers farther out than the ringworld was a Class M planet. According to the sensors, it was inhabited, but the civilization was at a relatively low level, barely a C on the baseline Richter Scale of Cultures. Further analysis, though, suggested the presence of artifacts that were considerably more advanced.

"A ringworld," Rosenzweig said thoughtfully. "There's only one other ringworld in the known galaxy. Might the same race have built them both?"

"Hard to say," Penik replied. "There are some basic similarities, but enough differences, too, that we can't assume the same people built both. We know the race that built the ringworld we knew about already did so instead of developing interstellar flight. But with this one abandoned, I think we can't be sure if the people who built it followed the same path. Maybe they even were explorers, found the other one, and tried to copy it."

"If so," said Miles, "it looks like it didn't work out. Do we go take a closer look?"

"Oh, we certainly do," Rosenzweig said with a grin. "Leave an artifact like this unexplored? I don't think so." Returning to the pilot console, he slowed the shuttle down and plotted a course to take it over the entire inner surface of the ring. They made one complete orbit of the star, staying about ten thousand kilometers above the inner ring surface, scanning the huge structure. Doing comprehensive maps wouldn't be possible, but Rosenzweig was sure that some ship would get the juicy assignment of exploring this system a lot more thoroughly than the *Endeavor* would have time for. When they completed the first full orbit, Penik requested that they do another one, closer to the arrangement of "shadow squares", an inner ring of rectangles that orbited the star in the same plane as the ringworld. With openings between them, they alternated light and shadow on the ring's surface, simulating a diurnal cycle.

When they finished studying the "shadow squares", Miles requested a landing on the ringworld. At first Rosenzweig was hesitant, but when a preliminary examination of the data suggested a remarkably Class M environment, he relented.

The shuttle soon touched gently down onto a flat area of land, not far from a lake. Once the engines had powered down, Penik, Miles, and Stewart disembarked to do a quick biological and geological study of the area. The others remained aboard, studying the structural data they'd gathered on the ring and its construction. The landing party discovered that much of the landscaping had apparently once been artificial, but with the maintenance systems long gone, the plants now grew wild, overrunning walls and walkpaths and buildings. The three scientists remained outside for only about an hour, and then returned to the shuttle.

Following the brief sojourn on the ringworld, the *Endeavor* did a brief orbital scan of the planet. Rosenzweig decided against a landing, and noted that orbital scans would have to suffice. As it turned out, the scans were enough to get quite a bit of data on the civilization and the beings that made it up. Miles ran comparisons with the database information on the races that inhabited the ringworld in Federation space, and it was soon clear that this race was not the same.

A final sweep of the ringworld completed the shuttle's time in the system, and the *Endeavor* returned to deep space to complete the engineering tests. A day later, with those tests completed, the schedule switched into a wide starmapping sweep through the remainder of the sector, with occasional dips into systems that looked potentially interesting. At this point, the shuttle's primary mission was to establish basic charts that could guide further forays into the sector in the years to come, and at that, it was succeeding nicely. Penik pronounced himself very pleased with the performance of the sensing and analytical gear.

The work schedules were staggered so that each member of the crew would have ample downtime. Rosenzweig was not interested in having exhausted crewmembers. He put his own time to good use, building existing friendships and establishing new ones. He made sure to have conversations with each of the others, especially getting to know Stewart and gingerly exploring whatever had changed in his relationship with Bergelson.

Penik was looking forward to a potential transfer to the heavy cruiser *Constellation II*, and was hoping to bring his friend Lieutenant Lee along with him, though he wasn't sure if his CO would approve her transfer as well.

Gossenberger was in line to become Chief Engineer of the *U.S.S. Astrad*. The promotion wasn't a lock yet, but Bob thought he had a pretty good chance.

The starmapping phase of the mission took a bit more than four days. Finally, on stardate 7608.12, Rosenzweig came forward after having taken a few hours' rest. He ran a check of all the readouts at his station, satisfied himself that they were saying what they should, exchanged nods with Gossenberger, and then stood up and faced back into the cabin.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began, "I hate to break the news to you all, but...it's time to head back to the *Revere*." He was greeted by a mixture of smiles and satisfied expressions. Turning to Penik, he went on, "Steve, calculate our travel time, would you?"

Penik tapped in a query to the computer, and a moment later, he responded, "From this location, roughly two days at warp 3.75."

"Lori," Rosenzweig said, "send this along with the usual telemetry packet: *Endeavor* turning back. ETA with *Revere* approximately two days. See you then. Rosenzweig, commanding *Endeavor*, out."

"Got it, Alex, will do," Bergelson replied. As she added that message into the telemetry, Rosenzweig turned back to his station, sat down, and activated the log recorder.

