

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

TIME WAITS FOR NO MAN

By Bob Fillmore and Alex Rosenzweig

Stardate 9610.27:

The Federation heavy frigate Avenger cruised through the darkness of space. All was calm. The ship was carrying out a routine patrol near the Rihanssu Neutral Zone, supplementing the usual runs by the small, fast vessels of the Border Patrol with the occasional appearance in the borderspaces of a ship with somewhat heavier firepower. The ship had been pursuing its course for a bit more than two days, but all was quiet. No Romulan vessels had been sighted, leading the crew to wonder if they were just avoiding the Avenger, or were active somewhere else.

It was late in Gamma Shift, well into ship's night. Everything seemed almost idyllically quiet. Except for the crew at the sensors keeping watchful eyes on the Neutral Zone, much of the ship's personnel were relaxing, or catching up on paperwork, or pursuing personal projects. Captain Maldonado and Commander Re'ming'ton were working on their upcoming nuptials, and Admiral Rosenzweig was letting himself get lost in the work of the early 21st Century poet Magdalena Alagna, whom he had discovered some years back. He owned several of her collections, and especially enjoyed her explorations of scientific and metaphysical phenomena.

Abruptly, the calm was shattered by an explosion which rocked the ship and killed the power. Emergency systems cut in a moment later, but it was clear that main power was off-line. Poetry forgotten, Rosenzweig whirled to his intercom panel and speared the activation switch with a finger.

"Engineering, what's going on? What just happened to our power?"

Lieutenant Whiting responded, "I don't know just yet, sir. Looks like something tore up the circuits in the forward part of the ship. We're tracing it now, and trying to reroute systems around the breaks."

"All right. Have Commander Padovan or Commander Zulkowski report to me on what you find out."

"Aye, sir," Whiting responded. Alex signed off, leaving the engineer to his task, and headed up to the bridge.

Arriving on the main bridge, the Admiral found Captain Maldonado and Lt. Commander Ciufu there, along with the Assistant Chief Engineer, Commander Zulkowski. Commander Padovan was in Engineering, directing the investigation from there. He briefly wondered where Captain Fillmore was, but Maldonado reminded him that Bob was supposed to be finishing a double-shift. It might take him a few extra minutes to arrive.

After a short time, the ship's systems abruptly came back to full power. Padovan reported that the damaged areas had been routed around to reestablish full circuit-pathways, and a team had been sent to locate the damaged areas. It wasn't long until the call came up to the bridge.

"Zach, this is Geordi. Could you, the Admiral, and Carlos meet me at Physics Lab 2, on Deck 7?"

"At the physics lab?" wondered Maldonado. "Not **in** the physics lab?"

"Don't know," Rosenzweig replied. "But let's get down there and see what George means."

The three men rode down to Deck 7. Stepping off the turbo-lift, they hurried down the corridor. Reaching the lab doors, they were surprised to find the engineers standing in a group at the doors to the lab. The doors were open, and the team was staring inside.

"What's wrong?" asked Rosenzweig. "Why are you all standing in the corridor?"

In reply, Padovan did not say a word. He just pointed through the open doorway. Rosenzweig stepped up to the opening and looked through. His eyes widened. Maldonado arrived next to him and also peered through.

"Oh, my god..." Carlos said.

The lab was missing.

It wasn't damaged. It wasn't destroyed. It was just...absent. The doors, in fact, were not open. They were gone, too, along with their inner frames. The room—up to the structural bulkheads—was gone. It was as if this particular spot inside the hull had been left unfinished, with only the tritanium frames marking where the room was supposed to be. On either side, they could see the conduits and support-feeds that would run inside the walls between rooms, along with the "outside" of the walls of the rooms on either side of this lab. But of Physics Lab 2, there was no sign.

"What the hell happened to the lab?!" Rosenzweig exclaimed.

"We have no idea," Padovan said in a mystified tone.

"We'll begin an investigation," said Maldonado. Quickly, he moved a couple of steps down the corridor and tapped a wall-mounted intercom panel. "Bridge. Mr. Ciufu?"

"Ciufu here."

Carlos quickly explained to Augie what they had found. He asked the Chief Science Officer to review all relevant computer and sensor logs to see if there was any information to be found. The engineers at the lab's former location began taking extensive tri-corder readings to see if there was any information that could be gleaned.

From his station on the bridge, Ciufu began tracking through any of the physics-related logs that he thought might shed some light on the situation. It was soon discovered that the last person to enter the lab before the explosion had been Second Officer Fillmore.

By this time, both Carlos and Alex had returned to the bridge. The Admiral stared at Ciufu, then paused. After a moment, he spoke.

"Computer. Locate Captain Fillmore."

The computer's dispassionate female voice responded. "Captain Fillmore is not aboard the Avenger."

"Augie," Alex went on, "was there any record of him leaving the lab?" Ciufu shook his head.

"Oh, no," said Carlos. "What has he gotten into now...?"

Rosenzweig stood. "Carlos, you take the bridge. I have to go speak to Wendy." The Executive Officer nodded and Alex headed for the lift. He found Commander Wendy Fillmore, the ship's Data Administration Officer (and former CMO), in the quarters she shared with Captain Bob Fillmore. As soon as she answered the door chime, the Admiral could see that she was upset. Wendy, not getting a response from Bob during an emergency, had already asked the computer the same question Alex had earlier, and had gotten the same answer. Bob was no longer aboard the *Avenger*.

Wendy was very upset. "Where is he, Alex?" she asked, her voice taut with worry. "What's happened?"

"Augie's looking into that right now," Rosenzweig assured her. "We'll find out. That much I promise you now. We *will* find out." He paused for a moment, then asked her, "Did Bob say anything to you about what he was working on?"

"He wasn't really specific, but he was very excited. He only said it might...revolutionize our understanding of space-time." She took a breath. "Whatever that means." Then she shook her head. "He usually doesn't share the more esoteric stuff with me until he's got some actual results to talk about."

"All right. Well, Bob must have kept some set of records, so we'll get the answers soon." *I hope*, he added to himself, as he hugged Wendy reassuringly, then left the Fillmores' quarters.

Ciufu's investigation eventually led him to where Fillmore had stored his experiment records. A review of those records quickly revealed that Bob had been conducting temporal research. He had been pursuing several new avenues of experimentation that he felt would allow what he called "a controlled transit along the time-axis of the continuum". In simpler language, Ciufu summed up, "He was working on a time machine."

"And," added Carlos, "it looks like he had been working on a prototype in the lab."

The fact that the effect of the experimentation had been bounded by the structural members which surrounded the lab further suggested that the experiment had been responsible, and that, in all likelihood, it had...sent the lab somewhere...or perhaps **when**..

"Are you sure?" asked Rosenzweig, as Ciufu and Maldonado sat in his ready room and gave their report.

"We can't be 100 percent sure," Ciufu replied, "but it is consistent with the results and evidence we have so far."

Alex leaned back and took a deep breath. Releasing it, he went on. "Okay. Augie, get a team together and try to figure out exactly what happened. We need to understand this **precisely**, so we have some idea of how to respond. Carlos, see to it that Augie has whatever resources he needs. Any questions?" There were none. "Very well, then. Dismissed."

Ciufu quickly got to work organizing his team. Lieutenant Rappa, the Chief Scientist in Physical Sciences, was a natural choice. Other members of the team included Captain James Rennie (who was training to command the *U.S.S. Hera*, was on temporary assignment to the *Avenger*, and who himself had been heavily involved in temporal research in more recent years), Lieutenant Setak, Ensign Nakajima, and, from Engineering, Ensign Brescia.

The team took two parallel approaches. They carefully studied the erstwhile location of the lab, taking readings and trying to determine any possible effects of the phenomenon on the ship's structure. The researchers also carefully studied Fillmore's logs, trying to glean the most they could from every note. The biggest problem was that there were no notes from Bob for the actual experiment once it was underway. Clearly he had intended to write everything up and enter it once the tests were done, but his disappearance had made that impossible. *Hopefully*, Ciufu thought, *the solution to the problem won't be sitting in the notes that Bob has with him, wherever/whenever he is.*

From what the team **was** able to piece together, it appeared from Fillmore's logs that he was pursuing a theory that the energy requirements for temporal dislocation and the ambient temperature in the local environment were directly correlated. It seemed that the lower the temperature was, the less energy was required to create a temporal warp. Brescia theorized that it might have something to do with improved superconductivity in low temperatures, or perhaps with the slower-moving molecules requiring less energy to excite along the temporal axis, but no one was quite sure. This particular approach, using the kind of equipment Fillmore had at-hand, had not been tried before. Of that, Captain Rennie was quite certain.

Some of Fillmore's last logs indicated that he was preparing an experiment to control the drop in temperature of the environment in and around the test apparatus using liquid helium. When the investigating team found that, they realized that use and movement of liquid helium in the ship, especially in any significant quantities, would be tracked. They turned their attention to logs kept by the Operations and Engineering Divisions.

There they found an answer, in part. The automatic resource-usage logs showed that, abruptly, a regulator valve had jammed open, releasing a large amount of liquid helium into the lab, followed within a few seconds by the termination of all readings from the lab's equipment. That, they surmised, was the moment of the explosion.

The explosion itself, meanwhile, appeared to be a result of feedback created when the lab vanished. A temporal vortex had indeed been created, and when the lab vanished, the air from the corridor rushed in to fill the void with such force that it resulted in the explosion. Fortunately, as Brescia noted, tritium and duranium are tough stuff, and neither the frames nor the hull were damaged.

That solved, in part, the problem of what happened. What remained—and this was crucial—was to determine the location and condition of the lab. To accomplish that, the team went back to Fillmore's documentation. Amidst the complex spatial equations, they found a position vector, suggesting a direction that the lab may have gone.

