

THE SURVEY BEGINS

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The golden-orange streams of light from the sunrise broke over the horizon, as UFC-18249 rose over the northern hemisphere of its fourth planet. The rising sun colored the lavender sky with highlights of pink and crimson, and the high clouds blazed like tufts of flame.

In the midst of this, for a brief moment, a column of light competed with the rising sun, bursting into being on a rise which looked out over a wide, rolling plain. The competition was brief, though, and the light faded, leaving behind a slender, dark-haired, pointed-eared man in a maroon jacket. Shading his eyes against the low-hanging sun, Commander Setak, the Vulcan Chief Science Officer of the starship *Avenger*, gazed out across the plain, the location that had been chosen as the base of operations for the resource and environmental survey the *Avenger* had been ordered to undertake. He paused for a moment and cocked his head upward to study the cloud formations and the brilliant wash of colors illuminating them. Setak, in addition to being the ship's senior science officer, was an aficionado of the art of light and color, and when he found striking examples in nature, he felt it appropriate to take a moment to appreciate them.

His Human crewmates sometimes teased him about what they suggested might be an emotional response. In reply, he forebore to point out that one did not require emotion to appreciate natural beauty. Of course, his crewmates knew full-well that Vulcans didn't lack emotions, but it was an old tease between Humans and Vulcans. All the way back to the first contact, when Captain Sevak stepped off the ramp of the survey vehicle *T'Plana-Hath* and greeted Zephram Cochrane—who didn't take long before he was offering the Vulcans drinks and playing Roy Orbison music for them, Humans and Vulcans had been exploring the ways their two species could interact. Setak imagined his posting to the *Avenger* not only to be a way to study the universe, but also to gain more understanding of other civilizations. His parents, alas, had not seen it in quite the same way, and had not supported his decision to join Star Fleet. In his mind, however, his experiences had completely justified that choice, and he stood by it as a logical and appropriate one.

Setak's introspection was brought to a halt by the sound of a transporter beam, as the next members of his team materialized on the next ridge over. Lt. Commander Sasha Graevyn would be heading the geophysical team, and Ensign 1st Class Linzai Coda would be overseeing biological investigations in the local area. Overall, there'd probably be in the vicinity of 20 or 30 crewmembers on the ground at the height of the survey, Setak estimated. Star Fleet Command was very interested in a thorough investigation of this planet, one of the few Class M worlds in the sector that did not already support an indigenous sentient species and thus of particular interest as a potential colony or base-of-operations location.

From overhead, the Vulcan's sensitive ears discerned the soft hum of a drive system. Glancing skyward, he saw the shuttlecraft *Wohali* on a steady descent toward the base camp's coordinates. As he watched, the *Aladdin*-class heavy shuttlecraft hovered for just a moment over the plain, then slowly settled to the ground, its engines powering down with a lowering *thrummm*. From the mission planning sessions held prior to their arrival at UFC-18249-IV, Setak knew that the *Marco Polo*-class survey shuttle *Odyssey* and the *Manasu*-class heavy shuttle *Kismet* would be setting down at strategic locations on two of the planet's other four continents. There were several island chains, as well, but they would await either Phase II of the survey or a follow-up research mission.

Graevyn turned toward Setak and waved. The science officer started to nod, then, realizing that Graevyn might not be able to clearly see that, waved back. He pointed toward the shuttlecraft, indicating that the team should gather there. Graevyn responded with a salute and led the group down the slope.

Setak, meanwhile, tapped his communicator pin and signaled the *Avenger*. When Commander Kagan responded, he made his report. "The *Wohali* has landed at Base Camp 1, and I can confirm materialization of the first science team."

"Acknowledged," Kagan responded from the bridge. "The other shuttles report also on the ground."

"Thank you," Setak said. "The team here will be staging at the *Wohali*, and we will report as appropriate."

"Very good, Commander. Captain Maldonado says he'll check in, himself, later. Right now, he's in Engineering with Commander Rielly."

"All right. I shall proceed here, and will be in contact. Setak out." Tapping his communicator again to close the channel, Setak began striding down the incline toward the shuttlecraft.