"Mission Log, Stardate 7608.12, Lt. Commander Rosenzweig recording:

After 21 days, we are preparing to end our survey mission. Overall, I consider it a success, despite our difficulties in the UFC-8198 system, and even there, we

made a first contact with a previously unknown race. Federation alienologists will doubtless look forward to additional data on this species, as they seem, much like the races of the Federation, to be interstellar explorers and colonizers. We also feel that scientists at Star Fleet Command will be particularly interested in UFC-8274, if for nothing aside from the ringworld artifact and a low-level civilization right nearby. I have little doubt that there's a fascinating story to be learned there, and I recommend that a starship be detailed to more fully explore this system at the earliest possibility.

The crew of the *Endeavor* are in good health and good spirits. Lt. Commander Miles recovered after about 36 hours, and has shown no ill-effects since. This of course has been a great relief. We are now looking forward to our return to the *Revere*. We're due for a bit of R&R after this mission."

Switching off the log, Rosenzweig looked over at Gossenberger. "Do we have the return course plotted?"

"Yep, we do."

Rosenzweig smiled and worked the controls in front of him. The *Endeavor* looped around in a wide arc, finally settling onto a course back the way it had originally come. Satisfied, Alex leaned back. Then he came to his feet and walked over to the sciences console, where Miles was working. She looked up as he approached.

"Hi," she said.

"Hello, there. Ready to go back?"

"Yeah. It's been a long trip. Should we continue mapping on the way back?"

"I'd say so. Even if some of the scans overlap what we did on the way out, it'll just give a more complete picture of the sector. The *Revere* should be waiting for us at the edge of Sector 1NK-10-30. When we get back, you, Steve and Karen will do the sciences report, Bob, Leslie and Ilene will cover the engineering side, and then Lori's and my job will be to pull it all together for the overall report. I have to read them all and sign off on them, anyway. Guess they weren't kidding at the Academy when they told us that command was as much paperwork as anything else."

"Nope, guess not," Miles agreed with a chuckle.

As the *Endeavor* approached the Federation border, they received an automated signal. "It's from the *Revere*," Gossenberger said. "Standard response to our telemetry. They know we're coming. I hit a standard response, so they know we know they know."

Alex laughed at Bob's turn of phrase. "Good job," he said. "Slow us to warp two as we close in." Gossenberger complied, and the shuttle slowed down steadily.

A sort time later, Steve commented, "ETA now 20 minutes to *Revere*."

"Dropping sublight in five," Alex responded. When that happened, a few minutes later, Gossenberger immediately reported picking up the ship's beacon. "Excellent," Rosenzweig replied. He set the shuttle to run an automatic approach, and leaned back in his chair. "Well," he said, noting that Miles and Germain had come forward and were standing behind his chair, "so ends my first command." Miles put her hand on his shoulder, and Germain nodded.

"You did a good job," she said. "I doubt it'll be your last command."

Rosenzweig looked up at her and smiled. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

A few minutes later, a light flashed on at Gossenberger's station. He slipped a receiver into his ear and listened for a few moments. Then he said, "Acknowledged," into an audio pickup and turned toward Rosenzweig. "Alex, I have the *Revere*."

"Good," said Rosenzweig. He tapped a control tying his station into the circuit, as well. "*Revere*, this is *Endeavor*; Rosenzweig here."

"Nielsen here, *Endeavor*: Good to hear your voice, Alex. How did the mission go?"

"I'd have to say pretty well, all things considered, Captain. We'll be reaching you shortly, and we'll all have some stories to tell."

"Confirmed," came a voice in the background. "Their ETA with us is in fifteen minutes."

"Thank you, Mr. Yaworski. We're tracking you now, Alex, and we're getting the shuttle hookups ready for you."

"Thanks," Alex replied. "We'll see you soon. *Endeavor* out." As he cut the channel to the *Revere*, he turned toward Bergelson. "Lori, tie me in with the folks handling the docking latches as we approach."

"Okay, Alex, will do."

The *Endeavor* closed with the *Revere*. Rosenzweig guided the shuttle in a wide sweep around the ship, passing ahead and then on the port side, then arcing around the stern and coming up along the starboard side where the hookups were waiting. Bringing the shuttle close to the ship with gentle bursts from the thrusters, Alex settled the *Endeavor* at station-keeping relative to the *Revere*, as suited crewmembers jetted out and attached the linkages to the smaller craft. As the systems verified a clean attachment, the EVA teams moved away, and the tractor beams cut in, securing the *Endeavor* in its "towed" position.

"All right, then," said Rosenzweig. "Power down the sled, and secure all systems." Germain nodded, tapping a series of controls. One after another, viewers blanked and indicators darkened.

"It's as though we're putting the ship to sleep..." Bob said softly.

"She'll be woken up again, no doubts there," Alex answered, with conviction.

Penik looked up, having heard the engineer's comment. "Bob being poetic? Well, now that's different..."