When Lieutenant Setak reported the information on the vector to Lt. Commander Ciufu, who was on the bridge, Ciufu passed it along to Admiral Rosenzweig. Rosenzweig, in turn, asked the Chief Navigator, Lieutenant Bradley, who happened to be on duty at the time, to see if it led to anything significant.

Lieutenant Bradley ran a series of computations of the spatial and temporal vectors from Fillmore's equations and overlaid them on a map of the area of the galaxy in which the *Avenger* was cruising. As he finished, his eyes opened wide. There was nothing at the

vector's endpoint now, but if one computed backwards for stellar and planetary motions through the amount of time suggested by the equations, a planet showed up in the right spot. Then Lieutenant Bradley "ran the clock forward" again, studied the result, and turned to face the center seat.

"Admiral, I have an answer."

That caught everyone's attention. Rosenzweig noticed that all eyes were now on Bradley. "Go ahead, Lieutenant," he said encouragingly.

"Sir, in the present day, there's nothing where the spatial vectors would have sent the lab. But, if we add in the temporal component, it turns out that there in fact was a planet right in the proper location at the right time."

"Lucky," Ciufu said softly.

"Yes, Commander," replied the Navigator.

"Where is that planet now?" asked Rosenzweig.

"Sir, it's Veshkam III." He paused. "It's within the Romulan Neutral Zone."

"Oh, damn," muttered Maldonado from his spot near the Sciences station.

Rosenzweig paused for a long moment. Then he turned to the navigator. "Plot a course for the point at the edge of the Neutral Zone closest to the Veshkam System." He glanced at the officer manning the Helm. "Lieutenant Ragin, when you have the course, make warp 3." As both officers acknowledged the orders, Alex stood and walked to the railing near the Communications station.

"Lt. Commander Rhea, please contact Star Fleet Command.

Send the following message: Request permission to enter the Neutral Zone on a rescue mission of limited duration. Type: Personnel recovery. We will operate under formal diplomatic stance of rescue, and will fly flag of truce while there. Mr. Ciufu," he added, turning to the Chief Science Officer, "please transfer to Ms. Rhea a summary of Captain Fillmore's experiment and the results thereof. Rhea, append that to the message and dispatch. Flag it as Priority 1."

"Yes, sir," Rhea acknowledged. She turned to her console and began composing the transmission.

Maldonado joined Rosenzweig at the railing. "At this range and power, it'll take a couple of hours to reach Star Fleet Command."

Alex nodded. "In the meantime, we need to start thinking about how we could get into the Zone, get to Veshkam III, recover Bob, and get back out again, preferably *before* any Rihannsu show up. Have rRham, Wendy, and Ms. Graevyn meet us in the briefing room."

By the time a response was received from Star Fleet, the Avenger's officers had worked out a plan. It was decided that they would enter the Neutral Zone uncloaked. This would be a show of good faith, and a statement that their mission was an honorable one. Hopefully, though, they would be able to avoid any encounters with the Rihannsu. They were not yet sure how Bob would be recovered, but Ciufu was hopeful that they would have enough information by the time they reached the planet to plan a reasonable course of action.

The senior officers returned to the bridge to hear the response from Star Fleet. By this time, Commander Padovan had come up, as well, and was awaiting their return. Rhea transferred the message to the main viewer, and Admiral Cafilisch's visage

gazed out at them from the viewer. "To Admiral Rosenzweig, Commanding U.S.S. Avenger, from Star Fleet Command. We must regretfully deny your request to enter the Neutral Zone. Although Captain Fillmore's contributions to the sciences and to Star Fleet have been considerable, and although we understand your feelings of loyalty toward him, we cannot approve a proposal to violate the terms of our treaty with the Romulan Star Empire. As you know, relations with the Romulans are uncertain right now, and they have been very much on the defensive since the signing of the Khitomer Accords. Should you encounter a patrol, we cannot be sure that the Romulans would not treat your incursion into the Neutral Zone as an act of war. And as much as we would like to recover Captain Fillmore, he is only one man, and one man is not sufficient cause to provoke a war." Cafilisch paused, and ran a hand through his thinning, sandy-blond-and-gray hair. "Please convey our regrets to Commander Fillmore, and our condolences on her loss. Again, I am sorry, but we must not draw the Federation into a war in this situation. Star Fleet out."

When the reply ended, Wendy said nothing, but she stumbled slightly and leaned heavily against Maldonado, who put his arms around her and guided her to a chair hastily vacated by an ensign at Mission Ops 1. Rosenzweig shook his head. He gestured to Carlos, and they huddled by the command chair.

"Well, he did his homework, anyway. He remembered about Wendy."

Carlos nodded. "But what are we going to do?"

"I appreciate Cafilisch's position, but we can't just abandon Bob. Agreed?"

Carlos smiled grimly. "Damn right."

"Are we rigged for a quick dash, in and out?" Alex asked.

"Yes. We can do it."

"All right, then. To hell with our orders. We're at least going to try to get Bob back." Rosenzweig stood up and turned to the Sciences station. "Mr. Ciufu," he asked, "can you detect any Rihannsu to the limits of sensor range?"

Ciufu squared his shoulders and turned to his station, studying the displays. Then he looked back. "No, Admiral, there are not."

"Thank you," said Rosenzweig. He walked to the Helm/Navigation console. "Mr. Bradley, plot a direct course to Veshkam III. Ms. Ragin, when you have the course, ahead, warp factor 7." He glanced over at Wendy and smiled slightly at the look of pure relief etched across her tear-strewn face.

"Wait!" the deep, resonant voice of Lt. Commander rRham rumbled across the bridge.

Rosenzweig turned to the Security Chief. "Yes, Commander?"

"You cannot cross into the Neutral Zone!"

"And why not?" Alex wanted to know. rRham gestured in the direction of the viewer.

"Star Fleet Command has given its orders. We cannot disobey our superior officers. You must not violate the Admiral's order."

Wendy stood up and stalked to the railing, her hands gripping it so hard her knuckles went white. "rRham, how can you say that? You would leave a man to possibly *die* just because some desk-bound bureaucrat *told you to?*"

rRham slowly shook his large head. "It is unfortunate that this has happened, but our duty is to follow our orders. If we ignore the commands of our superior officers, how can discipline be maintained? How can we keep order? How-?"

Wendy cut him off. "Listen, rRham, that's our friend and shipmate out there. That's my husband out there. If I had to, I'd go myself in a shuttlecraft to get him! Those people back on Earth, they're not the ones who work with Bob every day, who risk their lives with him, who..." She trailed off, and Alex hurried to the railing where she was standing.

"Wendy," he said softly, "he's reacting the way his culture taught him to. They're almost biologically hardwired to think that disobeying one's superiors is inconceivable. It will take him time to understand that we see things differently."

Wendy looked at him, her eyes bright with the tears she was holding back. "You're not going to *listen* to him, are you?"

"No, I'm not," Alex said. "I've made a command decision, and it will not change." He straightened up and turned back to face the Chief of Security. "rRham, my order will stand." He turned back toward Ragin. "Lieutenant, proceed."

"Lieutenant...stop," responded rRham. The Tzen turned to face Rosenzweig, an expression of sadness on his reptilian face. He drew himself up to as much of his full height as he could. "Admiral," he began formally, "in accordance with Star Fleet regulations, Section 117, Subsection 2, Paragraphs 4 through 7, I must relieve you of command, on the grounds that you are willfully disobeying the orders of a superior officer, in violation of regulations. Sir, will you desist?"

Rosenzweig's eyes remained locked on rRham's. "Lt. Commander rRham, is this a bluff?"

"No, sir," the Chief of Security responded. "It is not."

Alex took a deep breath. "Very well, then." He looked around at the crew, all of whom had their attention riveted on the confrontation. He nodded to Ragin and turned to Carlos. "Captain Maldonado, in accordance with proper procedure in this circumstance, I turn command of the Avenger over to you." He took a step back, away from the command chair.

Carlos exchanged a glance with Wendy, and walked quietly, almost regretfully, to the chair. He sat down and stared at the main viewer for a long moment. Then he glanced at the woman sitting at the Helm station. "Lieutenant Ragin, please execute Admiral Rosenzweig's last order."

"Captain!" rRham exclaimed.

Carlos spun in the chair and faced rRham. "Yes, Commander? Would you have me, as my first act in command of this vessel, begin by violating an order given by *my* superior?"

"The order was improper," said rRham stolidly. Graevyn, though, standing near the Mission Ops 2 station, could see the confusion in her friend's eyes.

"Was it?" Carlos pressed. "I am to disobey an order given by my superior because I believe it to be improper? But is that not exactly the basis upon which you just relieved Admiral Rosenzweig? And if so, why don't you question him on whether he felt that the order from *his* superior was improper?"

"I am acting in accordance with the regulations," rRham pressed forward.

"Do you want to relieve me, too?" Carlos asked. "Who is next in command?"

rRham's gaze slowly swiveled toward Commander Padovan. George shook his head. "If I sit in that chair," he said, "I'll give the same order."

One at a time, the Security Chief studied each officer on the bridge. Every expression was firm, and no one looked like they

would follow any course of action other than the one the admiral had laid out. rRham sighed. He turned to face Rosenzweig. "Sir, I wish to formally withdraw my complaint, and return command of this vessel to you."

Alex nodded and smiled, just slightly. "If the current commander has no objections...?" he asked, nodding to Carlos.

"None whatsoever, sir," the exec said, smiling himself and rising from the chair.

Alex returned to the command chair and sat back down. "And now, Ms. Ragin, if you would please execute my order?"

"With pleasure, sir," the lieutenant responded. She turned to her console. There was a low-level vibration as the impulse drives activated, bringing the ship up to sufficient speed to engage the warp drive. A moment later, the ship leapt into warp.