When he reached the craft, he heard Communications Chief D'HamYu T'HoD's booming voice, as he recounted a story to the assembled personnel. The laughter that accompanied the conclusion confirmed for Setak that T'HoD was up to his usual rhetorical tricks. In spite of—or perhaps *because* of—his upbringing in the warrior-priest caste on his homeworld of Eφος, T'HoD had a particular flare for the dramatic, and was highly accomplished in the art of storytelling. Setak could appreciate T'HoD's style. He might be a being dedicated to emotional control, but his interest in other cultures had impressed on him the value of storytelling and the importance of being effective at it. And T'HoD was nothing if not effective at it.

"Ahh, Commander, good of you to join us," T'HoD said with a smile as the Science Officer rapped on the doorframe and then stepped aboard the shuttlecraft. For just an instant, he touched his insignia pin, still getting used to his new rank, just issued a week before after four and one third years as a Lt. Commander. It was a subconscious act, but T'HoD noticed and smiled at him. T'HoD didn't miss much.

"Thank you, Captain." Setak's gaze took in the other officers in the shuttle, and also the equipment set up around the cabin. He nodded in satisfaction. The shuttlecraft had been outfitted according to his request. He made a mental note to log his appreciation to Lt. Commander Huz'Yur S'H'I. S'H'I had only recently come aboard, and had become Chief of Operations even more recently, succeeding now-Captain Milan, who had transferred to the *U.S.S. Archer* to become Second Officer and Squadron Liaison. Operations Chief was a demanding, and often unsung, position, and Setak wished to be sure that good work would not be overlooked.

"I have confirmed us as having reached the surface without incident," Setak noted.

T'HoD nodded. "I did, too. Have the other shuttles checked in yet?"

"Not yet," replied Setak. "I'd imagine they will soon enough, though." He moved to a table set up toward the aft part of the cabin. Glancing toward T'HoD, he inquired, "I gather the maps have been loaded?" T'HoD nodded, and Setak tapped a series of commands into the tabletop console. The tabletop lit up, revealing itself to be a viewer, and Setak accessed the shuttle's database to call up the primary planetary maps, plus the local area maps of the landing sites.

As the maps came up on the display, the crewmembers gathered around to see. The planet's five continents and four major oceans were demarcated in blues and greens, and the three landing sites were marked in red. The site maps indicated the planned extent of the on-foot explorations, and the larger area maps showed the areas planned for overflights. The shuttlepod *Star Fury* and several of the ship's *Wasp*-class fighters were being tasked with the mapping and survey flights, to maximize the *Avenger's* available resource usage. While Lt. Commander S'H'I grumbled good-naturedly at the logistical challenges, he had proven effective at meeting them. Setak established a link between the shuttle and the *Avenger*, so the maps could be updated in real-time as information was gathered. On board ship, Executive Officer Waidlich and Lt. Commander S'H'I would be correlating the data as it came in, so all the ground teams would be kept up-to-date.

"Do we have the sensor data overlays yet?" asked Graevyn.

"At this point, the data is still quite preliminary," Setak answered. He touched a control, and the display altered to include a menu of options and revision timestamps for the information. The available files included both the biology and geology reports, based on the initial sensor readings that had been taken when they arrived in the system.

"Let me dump them to my tricorder, and I'll start putting together an investigation plan," Graevyn said. Pulling out the instrument, she linked to the shuttle's on-board system and downloaded the files.

"And you, Ensign Coda?" Setak asked politely.

"Guess I should," the Trill replied. She emulated Graevyn's actions.

Once the two scientists had gathered their data, they moved off to look it over. While they did so, T'HoD moved forward to the flight control station. Checking communications, he saw an indicator of a new signal. One further check later, and he turned back toward the others. "Setak, the *Odyssey* and *Kismet* are on the ground, and we have some new information from their scans. I'll transfer it to the database."

"Thank you, Captain," Setak replied. He nodded to Coda and Graevyn, who again updated their tricorders' information.

"Setak?" It was Graevyn, looking curiously at him. "You might want to take a look at this." Setak walked over to her, and she showed him the data.

"Curious," he said softly.

"I thought so," Graevyn replied.

What the other shuttles had found during their descent were several locations of unexpectedly intense electromagnetic fields, coupled with some geo-structure readings that were simply anomalous, based on what was known about this planet.

Setak looked at Graevyn. "Do the readings indicate an active energy source?"

"I figure it's one of two things," Graevyn replied, "either it's an energy source, or it's an occurrence of something that's naturally that intense a field-generator, like radioactives or magnetics."

"A logical hypothesis," the Vulcan agreed. "In either case, it would seem that our survey has yielded a mystery..."

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