"And why not? Nothing wrong with a turn of phrase every once in a while." Bob had started off with some heat, but caught Steve's wink and relaxed a bit, allowing the response to moderate into banter. Alex realized at that moment that it had been days since either Bob or Steve had teased the other. The excitement of the mission had apparently wiped all thought of it from their minds. Even the jokes at the beginning, many on the subject of Shirley, had faded. This was rather less surprising, though, considering that Alex had spent more of his off-duty time with her than either Steve or Bob. Still, it was good to hear some of the old patterns of speech again.

"Alex, we're secure," Germain reported from the engineering station. "Shuttle flight systems shut down, others cycling down to standby modes."

"*Endeavor*, *Revere* bridge. Nielsen here. Welcome home."

"Thank you, Captain. It's nice to be back."

"When you've disembarked and gotten resettled, I'd like you all to meet me in the main briefing room. I want to hear all about it."

"Aye, sir," said Rosenzweig. "*Endeavor* out." Closing the channel, Rosenzweig turned to his crew and spoke to them as a crew one last time. "Ladies and gentlemen, you've all done an outstanding job, and that will be duly noted in my report. Thank you all. And with that, make sure your systems are locked down and all your data's backed-up. Gather your personnel effects, and when we're all ready, we'll beam back over. Your cabins should be just as you left them, so no concerns there."

The crew went about the tasks of securing and closing down their stations, then gathering their materials. One by one, panels faded out. Finally, only a few isolated life-support indicators still glowed on the engineering console, and the crew of eight stood together in the middle of the cabin. Rosenzweig tapped the transmit switch on his communicator. "*Revere*, the *Endeavor* crew are ready to disembark. Beam us over, please." A moment later, they vanished in eight columns of shimmering blue-white light.

The first six of the crew rematerialized on the platform in Transporter Room 2. Lieutenant Strauss directed them off the platform, and then reconstituted the last two of the crew. When they were all present and accounted for, she gave them a rare bright smile and said, "Welcome back!"

"Thanks," said Rosenzweig, smiling back. Strauss being that cheerful was a truly unusual sight, and he decided he'd better enjoy it before it vanished again. But he couldn't help but stick to one tiny bit of protocol. "Permission to come aboard?"

"Permission granted, sir," Strauss responded, her cheeks dimpling as she smiled a tiny bit more broadly in appreciation of Rosenzweig's action.

"All right, everyone," he continued, turning back to the now-erstwhile crew of the *Endeavor*; "drop your gear in your quarters and get freshened up. The captain wants a debriefing, so I'll let you know when we've set the time." With that, the crew trooped out of the transporter room and off to their respective cabins.

Not long afterward, the group gathered in Briefing Room 1 to await the arrival of Captain Nielsen. He arrived shortly thereafter, smiling and shaking hands with various members of the crew. Finally, they were all seated around the large table in the center of the room.

"So, tell me," Nielsen said, "how did things go?"

For the next hour, they told him all about the mission. They explained the loss of telemetry while they were in the UFC-8198 system, and took pains to assure him that the system wasn't dangerous, at least not anymore. They also told him about the other systems they'd visited, and the charting they'd accomplished. Nielsen's reaction to the news of a second ringworld was exactly what they thought it'd be.

"Another one? Well... This is a finding of some importance."

"All our reports will hold a recommendation that a starship be sent to explore that system in detail," Rosenzweig told him.

"Command will send one. I'm sure of it," Nielsen said.

The captain was also glad to hear that the engineering tests had gone well, and had proven out the shuttle's capability for long-range exploration in this configuration. He felt that while shuttles like this would never replace a fully-equipped starship, for "quick-and-dirty" mapping or recon flights, it would be a good resource.

Finally, they were done. "You've had one heck of a three weeks," Nielsen said. "Not many people can tell this sort of story."

Now you get to write it all up for Star Fleet Command. Good luck." With that, he rose, his motion echoed by the others, and then strode from the room.

Rosenzweig turned back to his crew. "All right, we'll divide into our work groups and start assembling the reports. Keep me informed of your progress, but don't forget to take some breaks as you work. I want you all to stay sharp while you're writing this up." The others nodded acknowledgement. "That's it, everybody. Dismissed."

Part III: Afterward

For the next few days, the *Revere* remained where it was, while the crew of the *Endeavor* worked on their reports. Rosenzweig and Bergelson finished their general section first, due mainly to its less detailed nature. They had to wait, though, for the technical reports to be finished in order to incorporate them into the master document. Roughly two days after they'd begun, Alex picked up a stylus and wrote his name on the line marked "Mission Commander" on the glowing display of the padd that sat on the table in front of him. He passed it to Lori, who signed on the line marked "Operations Officer". As she placed her stylus back down on the table, he leaned back in his chair.

"It's done," he said simply.

Lori nodded. "At last."

Alex chuckled. "It didn't take **that** long. The others'll be at it for another day. We had it easy." His voice softened slightly. "You did a good job. Thanks."

"You're welcome. Friends, remember?"

Rosenzweig did, of course, but he'd been reluctant to press the point. He smiled at her and nodded. "Yes, indeed." He lightened his tone, and continued. "Come on. I'll drop this in my office and we'll go get something to eat. All right?"