"Permission to return to my station, sir?" asked rRham.

"Of course, Commander," Rosenzweig replied. rRham looked like he might want to say something else, then shook his head slightly and headed for the lift.

As the doors closed and the turbo-lift started down, rRham ruminated on what had happened. Already he could tell that the admiral understood why he had acted as he did. It was the Tzen way. One did not violate orders. The chain of command was sacrosanct. Deep within himself, rRham could not help but respect the loyalty that those men and women had shown to Fillmore. But it was a different way than the one he was born to, and it would take time to reconcile it with his long-held cultural beliefs, even after several years of exposure to this kind of thinking.

It was only a short time until the Avenger arrived in the Veshkam Star System. Veshkam was a G7-type star, and its third planet a Class L world. The ship made orbit soon afterward, and Rosenzweig ordered a scan of the surface. It did not take long to find what they sought. Readings of refined tritanium and duranium gave Ciufu a lead, and he soon found the lab module sitting on a plateau.

As he focused the sensors more closely on the module, Ciufu's eyes widened. He glanced up at Maldonado, who was standing by the Sciences station. "Carlos, it's the lab, all right. But readings on its structural components show that it's over 2,000 years old. Whatever happened to Bob, it looks like he went back in time something like two millennia."

"When we find Bob," Carlos deliberately did not say "if", "I'm going to kill him myself." The Chief Science Officer flashed him a quick grin, then returned to his task.

A short time later, Ciufu made his report. After he'd reported on the condition of the lab, he continued, "I also found something else interesting. There's some evidence that there might once have been a low-level civilization on this planet." At Rosenzweig's curious look, he explained, "There're no technological artifacts, but there are some old patterns just barely visible, patterns that look as though they might have been left by an agriculturally-based society."

"I'd think such a culture would have been quite extensive for us to find any remnants," Alex commented.

Augie agreed. "Yes, it would. Unfortunately, especially with agricultural societies, what's left isn't much. It does look like the civilization was widespread, but from what rough dating estimates are possible, it doesn't look like there's much that's younger than 2,000 years."

"And the lab module is 2,000 years old," commented Carlos.

"Augie, do you think there might be a connection?" asked Alex.

"There's really no evidence of one," Ciufu responded. "Even the dating we have is pretty vague. The cutoff date might be as much as two hundred years in either direction."

"All right," Rosenzweig acknowledged. He turned to Maldonado. "Right now, lost civilizations are intriguing, but are secondary to our mission here. Have Mr. rRham lead a landing party to the surface. Get to the lab module and find out what there is to find."

Carlos nodded and moved to the intercom.

The group of six officers materialized on the top of the plateau. A light wind blew over the level ground. Lieutenant Rappa turned slowly, holding out a tricorder. He pointed. "Just beyond that outcropping." The group moved cautiously in the direction he had indicated, stepping cautiously over the scrub grass and rock. There were more plants—bushes and small trees—off to the group's left, and it also seemed that there was more ground-cover in that area, as well. But closer to where they were headed, it looked much more barren.

Climbing past the rocks, the landing party found the lab. They found the doors closed.

"Whoever or whatever was here last made some attempt to secure the place," commented Ensign Jennings.

Rappa nodded.

"I wonder if it was Captain Fillmore," said Ensign Karycinski.

"At the least, it looks like it has been a long time since anyone was here," answered Rappa.

"We must go in," rRham said, his bearing clearly suggesting that the time was past for speculation. He slipped his claws into the crack in between the double doors and gently pulled. Nothing happened. He pulled a little harder. The doors slid slightly open. Carefully, he pried the doors apart until there was enough room for him to enter the lab. The others followed. Entering the module, they looked around. Surprisingly, it appeared that the lab was essentially intact, although it was powerless. The displays were dark, the systems quiet.

rRham swung his light around the room, and the beam played over the walls. Abruptly, the Tzen saw something that didn't look right. Bringing the light back, he repeated the move more slowly. This time, he caught the writing. The landing party crowded in to look. Scrawled on the wall was a message. A quick scan revealed that it was indeed around two millennia old, though the only reason it had survived was that it was protected in the lab. Studying the readings, Ensign S'net abruptly stopped. The Caitian nurse flicked her tail sharply.

"Lt. Commanderr rRrham, this message was wrrritten in... blood. Human blood."

"Captain Fillmore's?" rRham asked.

"It's heavily degrrraded, but I think it does match his type."

"Maybe he had nothing left to write with," suggested Rappa.

"Perhaps," rRham allowed.

They studied the message. It said, "To reach the unreachable star." It seemed odd and cryptic, but also seemed to be giving some sort of clue to where there was more information.

Ensign Karycinski had a thoughtful look on his face. rRham asked, "Something to report, Ensign?" It was more of a demand

than a request, and the young Ensign was snapped instantly back to reality.

"Sir, this is a quote from an ancient earth story about a hero named 'Don Quixote'..." He trailed off. rRham was familiar with the tale, but before he could ask, Ensign Rabin noticed an etching on a sealed cabinet. "Sir, it looks like 'DQ'..." 'Don Quixote?' Karycinski asked. It took some work to get it open, but once they did, they found a sheaf of paper, upon which was written an extensive set of notes. A scan of the paper and ink determined that they, too, had been there for nearly two millennia. If it hadn't been for the cabinet's design to protect materials stored inside, the paper might well not have survived.

"Can we get the computers turned back on?" asked Rappa. "Bob may have left information in the databanks."

"Let me see what I can do," replied Ensign Rabin. She scrutinized the equipment, and fished in her engineering pack for several tools. Then she knelt down near the base of the console and flipped open an access panel. "Andy," she said to Karycinski, not looking up, "hand me a spare power cell from my kit."

Karycinski did as he was bid, and soon power was again flowing through the computer circuits in the lab's main console. Rabin stood up and grinned. "Even after two thousand years, it still works. Y'just can't complain about good Star Fleet workmanship."

With power restored, much of the on-board memory also proved accessible. There was only a bit of memory degradation near the end of the records. Unfortunately, that loss made the data from the last hour of Fillmore's experiment unrecoverable. Rappa growled a curse at that. That data would have given the clearest idea of what precisely had happened.

"Looks like we'll just have to piece it together ourselves," he said matter-of-factly.

What they *did* find in the memory circuits were a set of short, cryptic messages from Fillmore to Admiral Rosenzweig, Captain Maldonado, Commander Fillmore, and Lieutenant Rappa. Rappa read only his own, but downloaded them all into his tricorder for transmission to the Avenger.

rRham was watching the scientist's expression. "What did he tell you," he asked.

Rappa returned the Security Chief's gaze. "He seems to give a list of equipment... And a number – 42."

"That seemed extremely short," rRham commented.

Ensign Rutherford responded to that. "Actually, Commander, that's to be expected. A brief, compact message would be less likely to degrade, improving the chance that it would actually survive long enough for us to find."

rRham paused for a moment, considering. "That is sensible," he agreed.

"Glad you think so," Rappa quipped.

The landing party continued its study of the lab, and after a couple of hours, they were satisfied that they had gotten all they could for the moment. They returned to the ship, one key question still hanging in the air. How could Captain Fillmore be recovered?

There were two possibilities, as far as they could tell. They could either slingshot around Veshkam and jump backward in time, or they could try to reproduce the temporal part of Bob's experiment and travel back that way.

• • •

It was dark...the kind of dark that one notices as one is awakening from a phaser stun, and almost as painful. Captain Fillmore opened his eyes to see—not the ceiling of Sickbay as he had anticipated, nor any other persons at all—but the ceiling of the dimly lit physics lab in which he had been working. Doing a quick assesment of his physical condition and noticing nothing serious, he pulled himself up and looked around. “Definitely damaged,” he thought, “but nothing Geordi can’t fix...”

“Computer, status report,” he said aloud. Nothing. “Computer, status!” he repeated. Still nothing. “I wonder what happened,” he whispered as he hurried for the doors, and almost ran into them. “Odd...” He stared at the doors for a long moment, then pried them open. Still clinging to the doorframe, he could do little but stare in shock at the sight before him. “What the **hell!**!” he said, out loud this time, and took several steps outside, onto what appeared to be a flat stretch of ground that ended abruptly a few hundred meters away. And it was OUTside; he took a couple of more steps... “Oh, boy...” he said in his normal subdued tone, and turned back to the lab.

Having regained his composure, Bob moved back to the control console and studied the readouts. “A good thing for the battery backups,” he thought, since the entire lab was now running on emergency power, with all the equipment and control consoles running on internal batteries. Quickly assessing the situation (one of his “gifts”, as Alex had always called them), he knew that the batteries would only last a few hours, and began switching off any equipment he didn’t immediately need. He kept the computers and certain sensors on, as he knew he would need them to help him figure out what had happened. He had a theory, but, realizing that survival was paramount, he first made an extensive list of survival supplies and used the lab’s fabricator unit to replicate as much as he could.

Several hours later, he had gathered enough data to support his hypothesis; his experiment had been a success. Looking around again, he said, “Well, sort of...” and switched off the last of the equipment to conserve the batteries. Sitting there in the dark, he stared dully at the blank viewers. “Approximately 15 light years from where Avenger had been, and 2,000 years in the past. This is the only technology for hundreds of parsecs, and I don’t even have a good book... Guess I should have listened to Rappa...”

• • •

Following the landing party’s return to the ship, and after he had read their reports, Admiral Rosenzweig called a meeting of the senior staff to discuss their options. The division chiefs gathered in the main briefing room on deck 2. Sitting in were Lieutenant Rappa and Commander Fillmore. Rappa had been working closely with Bob and was familiar with most of the details. As for Wendy, Rosenzweig simply felt he couldn’t leave her out of a discussion of Bob’s fate.