"After you," Bergelson said, indicating the door. They left the lounge in which they'd been working and walked to Rosenzweig's office. After he dropped the padd on his desk, he stepped back out, and the two took a lift over to the rec deck to get something to eat.

Once they'd finished a companionable meal, Lori excused herself and left for her quarters. Alex walked up the stairs on one side of the large chamber and walked onto the balcony. Turning to face the large room, he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the railing. Several small groups of crewmembers were sitting and chatting, and a trio of ensigns were engaged in a lively game of vitronic-B in the middle of the room. Turning away from the homey scene of shipboard relaxation, Rosenzweig faced one of the large rectangular viewports and gazed out into the space beyond. The stars glowed, steady and unchanging, but like old friends once one's spent enough time among them. Rosenzweig allowed a smile to suffuse his countenance. Then he turned and left the chamber.

Just before Rosenzweig went on duty the next day, the door chime to his quarters sounded. He tapped the control to release the lock, and the door slid open, revealing Penik and Gossenberger standing in the corridor. "Come on in," he said. The two men entered, and Alex said, "So, what's up?"

"We've got our reports done, and since you have to read and sign off on them, we figured that we'd bring them straight to you."

"Thanks," he said, smiling. He accepted both padds from them and tucked the devices under his arm. "I have to go to my office

first and deal with some paperwork, then I've got bridge duty for the second half of my shift. I'll call you if I have any questions about the reports."

"I'm going to stop back in Engineering and bother Lt. Commander Cuozzo," Bob said with a wink.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Steve asked. "There's not a lot for me to do right now."

"Sure," Alex replied. "Come on." Heading to a turbo-lift, the two men rode down to Deck 7 and walked to Rosenzweig's office. Report flimsies, padds, and other materials were set on the desk. Penik's gaze happened to fall on a padd with a form he recognized.

"May I?" he asked. Rosenzweig nodded, and Penik picked it up.

"Recommendation for decoration," he read. "Due to the circumstances wherein Lt. Commander Shirley Ann Miles received injuries during the survey and shuttle test mission of stardates 7607.22 to 7608.12, inclusive, it is my recommendation, as commander of the aforementioned mission, that Lt. Commander Miles receive a Star Fleet Wound Decoration. It should be further noted that Lt. Commander Miles participated in this mission despite still recovering from previous injury suffered in the line of duty, and that it was her choice to do so. Further details concerning her injury and the circumstances under which it was suffered are included in the medical report here appended. Signed, Lt. Commander Alexander Rosenzweig, Mission Commander." Steve looked up at Rosenzweig. "A wound decoration, hmm?"

"Yes. Steve, when she was first hit by that amoeba creature's pseudopod, she was shoving me out of the way. If she hadn't, it might have been me in her place instead. I owe her a lot. I think she deserves at least this."

"Agreed," Steve said. "Does she know?"

"No," Alex replied. "I'll tell her before she leaves the ship. I have to send a copy to Commodore Kobryn, anyway, and I want her to hear it from me, rather than him."

"Kobryn's the CO of Starbase 24?"

"Right."

"I see."

Alex took back the padd and set it on the corner of his desk. He set to work on his other tasks. Steve helped where he could. After a few hours, they'd finished.

"It's nice to be caught up. Thanks, Steve."

"You're welcome. Time for your bridge shift?"

"Yeah. See you later on."

Reaching the bridge, Rosenzweig stepped off the turbo-lift and glanced around the bridge. All appeared to be running smoothly, and the bridge seemed calm. Nielsen was in the command chair, and Rosenzweig stepped down into the command area to stand next to him.

"Hello, Alex," the captain said. "Are you done with the reports?"

"Yes, sir. I've filed a copy with you for your reference."

"Thanks."

"Anything I need to know about?"

"Nope. But you can answer a question for me."

"Of course, Captain."

Nielsen smiled. "Is there any reason for us to still be hanging around out here?"

Rosenzweig smiled back. "None that I can think of, sir."

"Very good. Star Fleet wants their shuttlecraft back at Deep Space HQ, and our new orders include bringing Lt. Commander Bergelson to Earth for reassignment. So take your station, Commander."

"Aye, Captain." Rosenzweig stepped back up to the bridge's outer ring of stations, and as he moved to Sciences, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, Nielsen turn forward.

"Navigator," the captain began, "lay in a course for Deep Space Headquarters. Helmsman, warp factor two."

The two officers at the console in front of Nielsen set to work, and soon afterward, on the main viewer, the stars began to move.

The shift passed uneventfully, and once it was done, Rosenzweig headed down to the rec deck. It was there that Germain found him. He was standing on the balcony, hands clasped behind his back, silently gazing through the large viewport out into the space beyond. Ilene quietly padded up next to him.

"Hi, Alex," she said softly, her voice barely above a whisper. Rosenzweig turned to face her, and she could see in his eyes that he'd been engaging in some distinctly introspective thinking.