“...wish he had listened to me,” Rappa was saying. “I recommended that he wait until morning so that we could set up full monitoring and documentation, but he didn’t.”

“That may be true, but what’s done is done,” Maldonado replied. “What we need to decide now is what we’re going to do about the situation.”

“Augie,” Alex began, turning to Lt. Commander Ciufu, “do the sensors show any signs of Rihannsu?”

Ciufu shook his head. “Nothing within five parsecs, Admiral,” he reported. “But,” he added, “I can’t vouch for what might be out there just beyond that point. There could be a whole squadron of warbirds...or none at all.”

“I am concerned at our situation,” rRham said. “We are too vulnerable, sitting here. And if we attempt to use the slingshot effect for time travel, we will be vulnerable to attack.”

“Is the slingshot what we’re planning to do?” asked Lt. Commander Graevyn.

“I don’t think we’ve established that yet,” Alex responded, “although it’s one of our key options.”

“It’s risky,” said Commander Padovan without preamble. “I don’t like it.”

“I don’t particularly disagree with you, George,” Alex answered. “A couple of centuries is one thing. Two millennia is quite another.”

Carlos turned to Rappa and asked him, point-blank, “Lieutenant, in your opinion, could we copy Captain Fillmore’s experiment well enough to send the Avenger back in time 2,000 years?”

Rappa’s answer was equally straightforward. “Captain, we did lose the raw data from the last hour of the experiment. However, I believe that most of the key information we’d need to recreate the basic parameters of the experiment is in our hands. Given a bit of time, I believe I can assemble what we need.” He paused, then continued. “Also, Captain Fillmore was corresponding regularly with a number of members of the scientific community. There’s a lot of interest in this kind of research.” Rappa turned his gaze directly to Alex. “Sir, I’d like to request permission to contact them and see what information they have that might be able to help us.”

Rosenzweig considered. “I do have a concern here. So far, we’ve kept this situation relatively contained. If we bring in...umm...outside parties, we do risk things getting out of hand. Remember, we are still acting in violation of orders here.”

A low rumble emanated from the vicinity of the Security Chief, but Alex gave him only a single glance.

Wendy leaned forward. “I know that Bob was talking to certain people in the Department of Temporal Physics at Cambridge University, on Earth. He mentioned that a few of them are not very fond of Star Fleet. They might well be willing to help without telling anyone.”

Alex looked at her. “Wendy, just who has Bob been talking to?” As a Star Fleet flag officer, he was naturally a bit wary when hearing about scientists who were unhappy with the Fleet.

Wendy nodded in understanding. “We all know, of course, that Command has been trying to control as much of the research into time travel and temporal physics as they can.” There were nods around the table. “That’s not very popular in the scientific community.”

“But given the risks involved—” Carlos began.

Wendy nodded. “I know. Look Star Fleet may well be justified in how they feel. After all, we—meaning Star Fleet personnel—have had more experience than almost anybody else with temporal phenomena. But that doesn’t make what they’re doing any more popular among the scientists whose whole tradition is the free exchange of information. They’re afraid, maybe even legitimately, that if the “military” has exclusive control over this kind of research, there’d be no way to control *them*.”

Rosenzweig bit back his instinctive response. It was neither the time nor place for that debate. "So some of the folk at Cambridge might help us."

"I think so," Wendy replied. "I could contact them, at any rate."

"Also," interjected Lieutenant Rappa, "Captain Fillmore has been in touch with a Dr. Skor at the Vulcan Science Academy. It seems that the Vulcans are also interested in temporal studies, and notably in Captain Fillmore's work. Lieutenant J.G. Sanar from Physics has dealt with Dr. Skor before, and should be able to help us get in touch with him."

"Does Dr. Skor have any hangups about Star Fleet that we should know about?" Alex asked.

"Not as far as we know," Wendy said. "He has the usual Vulcan wariness about an organization that carries as many weapons around as we do, but he hasn't yet run afoul of them, so has no reason to distrust or dislike the Fleet."

Alex nodded. "Very well. Mr. Rappa, Dr. Fillmore, when we're done here, contact Cambridge and the Vulcans. Let's see what kind of help they can be." As the two nodded, Rosenzweig continued, "In the meantime, what areas of immediate concern can we look at now?"

"Right now," Rappa said, "we're looking at two: power and stability." At the blank looks from the other officers, he continued, "To move the whole Avenger back in time over two thousand years will require a great deal of power. Captain Fillmore's equipment wasn't fine-tuned for maximum efficiency yet, and it's not likely we'll have time to do so, either. At its current efficiency, even our matter/antimatter reactors may not provide sufficient power.

"As for stability, Captain Fillmore's prototype mechanism was small, and a lot of it was equipment to monitor and focus the temporal field. If we want to move the Avenger, we'll need a much larger device. Also, working on such a larger scale would tend to magnify any variations in the temporal flux to such a degree that controlling movement along a predetermined time-vector might well be impossible. Put more simply, it might be a big gamble just getting us to where we need to be."

"I can't risk the entire ship and crew on a maneuver that's quite so risky," Rosenzweig said firmly. A stricken expression crossed Wendy's face, but she held any protest inside. The admiral appreciated that. This was hard enough as it was. He leaned forward. "If we're going to take a risk, I'd prefer it be a risk we know something about. I tend to lean toward a slingshot maneuver, despite the risk of a Rihansu attack."

"Admiral," Ciufo interjected, "I must point out that the farthest that any ship has gone back in time using that maneuver is about four hundred years. Even that was under less than controlled conditions. Going back two thousand years is unprecedented. Trying to use a slingshot to go that far might be as risky as trying to copy Bob's experiment."

"He does have a point," Maldonado said.

Rosenzweig nodded. "I know. No-win scenario. Which big risk do we end up taking?"

"Admiral?" It was Lt. Commander Graevyn. "What about a shuttlecraft?" Both Rosenzweig and Maldonado stopped and looked at her. A moment later, the others followed suit. "Why not?" she went on. "It'd be small enough that the power drain wouldn't be nearly as significant as if we used the entire ship. It should also address the stability issues, at least somewhat."

"But," objected Padovan, "a shuttle's power plant is also much smaller. How could it hope to generate enough power?"

"The power requirement would be much less, too," Rappa said thoughtfully. "We might be able to do it."

"Also," Graevyn added, "we could run a power-feed from the ship to the shuttle, at least on the departure leg. That would let the shuttle save internal power, which it will need for the trip home, when the ship won't be there to help out."

Rappa thought for a moment longer, then looked up at the others. "I believe I can put together a temporal device big enough to get a shuttle back far enough to get Captain Fillmore." Rosenzweig looked closely at him, studying his expression.

Next to the commanding officer, Maldonado commented, "It would certainly solve the problem of risking the ship."

Alex nodded. "Yes, it would." He straightened in his seat. "Very well. Let's do it."

"What about the crew?" asked Graevyn.

"I'd like to volunteer," Wendy said immediately.

The admiral nodded. "Very well." He turned to Lt. Commander rRham. "Commander, would you be willing to lead this mission?"

"Yes," responded the Security Chief.

The group proceeded to discuss the other crew recommendations. Once the senior staff had their recommendations in, the appropriate crewmembers were contacted. In each case, Rosenzweig made it clear that any person could decline the offer without prejudice. After all, they were operating against orders and in territory where they were not supposed to be. Alex was confident that few would decline, and as it turned out, none did. In addition to rRham and Wendy, the shuttle crew would consist of seven additional officers. Lieutenant Rappa would go to watch over the temporal dislocation apparatus. Ensign Louise Crenshaw, a power systems specialist, would be on-hand to assist him. Lieutenant J.G. Ann Marie Reilly would go to provide medical assistance. Ensign Larry Kozek would provide sciences support. rRham requested two security specialists, and Ensigns Hwendr  and Loyal were assigned. Finally, Lieutenant Santo Rigoni was assigned to serve as the pilot for the flight.

With the crew decided upon, Graevyn leaned forward. "Next question is which shuttle. I suggest the Odyssey. It carries sensors and extensive analytical equipment that will be very important in gathering data through all parts of the trip. And depending on what happens, you may need it."

Rosenzweig nodded. "I think you're right," he said. "Unless anyone has any objections...?" He looked around at the assembled officers. No one said anything. "Good. Go ahead, Commander."

Graevyn activated her intercom and contacted Lt. Commander Wilson in the Flight Control Center. After a moment, she confirmed that the preparations had been started on the shuttlecraft. Much, though, would have to wait until the temporal equipment was ready.

"That's fine," Alex acknowledged. He turned to face Rappa. "All right, Lieutenant, it's your show." He glanced at the Chief Engineer. "George, please give Mr. Rappa any assistance he may require in getting components fabricated."

"Of course, sir," Padovan said straightforwardly.

• • •

"Day 37. Since this is my last sheet of paper, this will be my last entry. All save about a week's worth of my rations are gone, and I have all but expended the local edible flora and fauna. I must now venture farther than I have before. The ecosystem on top of my plateau is not robust enough to support a human for long, and I have overstayed my welcome. There is ..."

"Damn!" he shouted, scribbling the writing implement on the paper to no avail. "Bloody thing," he mumbled as he tossed the pen into the cabinet. "Oh, well," he thought. "Guess I've written enough..." He cracked a wry smile as he placed the last sheet under all that he'd written before and marveled at how verbose he could be. Over twenty centimeters thick, this stack of papers was, and he still wasn't sure if he'd given enough details, should anyone come looking for him. "Well, can't worry about that now," he thought as he sealed the space-tight cabinet for the last time. It took longer this time than he'd ever noticed before, and he figured that the batteries, too, were about drained. "Lovely..." he thought as he reached for a pocket knife he had replicated and began to etch the cabinet's door frame. That done, he looked about the lab for something to use as a pointer to the cabinet, just in case someone actually **did** come looking for him, and finally concluded that there was only one sure way to leave that message. He used the knife again, this time on his own finger to leave his final message, in his own blood: "To reach the unreachable star..."