"Hi, Ilene. You've been scarce the last couple of days." He winked. "Been hiding?"

Germain opened her eyes wide and raised her eyebrows, an exaggerated expression of surprise. "Me? Hide? 'Course not." They both chuckled, and then Germain asked, a bit more seriously, "What were you thinking about?"

"Nothing hugely important. Just that... Having you all here has been an amazing experience for me. We've been such a good team, and maybe more than that. I wish it didn't have to end. I wish..." Alex took a deep breath, and said it. "I wish you'd consider transferring. You're a great engineer, and a great person, and we could really use you on this ship." His tone of voice told Ilene what he'd also been thinking, and even now wouldn't say. She also knew that it couldn't go in that direction.

"Alex, I can't. It's not that I don't like you. I do. But we each have our own destiny, and right now, it lies on different roads. And if we were on the same ship, it'd just be postponing that reality, for however long. And how hard would it be to be on the same ship, always working together, without a commitment? I don't know that we could withstand that strain. Would you really want to try, under those circumstances?"

Rosenzweig looked pained, the internal struggle showing on his face. "I don't know..." he muttered.

Germain noticed that several members of the crew were now aware of them and their conversation. She took Rosenzweig's hand. "Come with me." She led him off the rec deck, to a turbo-lift, and down to the aft section of the primary hull, a bit forward of main engineering, until they reached the small cubicles set into the structural assembly of the hull. As they stepped out of the lift and moved down the corridor, they passed Gossenberger, who'd been visiting the engineering section. Intending to ask Germain a question, Gossenberger started to follow them, but when they entered one of the privacy cubicles and the door slid closed and locked, he stopped, shrugged just a bit, and went on about his business. The question could wait.

He had no idea what happened between them in that cubicle, but when Gossenberger saw them later, Rosenzweig's expression was different, as though a conflict within him had been resolved. "No doubt with Ilene's help," Gossenberger thought to himself.

Not long afterward, he received a brief message from Germain, saying that there would be a gathering of the *Endeavor's* crew in one of the smaller lounges near the rec deck.

"I want to thank you all for coming," Rosenzweig said, standing at one end of the oval table in the lounge and facing the rest of the *Endeavor's* mission crew. "This is the last time we'll be gathered as the crew of the *Endeavor*. Very soon, we'll all be going back to our regular duties and our regular lives. But before that happens, I'd like to propose a toast." He lifted his glass. "To the finest crew I've ever served with, and the best companions I could have asked for on a mission." The others raised their glasses in response, and they drank.

For the next several hours, the eight of them relaxed, talked, listened to music, and enjoyed each other's company. At some points, as appropriate musical selections played over the room's speakers, they chose to dance, simply enjoying being together without having the responsibilities of watching a vehicle's operations at the same time. It was no great surprise that Germain danced the most, even on her own when the others chose to stop and watch instead. She'd always been an excellent dancer, with a lithe grace that held Rosenzweig in its thrall. When she finished one of her dances, the applause was general. She bowed and walked over to Rosenzweig.

"That was lovely," he told her.

"I'm honored."

"Come, sit next to me at dinner." He indicated the table, where eight places had been set. They walked to the table and took their places, a small smile crossing Rosenzweig's face as he found himself sitting between Germain and Miles.

The dinner was quiet. The music had been muted, and the conversation followed suit. After a while, the meal done, each member of the crew gradually drifted away, back to their quarters or wherever their mood might take them. Rosenzweig was the last to leave. He walked along one of the radial galleries until he reached the outermost corridor of Deck 6, turned, and began to stroll along this corridor, occasionally greeting crewmembers as they passed. It was near the ramp to the main gangway hatch that he encountered Germain.

"Hello," she said, with a smile. "Mind if I join you?"

"Please do," Rosenzweig replied, and offered his arm. Germain slipped hers through it, and they resumed their stroll.

"Do you often walk in circles around the primary hull?" Ilene asked, an impish expression on her face.

"Sometimes," said Rosenzweig, smiling back at her. "If I really want comparative solitude, I use the outer corridor on Deck 7. I go in from one side of the rec deck, then walk all the way around and come out on the other side."

"Sounds calming," Ilene said, as they walked onward.

After a journey of slightly more than four days, the *Revere* arrived at Star Fleet Deep Space Headquarters. The ship was met by several work bees, and when the *Revere* cut its tractor and released the *Endeavor*, the bees captured it in their own grapples and towed it off to the station. The ship was directed to Docking Bay #6, and smoothly moved into the large sphere. Once the last external illuminators and thrusters had been shut down, the officer at the engineering station turned to face Captain Nielsen.

"We're settled in, sir."

"Thank you, Ensign Parelli."

"Sir," said Lieutenant Carr from communications, "we're being hailed by Admiral Striker." Striker was the Assistant Vice Chief of Exploration at Star Fleet Command.

"Must be about the survey mission," opined Lieutenant Yaworski.