Surveying his work, and noting by its careful placement that anyone familiar with Earth literature would be able to determine from this both the location of his notes and the direction in which he had gone, he packed all of the available supplies into his replicated backpack, squared his shoulders, pried open the doors of the lab for the last time, walked out onto the plateau, and closed the doors as best as he could. He spied the windmill-shaped trees in the distance, and headed for the plateau's edge and the closest navigable path down to the plain below.

...

It actually took less time than Rappa had predicted. Both the researchers at Cambridge and Dr. Skor proved more than willing to help, and their insights sped the process of interpreting Bob's notes and reconstructing the temporal displacement equipment significantly. In less than a full day, the time travel equipment had been installed aboard the Odyssey. Each component of the apparatus had been tested and proven sound. But, given the nature of the equipment, the only true test of the entire assembly would be in the journey itself. It would either work, or it would not.

With all pre-flight checks complete, and the crew reporting readiness, the Odyssey gently lifted from the deck in the portside hangar bay and smoothly eased itself away from the Avenger. Using its thrusters, the shuttle proceeded to a point approximately 1,500 kilometers aft of the ship and held station there. Lieutenant Rigoni sent a message to the Avenger, saying, simply, "We're ready." Then, he double-checked to be sure that the shuttle was directly behind the portside bay and powered down all the on-board systems.

On the Avenger's bridge, Rosenzweig touched his chair-arm intercom switch. "Engineering. Mr. Padovan, are we ready?"

"Aye, sir," came Padovan's response. "We are."

"Very good. Feed power to the emitter."

"Yes, sir."

In the depressurized hangar bay, the large projector that the engineering crews had set up began to glow. A moment later, the power beam reached outward to the shuttle. Aboard the Odyssey, indicators jumped upward.

"We're receiving power," reported Ensign Crenshaw.

"Everything's going by the numbers so far."

"Not quite," Rappa interjected.

"What's wrong?" Rigoni asked, concentrating on his displays.

"The temperature is still too high," explained Rappa. "We need to lower it if we are going to make this work."

"I can't turn anything else off," answered Rigoni, unless you want me to kill life-support."

"Not the best of ideas," commented Reilly, speaking for the first time since they'd begun the operation.

"No," agreed Rappa. He paused for a moment, thinking. Then he looked back at Rigoni. "What if we opened all the external equipment hatches? Exposed all the systems to space? That should bring the temperature down."

"Will it be enough?" asked Kozek.

"I don't know," Rappa answered, "but it's the only chance there is that this is gonna work."

"We'll try it," said Rigoni. He tapped a switch on his console. On the outside of the shuttle, a series of hatches flipped open. Rigoni's displays abruptly read a drop in the temperature of the shuttle's systems. "It's working," he reported.

Rappa sat down in his seat. Turning toward the others, he warned, "Get a firm grip. As soon as the temperature drops enough, the cascade reaction will start. About half a second later, the shuttle will go into the time warp." The others acknowledged the instructions, and they activated their seat restraints.

On the bridge of the Avenger, Lt. Commander Ciufo had focused the main viewer on the shuttlecraft. The small craft now occupied a position directly in the center of the viewer. The hexagonal ring-shaped structure mounted on the outside of the shuttle, what Rappa had described as a sort of temporal waveguide, was glowing. As the energy beam contacted the shuttle's receiver array, energy began cycling through the ring, speeding around it faster and faster. To keep the temperature of the systems down, Rigoni had switched off all the external lights, leaving the shuttle in darkness. But now, the glow from the ring washed over the craft, illuminating the vehicle. No one spoke as they watched the glow increase, the shuttle's identification markings standing out against the white hull.

Abruptly, a brilliant flash of nearly pure white light flooded over and seemed to consume the shuttle, which appeared to stretch and then shrink, seemingly drawn into a singularity. Then it was gone, leaving only space itself, placid and undisturbed.

For a long moment, there was only silence on the bridge. Then, Lieutenant J.G. Sanar, who had been on the bridge to observe the departure, spoke. "Fascinating."

Maldonado shot Rosenzweig an amused look, as if to say, "Typical." Rosenzweig grinned. At least the mission seemed to be off to a good start.

Aboard the *Odyssey*, Lieutenant Rappa had counted down the last five seconds. As he reached zero, a blinding flash seemed to turn everything white. An instant later, everything went black, and every member of the crew was caught up in a feeling of tremendous acceleration. They gripped the arms of their chairs tightly.

A few seconds later, the shuttle burst back into normal space. Gradually, the crew's vision returned, and they saw that the emergency lights had come on in the cabin, glowing redly and imbuing the craft with a slightly hellish appearance.

Ensign Crenshaw spoke into the silence. "Let's do the time warp again," she said, a sly tone in her voice.

Wendy favored her with an unamused stare. A couple of the others looked at her blankly, not getting the reference.

Ensign Kozek was the first to reply. "Lou," he said acerbically, "you've been hanging around Commander Zulkowski too long." Then he winked, taking some of the sting from the comment. Crenshaw smiled a little and shrugged.

"Mr. Kozek," rumbled Lt. Commander rRham, "can you confirm that we have reached the correct point in time?"

Kozek quickly turned to his console. "Umm... Yes, sir. We have."

rRham nodded. "Good." He turned to gaze toward the front of the cabin. "Mr. Rigoni, are we near Veshkam III?" Getting Rigoni's affirmative response, rRham directed him to bring the shuttle into orbit. "Once we are in orbit, begin scanning for Captain Fillmore." Rigoni, Rappa, and Kozek all acknowledged the orders and set to work. "Mr. Rappa," rRham added, "please begin a thorough check of the time-travel equipment."

"Good idea," Rappa noted. He moved aft to look things over.

• • •

Reaching the ground, Bob stood in the shadow of the great plateau. The area was largely arid, with sparse vegetation, and he knew it well, for he had explored every inch within 5 kilometers. He circled around the plateau and on the far side he spotted those windmill-shaped trees he'd always wanted to explore, but which had been just too far away. Sensor scans had told him there was a river there, and that's where he was going to go. It would take days to get there, so he began at a brisk pace and counted his steps to keep his mind busy during the boring walk.

Two days later, he finally reached the river. He couldn't keep from thinking about what he thought he had seen in the sky last night: not a meteor, certainly not a comet, but a misbehaved star to be sure. He wondered if one of the planetary bodies in this system was unstable, or if there was advanced life here after all, but rescuers were the farthest thing from his mind since he had accepted his fate weeks ago. Oh, well, he was finally here. Scans of the water and plant life indicated no apparent danger, so he drank deeply and "grazed". Following the tasteless meal (he never had been fond of salads), he cut down several saplings and lashed together a lean-to for protection.

• • •

The shuttle began its descent toward Veshkam III. A course had been plotted toward the plateau upon which the lab module rested. As they approached, the sensors would hopefully tell them whether Captain Fillmore was still in the lab, or whether he had

gone elsewhere. If he had left, they would have to search for him. It was possible; they had been conservative in their estimates of target time, and it was actually several weeks after Bob's estimated arrival.

Lieutenant Rappa came forward and sat down near rRham and Rigoni. "There's bad news, and good news," he said succinctly.

"The bad news?" asked rRham.

"The bad news is that the temporal flux collimator has been damaged, and the backfeed through the system blew the main power coupling. As long as we keep the drives operating, we're okay, but if we land this craft, it won't be taking off again unless we can replace the coupling."

"How long to install a spare?" rRham questioned.

Rigoni sighed. In his thick Italian accent, he explained, "The time-displacement apparatus took up so much space that there was no room for either spares or a synthesizer. We have...what we have."

"But there is good news," Rappa continued. "I was rereading the report from the first landing party to the lab module. And according to that report, a power coupling was missing from the lab." At first I thought that Captain Fillmore had taken it, but I'm starting to think that maybe *we* took it...or will take it, or..." He paused, looking flustered. "I hate time travel."

"Well," Rigoni responded, "do we take the chance and land?"

"Do we have a choice?" asked Rappa.

"We will land," rRham commanded. The Tzen had realized, too, that landing was the only real chance.

"All right," Rigoni responded. "Everybody back in your seats. Prepare for descent."

The shuttle gently swept into the atmosphere and cruised over the northern continent. Soon, as they overflowed a large rolling plain, they could see the plateau in the distance. Rigoni steered for the plateau and gradually slowed the shuttle, eventually bringing it to a gentle landing less than thirty meters from the laboratory module.

As soon as Rigoni declared the shuttle secure, Wendy released her restraints and hurried for the door. She tapped the control panel next to the hatchway, and the hatch swung open. rRham and the security team followed, with the other crewmembers coming after.

As they approached the lab, they noticed that the doors were closed, but not sealed. The security personnel pried open the doors and entered first, then reported that it was safe.

The lab was empty. A quick review by Ensign Crenshaw confirmed that there was only minimal power left in the lab's equipment. It was Rappa who, looking up, noticed the wires running up to a hole in the ceiling.

"D'you think Captain Fillmore did that?"

"No idea," replied Crenshaw.

"Mr. Loyal," rRham said to one of the security specialists, "see if you can find out where those wires go."

"Aye, sir," said Loyal. He hurried out the door. A few minutes later, rRham's communicator beeped. "Sir, you're not gonna believe this!"

"What is it?" asked rRham.

There was a rap on the ceiling plates. "That's me, Commander. I'm on the roof. Sir, there's a solar array up here. Looks like old-style photovoltaic cells."

Wendy grinned. Stranded he may have been, but Bob's resourcefulness had not failed.

A rapid inspection of the lab revealed the notes that Fillmore had left behind, confirming that he had apparently left the lab sometime before they had arrived. Remembering that those notes would prove to be the key to Bob's rescue some 2,000 years in the future, Rappa ordered everyone to leave them where they were. He resealed the cabinet as it had been before, with the exception of removing all of the air, in the hope of ensuring a better chance of the documents surviving to be found in the future.

"Lieutenant?" It was Ensign Kozek. Rappa turned to face him. "Sir, I've done an inventory of the equipment and materials here. It looks like several items, including a tricorder and a padd, were taken just recently."

"They were noted as missing in the first landing party's report, as well," Rappa replied, "but they couldn't identify when they were removed."

"The dust had probably smoothed out over a couple of millennia," Kozek pointed out. "But here it hasn't redistributed yet. There's noticeably less dust in some equipment slots than in others, suggesting recent removal."

"True enough," Rappa replied. "Good thinking, Ensign."

"Thank you, sir. That, and the blood on the wall is about 2 days old." He grinned.

When the landing party was finished inspecting the lab, rRham ordered them to fan out across the plateau and look for either Captain Fillmore or any evidence of his activities. The exception was Lieutenant Rigoni. His job was to locate the power coupling and get to work on making repairs on the shuttlecraft.

It did not take long for them to find the coupling. Fortunately, it was in good shape. Clutching his prize, Rigoni hurried off to the shuttle to begin repairs. At the top of the list were the boosters and main propulsion units, so that when they found Captain Fillmore, they could actually *get* home.

Although they needed to do the search to be certain, Rappa somehow doubted that, had he been on the plateau, Fillmore would not have seen the shuttlecraft and come running. The Second Officer had to be somewhere else. To determine where, he decided to use the sensor units on the shuttle. Sitting down at the sensor controls, Rappa adjusted the range and resolution. Slowly, he swept the scanners in an arc around the plateau. There was nothing.

"Hmm..." Rappa said.

"Where could he go?" Wendy asked, worry tinging her voice.

"If he's not on the plateau—and it sure looks like he's not—the question becomes, why would he leave it, and where would he go?" The scientist tapped a control, extending the sensors' range. He repeated the sweep. Then he repeated the process, extending the range again.

It took a couple of range extensions, but they soon detected an energy pattern that was distinctly artificial. When Rappa focused the scanners on the energy, it was not long before the computer recognized the pattern as the distinctive signature of a Star Fleet tricorder, operating approximately 100 kilometers west-northwest of their position.

"Gotta be him," declared Rappa, grinning.

Wendy was grinning, as well. "I'll go tell rRham," she said. Excitedly, she dashed out of the shuttlecraft in search of the Tzen Security Chief. Finding him, she told him what she and Rappa had

found. Then, turning in the general direction of the river, she stopped suddenly.

"What is it?" rRham hissed.

Wendy continued slowly, "Those trees... I just noticed that they resemble... windmills!"

"But not unreachable stars," said rRham. He then called the landing party and ordered them back to the shuttlecraft. They would be underway as soon as Rigoni had the repairs completed.

The repairs took several more hours. Rigoni worked as quickly as he could, but there was only so fast he could push some of the procedures. Wendy tried to be patient, but the wait was clearly wearing on her, especially with Bob so close. At the scales on which Star Fleet officers were used to working, 100 kilometers was but a stone's throw, yet it was still not quite close enough to travel without the aid of a vehicle. And Rigoni was emphatic that the work he was doing could not be rushed. If it wasn't done right, he explained, the shuttle might crash on the way to the river, quite possibly destroying any possibility they had of rescuing Captain Fillmore *or* getting home.

After a while, realizing that she wasn't accomplishing anything by staring over Rigoni's shoulder, Wendy went outside. As she stood near the *Odyssey's* hatch, Lieutenant J.G. Reilly and Lt. Commander rRham hurried over to her. They held out several leaf samples that they had found.

"Doctor," Reilly said, "we've been trying to determine if any of these plants might have useful medicinal properties. Some of the readings suggest they might."

"Let's take a look," Wendy said. She bent to scrutinize the leaves, and Reilly and rRham traded glances. "Hand me the tricorder," Wendy requested. Reilly complied. Wendy did a pass over the leaves, then shook her head. "Not this one." She tossed the first leaf away. Then she started studying the second.

After a while, both Reilly and rRham could tell that Wendy's heart just wasn't in it. She was going through the motions of analyzing the plants, but her mind was still very much on how much longer it would take to complete the repairs on the shuttlecraft.

Finally, Rigoni emerged in the shuttlecraft's hatchway. "The job's done!" he announced. "We can now fly safely."

Wendy dropped the leaves she was holding and bolted for the shuttle. rRham opened his communicator "This is rRham to all personnel. Return to the shuttlecraft. We will be leaving as soon as all are aboard."

It took only a few minutes for everyone to get back to the shuttle. As the last of the crew climbed aboard, the hatch was sealed.

"Everyone strap in," instructed Rigoni. He switched on the main power system and ran a series of diagnostics. All the lights were green and blue, as they should be. Rigoni smiled. "Shall we go?" he asked.

"Go," rRham ordered.

The pilot smiled and touched controls. Smoothly, the *Odyssey* lifted from the plateau and swung around to face toward the river. Steadily, it picked up speed, and flew toward its destination.

•••

Building a lean-to was more work than the simulators on which Bob had trained led him to believe, or so it seemed. Sitting in his newly-constructed shelter, he sampled more of the local

flora. Then he heard a rustling in the brush beyond his campsite. He instinctively grabbed his tricorder and followed the sound. He soon came upon a small humanoid, 70 to 80 centimeters tall, vaguely resembling a Terran chimpanzee or Vegan qaat, but appearing to be more evolutionarily advanced. Since this was the first sign of advanced life he'd seen on this heretofore desolate planet, he took detailed readings. Soon, he began to frown into the tricorder. His readings indicated that this creature was ill. Very ill. He surmised that it probably wouldn't see the sun rise tomorrow. "Poor thing," he thought. Shifting his weight onto his left foot caused a twig to snap, and the creature noticed him. It attempted to run away, but Bob was able to follow it without any trouble.

After traveling less than a kilometer, Bob followed the creature into a village nestled among the trees. He abruptly stopped and stared. Images of ancient Earth newsreels of bombed villages came to mind as he looked about at the dead and dying. The humanoids had noticed him, but most seemed too sick to care, and the others were too busy to care. Thinking that he might be able to help, he entered the village. At first, the humanoids drew back in fear of him and his beeping box, but he was gradually able to empathically communicate that he was trying to help.

Bob began compiling readings on the sickest humanoids that were still alive, and discovered that their bane appeared to be a variant of the rhinovirus; the "common cold", as it were. Intrigued as to how such a simple thing could cause such destruction to life, he began taking extensive readings of the surroundings: plants, other animals, food stored in the village... He quickly came to a horrible conclusion. His readings seemed to indicate that this virus had not existed on this planet 6 weeks ago. He had introduced it to this planet. He was responsible for the annihilation of these creatures! Not with a weapon, and not with purpose, but with carelessness. He was usually careful in his experiments; maybe a little rash at times, but that's how great discoveries were often made. But now, this changed everything. He continued to try to help ease the suffering of the little humanoids, but concluded that he was only making things worse by remaining here and spreading the germ. The only hope these creatures had was for him to leave them alone and hope that their own immune systems could fight back, though his readings did not indicate that possibility as likely. Mentally exhausted, and with the extreme weight of this evidence upon his shoulders, he slunk back to his refuge in the lean-to.

Bob found himself making a rut by pacing back and forth, beating himself up for never having considered a collateral effect of time travel: to be able to unwittingly destroy entire civilizations with no more than simply appearing on the scene! It was almost unbelievable. But, here in his tricorder, and out there in the woods was the proof of that theorem. And what of the future? Had his presence here, his affecting of these creatures, adversely affected the future? How could he tell? How would he know? How... He could no longer ponder these questions with the cold objective eye of a scientist; he dropped to his knees, and sobbed into his hands.

After a while, his sobs ended, and he raised his head. "Well, enough of that," he thought. "Grieving will not bring these humanoids back to health, but perhaps I can find an answer." He went to the river to clean up, and caught a glimpse of his reflection for the first time since he'd been here. What a sight! What would rRham think to see an officer of the line in such disarray! Laughing to himself, then out loud, he almost didn't hear it at first. But the sound

grew louder still, and he suddenly realized that a shuttle was approaching! He did the best he could to tidy up in 2 seconds or less and bolted in the direction of the sound.

Odyssey glided to a stop and landed near the river. Almost instantly, the crew emerged and began scanning in every direction, calling Bob's name. Mere moments later, a quite disheveled Second Officer came racing out of the forest toward the shuttle.

"Bob!" Wendy almost screamed his name, and they caught each other up in a passionate embrace, the fear each had of losing the other now stilled. "Tears?" Wendy asked, gazing at her husband through tear-filled eyes herself.

"Only for you, my sweet," he responded.

rRham, not quite sure what to do with this display, simply waited silently. The rest of the crew busied themselves taking readings.

Even as they broke their embrace, Wendy saw a shadow of something in Bob's eyes, something dark amidst the joy of seeing her again. But she was not certain of what it was, and was too caught up in her own emotions to pursue it.

Regaining his composure, Captain Fillmore greeted each officer, and asked rRham for a report. rRham efficiently filled him in on the details, and recommended some samples be gathered for study. "No time," Bob urged. "Data I collected during my experiments suggested that the more quickly two temporal incursions occur relative to one another, the greater the probability that a transit through time will be successful." He was thrilled that they were able to recreate the effect that had brought him here in order to rescue him, and that they were able to control it! "Besides, I've got to see this puppy in action!"

rRham wondered where they would get a young canine, but had agreed that they should leave as soon as possible when Ensign Kozak came running over with a report. "Sirs, I seem to be getting a reading that could suggest a higher life-form, about one kilometer into the woods." Everyone else seemed eager to leave, so rRham told him to log it and board the shuttle.