"Agreed," said Nielsen. "On viewer, please, Ms. Carr."

As Striker appeared on the main viewer, she leaned forward. "Captain Nielsen, I presume?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Nielsen, coming to his feet.

"Captain, relax, please." As Nielsen reseated himself, Striker continued, "I'd like to speak to your chief science officer."

"A moment, please," said Nielsen. He pressed the intercom control on the arm of his chair. "Lt. Commander Rosenzweig to the bridge please."

The captain and admiral made small talk as they waited, and less than two minutes later, the starboard turbo-lift doors split and Rosenzweig stepped onto the bridge.

"Rosenzweig reporting, si—" He saw Striker on the screen and came to attention. "Admiral," he said formally.

"You're Lt. Commander Rosenzweig?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"You're smaller than I expected. No matter. I'd like you to bring your mission's sciences and engineering lead officers over to Headquarters for a meeting with myself and the Vice Chiefs of Engineering and Technology. One hour, in the Headquarters Building, main conference room, fifth floor."

"Yes, Admiral. We'll be there."

"Good," said Striker. She nodded to Nielsen, and added, "Good day, Captain. Striker out."

Rosenzweig looked at Nielsen, shrugged, and stepped to the sciences station. Tapping the intercom control on the console, he said, "Lt. Commanders Penik and Gossenberger, please meet me in Transporter Room 1 in thirty minutes. Bring all data from the *Endeavor* mission. Rosenzweig out." He glanced back at Nielsen, who nodded, and with that, Rosenzweig left the bridge.

The meeting was a short one, much shorter than Rosenzweig and his friends had expected. They were in conference with the admirals for less than twenty minutes. They submitted copies of their reports and briefly described their experiences on the mission. Striker agreed with the recommendation that a starship should be sent on a follow-up mission to UFC-8274. After the discussion was over, Striker thanked Rosenzweig, Penik, and Gossenberger for their cooperation and insights, and dismissed them, noting that she and the other two admirals would report on the mission directly to their superiors.

As they left the room, Gossenberger said, "Whew!"

"They really know how to interrogate, eh?" Rosenzweig replied with a chuckle. The admirals weren't really interrogating, but they did have a knack for asking direct questions and following up to get to the heart of what they wanted to know.

"That's for sure," Penik commented. "Are we beaming back to the ship?"

"Yeah."

The three officers returned to the *Revere*, and not long afterward, the ship departed, bound for Starbase 28. It reached the base in about three days. On stardate 7608.24, the scout slid into standard orbit around the starbase. Brennan said goodbye to

her crewmates and made her way to the transporter room, where she was met by Rosenzweig.

"Bye, Alex. It's been fun."

"There's a word for it," Rosenzweig said with a chuckle. "You did very well, Leslie. Take care of yourself."

"I will."

Brennan stepped up onto the transporter platform and turned back to face the operator's booth. Rosenzweig had stepped inside, and stood beside the on-duty technician. "Ready when you are," Brennan said.

Rosenzweig tapped on the intercom. "Goodbye, Leslie." Then, to the technician, "Energize." With a nod, the tech worked her controls. A cylinder of coruscating blue light enveloped Brennan, and she vanished into it. A moment later, a light flashed on, and the transporter tech tapped a switch. A voice came through the booth's speaker.

"Starbase transporter control here. Confirming safe beam-down of Ensign Brennan."

"Thank you," said the tech. "*Revere* out."

With Brennan back on the base, the *Revere* quickly left orbit. Several hours of travel at warp five brought it to the expected rendezvous point with the *Perseus*. The destroyer came alongside and matched course and speed with the *Revere*. Rosenzweig and Penik went to the transporter room.

"Take care of yourself, Steve. Hopefully we'll get to work together again soon."

"You, too, Alex."

"Good luck on that transfer, too."

"Thanks."

And then Penik ascended the platform, and just as Brennan had before him, Penik vanished in a column of shimmering energy. Moments later, the platform was empty, and after thanking the transporter specialist, Rosenzweig headed back to the bridge to find out where they were headed next.

The *Revere* next set course for Earth, with rendezvous with the *Lexington* and *Aquila* along the way. Both took place expeditiously. Gossenberger promised to keep in touch, and Rosenzweig wished him luck on his hoped-for transfer. And with that, the engineer was gone. The *Revere* reached the *Aquila* about six hours later.

In the transporter room, Stewart thanked Rosenzweig for the opportunity to participate in the mission.

"You're very welcome, Karen. You did solid work, and don't think that was missed in my report."

"Thanks, Alex, I appreciate that."

"Best of luck to you. Stay in touch if you can."

"I will. You, too."

"Count on it."

And with that, Stewart was beamed back to her ship, and the *Revere* journeyed on.

Two days after it left the *Aquila*, the *Revere* arrived at Earth. They took up station near the Centroplex, and a travel pod flitted over and docked at Airlock 3. Rosenzweig accompanied Bergelson to the airlock.