• • •

The landing party got aboard, and the hatch was sealed. "Strap yourselves in," Rigoni commanded. As soon as his display showed that all the restraints were active, the pilot engaged the boosters. Gently at first, then with increasing speed, the Odyssey lifted from the surface and accelerated into the sky. Rigoni glanced over his shoulder at the others. "We'll hit orbit in a few minutes," he commented.

"Very good, Lieutenant," rRham responded.

A few seats back, Fillmore and Rappa were deep in discussion of the temporal displacement apparatus, while Wendy sat holding Bob's hand, their fingers intertwined. Bob was quizzing Rappa on every detail of what they had done and how they had arrived at the decision to bring the shuttlecraft back in time.

"You have to realize, Bob," Rappa was saying, "a lot of this is a crapshoot. We had to guess."

"Didn't you field-test?" Bob questioned.

"Our trip back here *was* the field test," Rappa told him.

"You mean all these people...?" Bob's voice trailed off.

"Yes, dear," Wendy said gently. "Don't forget it." Bob said nothing for a moment, but just put his arms around his wife.

Rappa waited for a moment, then continued. "We're still not sure if we're going to make it back. But we think we can."

"What are the problems?" Bob wanted to know.

"Two big ones," Rappa explained. "First, the device, as you know, is very affected by the temperature of its environment. Every time there's a thermal shift, we have to either compensate for it or recalculate the temporal coordinates. And if it's not cold enough, we won't go anywhere. We had to turn off all the on-board systems to engage the temporal equipment to come back here." He paused, then continued. "Second, on the first trip, we were being fed power from the Avenger. This time, we're on our own. Either we stored up enough in the batteries, and they held it, or we're stranded and square-oned, and we'll have to either find some energy source here or set up housekeeping."

The Second Officer looked at his wife, and then at Rappa, for a long moment. "Is there any choice but to try?" he asked directly.

"No," said Wendy. Rappa nodded his agreement.

Lieutenant Rigoni led them through the pre-launch checklist. Bob and Rappa assisted with the temporal equipment. When all three men were satisfied that all systems were ready, Rigoni moved the shuttle out of low planetary orbit. Positioning the craft a distance of several planetary diameters out, he again opened all the outside equipment hatch covers. Turning to Rappa, he nodded. "We're as ready as we're going to be."

Rappa strapped himself in and looked over his shoulder. "Everyone strapped in?" Getting affirmative responses, he reached out and threw the switch on the temporal equipment's control panel. He looked around one more time, catching the eye of each member of the crew. Then he turned back to his panel.

As he had before, Rappa counted down the last five seconds. As before, there was a blinding flash, then inky blackness and the feeling of acceleration. This time, though, there was a huge jolt and the sound of an explosion. Grabbing at their armrests, the crew felt the shuttle begin to shake. At the pilot's console, Rigoni struggled with himself; his instinct was to try and steady the craft, but until the time-jump was complete, there was nothing he could do. The thrusters and standard engines would have no effect until the craft had returned to normal space.

...

Abruptly, a brilliant flash of nearly pure white light flooded over and seemed to consume the shuttle, which appeared to stretch and then shrink, seemingly drawn into a singularity. Then it was gone, leaving only space itself, placid and undisturbed.

For a long moment, there was only silence on the bridge. Then, Lieutenant J.G. Sanar, who had been on the bridge to observe the departure, spoke. "Fascinating."

Maldonado shot Rosenzweig an amused look, as if to say, "Typical." Rosenzweig grinned.

A moment later, there was another flash of light, and the shuttle was back, re-emerging into normal space. In contrast to its controlled departure, though, this time it burst into existence and blazed away from the singularity, flying at high speed, tumbling and clearly out of control. A second later, the stunned bridge crew realized that the shuttle was heading straight for the Avenger.

Alex reacted instinctively, command reflexes cutting in far faster than he could have acted if he'd had to actually think about

it. "Evasive maneuvers!" he ordered. Lieutenant Ragin complied immediately, and the Avenger darted out of the way. Still tumbling, the Odyssey whipped past the ship.

Before the bridge crew had more than an instant to react to the near-miss, Lt. Commander Ciufu reacted to a course-projection that had appeared on one of his Sciences viewers. "Admiral! They're on a direct heading for the moon!"

Veshkam III's moon was perhaps the size of Phobos, the larger moon of Mars. It wasn't all that big as moons went, and was probably little more than a stray asteroid which had been caught up in the planet's gravity-well. Still, it was plenty large enough to make a serious mess of the Odyssey, if the shuttle were to hit it. At the rate it was going, they had only a few minutes to head off that eventuality.

Again, Rosenzweig reacted. "Helm, pursue and overtake the shuttle. Get a tractor beam on it as soon as we're in range."

The Avenger gave chase. Ahead of them, they could see the Odyssey's thrusters firing intermittently, as if someone on board were trying to regain control. That was good news; at least there was someone alive on the craft.

"I'm picking up ten life-form readings on board," Augie reported from the Sciences station.

Captain Maldonado looked up. "They left with **nine**. He grinned. "I guess they got Bob back."

Alex nodded, his eyes still locked onto the main viewer image of the tumbling shuttle and the moon beyond. "All be for nought if they go splat on that moon," he replied tightly. He glanced at both Lieutenants Ragin and Bradley, intent on their task of pursuing and grabbing the shuttlecraft.

Aboard the shuttle, Rigoni struggled with the controls. The thrusters obediently fired when he hit the right switches, but they weren't having enough effect. If he had more time, he was sure he could get the craft stabilized, but the time wasn't there. They could all see the moon flashing past through the forward viewport, and growing larger each time it crossed their field of view. The pilot could feel the eyes of the crew on him, but as good as he was—and he **knew** he was good—he realized that there were still limits, and he might not be able to save them.

Rappa looked up from his sensor panel and said, "The Avenger's coming after us."

"Let's hope they can catch us," Rigoni answered. "We don't have enough power to recover ourselves." Despite the finality of his declaration, he continued his struggle with the controls, as if hoping that one thruster-burst in the right direction might just do the job.

On the Avenger's bridge, the crew watched as the moon grew steadily on the main viewer. In his head, Alex began calculating trajectories for escape so that, with or without the shuttle, the ship itself wouldn't end up a mass of wreckage on the moon's surface. He hoped sincerely it wouldn't come to that.

Abruptly, Lieutenant Bradley let out a cry of victory. "Yes!" He stabbed at his controls, and a tractor beam leapt out from the ship and seized the shuttle.

Ragin was ready. As soon as Bradley nodded, confirming a positive tractor lock, she engaged the impulse engines, shearing off and pulling the shuttle with the Avenger, away from impending

doom. As the moon fell away on the main viewer, the bridge crew seemed to let out a collective sigh of relief.

Rosenzweig turned toward the Mission Ops station. "Get that shuttle aboard," he ordered.

Carefully, the Odyssey was guided into the portside hangar bay and brought to a gentle stop. As soon as the outer door had slid closed, Dr. Urbanavage and her medical team dashed into the bay and raced to the side of the shuttle. Donna hit the switch on the side of the hatch and waited as the doors slid open. Then she climbed inside.

"Nice to see you, Doctor," Rappa said.

Urbanavage glanced quickly around at the shuttle's crew. They seemed okay, although somewhat shaken up by their harrowing return-trip. Even Bob looked in good health, although the toll of his long stay in the past could be seen in the expression on his face. Urbanavage, Dr. Gifford, and Ensign Simons quickly checked the crew over, and found them in good health.

"I want you in sickbay for a more thorough check, though," she told Bob. For once, he gave no argument.

The medical team ushered the shuttle's crew out of the craft so the flight crew could finish securing the vehicle. Rigoni stayed to oversee the recovery of all the appropriate flight and sensor logs, and then he, too, would go get some rest.

Donna, reaching the side of the bay, tapped the control on a wall-mounted comm-panel. "Urbanavage to bridge."

"Bridge here, Doctor."

"We've done a quick check of the shuttle's crew. All seem fine. I've ordered Captain Fillmore to sickbay for a more thorough checkup."

Rosenzweig's voice came on. "Thank you, Doctor."

Just as Urbanavage was signing off, an alarm sounded at the Sciences station on the bridge. The Admiral spun to face the Science Officer. Ciufo scrutinized the sensor readout. "Detecting a Romulan warbird coming into this sector." He looked up. "I'm pretty sure they haven't detected us yet, but if they haven't, it won't stay that way for long."

"Well, we have everyone back," Maldonado said. "There's no reason to stay, is there?"

"Nope," Rosenzweig agreed. He swiveled forward. "Mr. Bradley, plot us a course back to Federation territory. Ms. Ragin, as soon as you have the course, warp factor nine."

Both Ragin and Bradley acknowledged, and within moments the Avenger made a tight orbit around Veshkam III and arrowed out of the system. As soon as they were comfortably out of the planet's gravity-well, the ship leapt to warp and fled the Neutral Zone.

• • •

"Second Officer's Log, Stardate 9711.02:

All the recorded and observed data have been filed with Star Fleet Sciences, along with my conclusions and a recommendation for the next phase. I will decide on how to proceed here on Avenger after a two-week sabbatical. Star Fleet appears very interested in the results, and I look forward to their reply. End."