"New job, new location," Lori was saying. "I've been in the 'utility player' role for a few years now, and while the variety's

interesting, I just want to settle down a bit and focus on one job in one place for a while. Know what I mean, Alex?"

"Yeah, I do. I hope you get that, too. For what it's worth, I'm glad you were with us on this mission, and if there's any way I can help you out in return, let me know, okay?"

"I will, thanks, Alex."

As they reached the airlock doors, Bergelson held out her hand, and Rosenzweig shook it, holding it for an extra moment and smiling at her. They let go, then, and Bergelson stepped into the lock, leaving Rosenzweig to watch through the viewport as the pod disengaged and eased away from the ship. The science officer turned, and as he did, he noticed the young ensign on duty at the control station watching him.

"Something wrong, Ensign?"

"No, sir," said the ensign, quickly returning his focus to his controls.

"Good," said Rosenzweig. He turned on his heel and left the room.

The next day, on SD7608.27, Rosenzweig came to Germain's quarters a couple of hours before the *Revere* was due to rendezvous with the *Vogel*. Ilene answered the door chime, and smiled as she saw him standing in the corridor.

"Come in, Alex," she said.

"I came to see if you needed any help packing." It was a little transparent, as excuses went, but Ilene took it in good part.

"Nah, I'm finished, pretty much. I was thinking of going down to the rec deck for a cup of tea, though. Join me?"

"Love to," Alex said. They headed down to one of the dining areas that abutted the rec deck.

"I'm going to miss you, y'know," Alex said as they sat together, two steaming mugs of tea on the table between them. "Still sure you wouldn't consider a transfer?" He said it with a wink, more teasing than anything else.

"Not now, Alex. Sorry. I'll miss you, too, though." Ilene then smiled impishly back at him, and added, "But I know you. You're a creative guy; you'll come up with some reason to get us together again." They both laughed, and then Alex looked straight into Ilene's eyes.

"You're right, of course, though I don't have to like it." He gave a melodramatic, exaggerated sigh to let her know he wasn't really upset. "Seriously, though, I hope that whatever you do, you're happy. If our paths do cross again more permanently, I'll be happy for that, too. And if not, you'll still always be a dear friend."

For a short time, they sat quietly and sipped their tea. Then Alex checked his chronometer. "Time to go," he said. They finished their tea and went back to Ilene's quarters to pick up her things. Just before they left the cabin, he caught her up in a hug, and they held each other tightly and kissed for a long moment. Finally, he let her go, and said, huskily, "We'd better get going."

When they reached the transporter room, Ilene turned and stopped Alex just before they reached the doors' sensor range. "We've said our goodbyes," she told him softly, her expression gentle but her resolve firm. "Go back to work." Alex nodded silently and stayed where he was as Ilene went through the doorway into the transporter room. He stared at the closed doors for a few more seconds, seeing her, in his mind's eye, stepping onto the platform, telling the specialist to energize, and vanishing into light. Then he turned around and returned to his duties.

On the bridge, Nielsen was talking to Captain Tirpak when the *Vogel's* commanding officer got the report that Germain had beamed back aboard the ship. He wanted to get back on his way, but just before he closed the channel, he made an appeal to Nielsen.

"Captain Nielsen, could you do me one tiny little favor? **Please** try to restrain your science officer from coming up with any more reasons to 'borrow' my engineering officer. I prefer her where she is. Okay?"

"I'll do what I can," Nielsen said with a chuckle. "*Revere* out." Tirpak signed off, and the viewer switched from the captain's image to an external view showing the *Vogel* swinging around and accelerating away.

"Navigator," Nielsen continued, "lock us back on course for Starbase 24. Helmsman, warp three."

Alex spent most of his off-duty time with Shirley during that last day before they reached Starbase 24. He had realized that she was his last link to the feelings he'd experienced during the survey mission, and he tried his best to prolong it as much as possible. Shirley understood the feelings, and accepted them. Command was a heady experience, and while some officers never fully became comfortable with it, others took to it and reveled in the feeling. At long last, though, the expected call from the bridge came.

"Commander Rosenzweig, we're in orbit around Starbase 24."

"Thank you," Alex responded. "I'll see Lt. Commander Miles off." He went to her cabin, and found her packed and ready. Together, they walked to the transporter room.

"Goodbye, Alex," Shirley said, as they stepped into the chamber. They clasped hands momentarily, and then Alex let go and stepped back.

"Take care of yourself, Shirley. No more sojourns in the medical complex, okay?" he teased.

Shirley laughed. "Deal." Alex then handed her a datacard. "What's this?" she asked him.

"Bring it to Commodore Kobryn after you beam down," Alex told her enigmatically.

"Alex!" Shirley's eyes were wide. "What is it??"

"Oh, all right," Alex relented. "I've recommended you for a wound decoration, based on what happened to you during the survey mission."

Shirley blushed and smiled. "Thank you, Alex." Alex gazed levelly into her blue eyes.

"You're welcome, Shirley. It was my honor." And a moment later, he found his arms full of Shirley as she hugged him. He was only startled for a second, and then returned the hug. They let go a moment later, and then he escorted her to the platform. As she stepped up, Alex walked back to the booth and joined the specialist on duty. "Energize," he ordered. Shirley raised her hand in a wave, and then dematerialized.

Miles rematerialized on a platform in the base's main transporter terminal. With a wave to the on-duty technician, she picked up her case and left the room. She walked down the corridor, through the building's expansive main lobby, and out into a patio in front of the structure. She stepped onto a moving

sidewalk that took her in the direction of her living quarters building. Just ahead of her, she saw one of her friends.

"Robin!" she called out.

Lieutenant Masters, a chemist on the base and another member of the Academy class Miles shared with Rosenzweig and Gossenberger, turned. Seeing Miles, she smiled. "Hi, Shirley. Welcome back."

"Thanks. How have things been going?"

"Pretty good," Masters said. "Oh, by the way, Kobryn wants to see you as soon as you drop off your things. He flagged it on the morning bulletin, so whichever one of us saw you first would let you know."

"Okay, thanks," Miles answered. "I'll get over to see him ASAP." Seeing her building coming up, she added, "Gotta go, Robin. I'll see you later." Masters nodded, and Miles stepped off the sidewalk and headed toward her quarters.

Back on the *Revere*, Rosenzweig left the transporter room and headed back up to the bridge. As he stepped out of the lift and walked over to his station, Nielsen glanced back. "Ms. Miles is back on the base?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very good. Are you ready for us to get back to normal?"

"Aye, Captain, I am indeed."

"Well, then, we've just received new orders from Star Fleet Command. We have a mineralogical survey to do." He tapped a control. "I'm patching the information over to your station."

An indicator flashed, and Rosenzweig noted, "Got it here. Thank you, Captain."

Nielsen nodded, and turned his attention to the navigation officer. "Lieutenant East, lay in a course for the Valeen Star System. We have an appointment with its asteroid belt." He looked at the helm officer. "Lieutenant Morgan, when you have the course, take us out, warp factor seven."

"Warp seven, aye," said Morgan. He touched several controls, gripped the velocity control lever, and slowly eased it forward. On the main viewer, the stars stretched out into rainbow streaks, and the *Revere* leaped into warp, on its way to its next mission.

Epilogue: *Hyperion*

SD10411.09:

As Admiral Rosenzweig ended his story, Coburn and Shralat were thoughtful. The admiral sat for a moment, himself still thinking back to that journey all those years ago. Shralat spoke first.

"It had a big effect on you, didn't it, sir?"

"It was my first independent command. Oh, I'd led landing parties before, but this was the first time I was in command and really out on my own. The stakes were higher, the consequences more critical, and—to be honest—the emotions more intense. I think we all felt it, but it was probably more powerful for me as a command. A number of the others later told me that when it came time for them to have commands of their own, they understood the feeling."

"What happened to your crewmates?" asked Coburn. "What are they doing now?"

"Many went on to illustrious careers. A few have retired from Star Fleet."

"So who did what?" pressed Shralat.

"Both Steve Penik and Bob Gossenberger eventually got their own ship commands, Penik of the science scout *Leonov* and Gossenberger of the heavy frigate *Dardanius*. Penik's still on the *Leonov*, but Gossenberger made commodore and took a starbase command recently."

"And the others?"

"Lori Bergelson and Shirley Miles eventually got married and left the Service."

"To each other?" Coburn teased.

"No, not to each other," Rosenzweig answered, chuckling. He went on. "Ilene Germain is now a commander, and leads a team for the Corps of Engineers. I expect to be hearing that she's made captain any time now. Leslie Brennan is the chief engineer on the attack carrier *Vella Core*. And Karen Stewart went on to become the exec on the exploratory cruiser *Cousteau*."

"Sounds like they did well for themselves," Coburn commented.

"They were a great team. I was very lucky to have such a good group, and am very proud that they've had great careers, or at least found happiness. No complaints." Rosenzweig smiled.

"Are you in contact with any of them?" Shralat asked.

"Most, off and on. Sometimes years will go by without a contact. Other times, it can be frequent. But in the end, I know pretty much where I can find them, if I need to." He winked. "Being an admiral does have its advantages."

"You sure didn't have them when you were on that mission all those years ago," Coburn commented wryly.

"And if I had, I think the only real difference would have been that the follow-up missions would have been ordered faster, by a few days," Rosenzweig rejoined with a chuckle. "Well, I might have transferred Ilene, too, but on that front, I think everything worked out for the best."

"Oh?" Shralat leaned forward at that, her antennae bending toward Rosenzweig as if to underscore her interest in **that** comment.

The admiral grinned. "Now that would be a whole **different** story, and one for another time." He leaned back, still smiling, and watched the pilot digest that bit of information, as the *Hyperion* continued its journey.

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