"Personal Log:

It is said that fortune smiles upon the foolish, and this is certainly true here... I must remember to personally thank each member of the crew who risked everything in rescuing me. I had never planned on the experiment actually working; certainly hadn't planned on that helium valve sticking open! I'm also finding it difficult to clear the images of the humanoids I discovered from my mind. It really bugs the hell out of me, and I just don't know how to deal with this situation. I simply cannot let it go, even though it was two millennia ago. I have not included this event in my official report, but may decide to amend that report after I figure out how to deal with it. I keep going over it again and again, but am at a loss for any way to make amends. If I had only been more carefull... Ahh... End recording."

Realizing that he was pacing around his office again, Fillmore decided that it had come time to talk about what had preyed upon his mind. Fighting with himself about it was getting him nowhere. "Fillmore to Admiral Rosenzweig."

"Rosenzweig here. Go ahead."

Bob heard lots of background noise. "Um, are you alone?"

"Actually, no. I'm on the Rec Deck with several of your... admirers. They have many questions. Care to join us?"

"On my way." Not what he'd had in mind, but he'd have an opportunity to talk with Alex later.

Bob met Wendy in Sickbay. He told her about the admiral's "request" and asked her to join him. As they entered the Rec Deck, Bob was immediately greeted by many of the crew. He smiled and thanked them as he and Wendy crossed the room to sit in a conversation-pit with Alex and some of the other officers. Even as he settled himself, Bob continued to deal with the questions from officers and crew alike, of, "What was it like?" and "How do you feel?" He was trying to be polite, but it soon was clear that there were aspects of his experience about which he simply was not ready to talk. Finally, Bob was asked what the most bizarre aspect of being trapped in the past had been.

He paused for a moment, considering. Then he spoke. "Well, after about two weeks, I was getting a bit stir-crazy, so I switched the lab's longest-range detectors back on, hoping against hope that I would find the Avenger coming to get me. After about a day, I was alerted by an alarm. I hurried to a monitor screen, and observed the gravimetric signatures of 5-7 large ships moving at just sub-relativistic speed. They didn't stay in the detectors' limited range for very long, but in the time they did, I got enough information to guess that they were headed roughly in the direction of the Romulan homeworlds. Unfortunately, I had nothing powerful enough to punch a signal far enough to get their attention. It was the greatest of luck that they were as large as they were, else the sensors would never have seen them. Equally unfortunate, all of the recorders had been switched off, and the ships were gone before I could get them turned on, so no record remained of the sighting."

Alex looked at him, thunderstruck. Several of the others sitting or standing nearby, either looked shocked themselves, or saw the admiral's expression and caught on to the fact that there was something important happening here.

"I just hope," Bob went on, "that whoever they are, they didn't get into too much trouble with the Romulans."

"Bob..." began Alex. He paused. "Do you know what you saw...?" At Bob's look of confusion, the admiral went on. "I don't think those ships had any trouble with the Rihannsu." Bob still looked confused, and Alex continued to explain. "You see, they were the Rihannsu...on their way from Vulcan."

"You mean, those were S'task and his followers...?" Bob's voice trailed off.

"You, my friend, are witness to history," Alex told him. Bob sat back and smiled.

Later, Fillmore and Rosenzweig adjourned to the Commanding Officer's ready room. Bob had asked to speak with Alex privately, and his friend, seeing that something was on the Second Officer's mind, agreed.

Bob eyed Alex suspiciously as the admiral took a bottle of blue liquid and two glasses out of his cabinet. "Rank has its privileges," Alex commented, cracking a wry smile.

"Indeed," Bob quipped.

As Alex poured the Ale, Bob began to fill him in on what had been troubling him.

Twenty some-odd minutes later, Bob concluded the tale to an amazed admiral.

"So, Augie's theory of a lost civilization was right."

"Yes." Bob shook his head. "And they are lost because of me."

"I can see this has you upset, which is no mean feat, I might add." Bob shot him a look as he continued. "On the other hand, if there's anything that will phase a person, believing that one has destroyed a civilization is likely to do it."

"Look," Alex continued. "Let me try to put things in perspective. You could not possibly have known what would happen."

"No! You were a scientist once, too. You know that we are responsible for all of the effects of our experiments! And I must openly accept responsibility for *my* experiment."

"That's fine," Alex replied, "but there's no way to prove that you actually had anything at all to do with the demise of that civilization. There's no need for it to leave this room."

"Yes, well, that's not all that's got me stirred up." Alex had never seen Bob look so serious. "Now, I've been in tight spots before, but I have never before been marooned and isolated from all I've known, with my rescue balanced solely on an unpredictable, experimental technology and the fact that my crewmates violated orders and took severe risks for me. And there is another difference, one I had to come to terms with during those 5 weeks on that planet: whether I live or die now not only affects my own future, but Wendy's, too. If I die, I leave a widow, and that thought scared me far more than just my own death."

"So what will you do?" asked Alex, concern etched across his countenance.

"Well, it seems that Star Fleet isn't the only group interested in my brain. Cambridge University, on Earth, has offered me a prestigious post as Dean of Temporal Studies. I would be the only man alive in such an esteemed position who has actually traveled in time, more than once, and am therefore a 'hot commodity', as it were." He paused to let his words sink in, then continued. "Also, there are limits to the kind of research I can continue to do on

Avenger, or even in Star Fleet. I cannot continually endanger the ship, and Fleet HQ is already concerned enough about 'maverick' researchers. No one appears to be able to tell me exactly why Star Fleet Command is weirded out by temporal research, but they are. Even if Star Fleet were fully cooperative, I also know that as one man, I can only do so much. But as a teacher, I can train classfulls of potential temporal researchers, and as a Dean, I can influence how the academic community, at least, deals with this issue in ways I never could from within 'the military'."

Alex nodded in understanding. Still, he didn't want Bob making any hasty decisions. He leaned forward slightly and said, "Well, give it some time before you decide, if that's possible. You are a great Second Officer and an asset to the Fleet, and it would be a profound loss if you were to leave."

Bob nodded in acknowledgement of the compliment.

"Let me make one suggestion, though," Alex continued. "If you do choose to accept the deanship, take an extended leave from Star Fleet, rather than retiring. This would still give you some 'pull' inside the Fleet, too."

Bob paused thoughtfully for a moment, then agreed.

With that, Alex again looked at Bob, lifted his glass, said, "To friends no longer absent...", and drank. Bob smiled and drank as well.

Alex then put his glass down. "Oh, there's one other thing to consider..." He had a devilish look in his eye as he continued. "As you think about all of this, you may also want to keep this in mind." Alex handed Bob an official-looking envelope from Star Fleet Headquarters. "Uh, oh," Bob thought as he opened it and stared at the contents.

"Well, you are just full of emotions today," Alex prodded, watching Bob's expression.

Bob read the beginning of the letter: "TO: Admiral Alex Rosenzweig, Commanding U.S.S. Avenger. Re: Promotion of Captain Robert Fillmore, Jr. to Fleet Captain." He trailed off and looked up at Alex. "Hey, that's fighting dirty!" he said, with the widest grin Alex had ever seen on his face.

"Of course, Fleet Captain." Alex smiled back.

...

In November of 2296, Commander Wendy Fillmore learned that she was pregnant. It wasn't a complete surprise; she and Bob had been wanting to have a child for some time, and in the wake of Bob's experience on Veshkam III, "now" seemed like a particularly *good* time. Regulations were specific about children, though: a starship was not the place to raise a child. In the case of a married couple on board a ship, if a partner became pregnant, either that partner or both partners (in races which had two genders, at least) had to be transferred to ground assignments. Wendy and Dr. Urbanavage informed Admiral Rosenzweig, and plans were set in motion for Wendy's transfer.

Making some inquiries, Rosenzweig learned of an upcoming opening in the Star Fleet Publications Office, located at Star Fleet Headquarters, on Earth. Wendy had been doing more and more of an information-control nature in recent months, even on board ship, so this seemed like a natural progression for her, and Alex brought her the information. As he'd suspected, she was very happy with the idea, and Alex began making the contacts necessary to set the transfer up.

Meanwhile, Bob had continued to mull over the offer from Cambridge. Wendy's pregnancy was, he thought, a signal. It was time. He went to Alex and served notice that, barring any Federation-wide crisis, when Wendy transferred to Earth, he would request extended leave and accept the Deanship. Regretfully, Alex accepted the resignation, which would, if all the transfer plans went on schedule, be effective in early February of 2297. In the meantime, Rosenzweig, Fillmore, and Captain Maldonado—himself freshly back from his own honeymoon—began reviewing officers' records in order to select a new Second Officer for the Avenger.

By the end of December, Commander Frank Warren, Jr. had been chosen for the position. It had not been an easy choice. A number of fine officers, both from Avenger's crew and from elsewhere, had been reviewed, and Warren's long experience had finally won out. With the selection made, Fillmore began the process of training Warren to step into the position.

When February came, the Avenger returned to the Sol System to drop the Fillmores off. It was a bittersweet time, as such times often are when friends go their separate ways, and the Fillmores had been a part of the Avenger's "family" for many years. On their last night aboard, Commander Maldonado and the rest of the Recreation staff threw a huge party, a combination honorarium, baby shower, and farewell bash. It was held on the Rec Deck, and Chaym and her people truly outdid themselves, creating one of the best parties the Avenger had seen in a long time...and the Avenger Rec crew knew how to throw good parties.

All too soon, though, it was over. Wendy was tired; pregnancy had tended to sap her energy, and staying up 'til way into Delta Shift was generally not something she did if she could avoid it. Most of the rest of the crew had scattered off either to bed or back to duty, and soon only Carlos, Bob, Wendy, and Alex remained, and Wendy was preparing to go to bed. Chaym was off directing the cleanup, but she'd promised to stop back before the Fillmores left.

"Well," Alex said, "the last party for you two...at least with us, for a while."

"Yeah," Bob replied.

"I bet the parties you'll find at Cambridge won't be anything like this," quipped Carlos.

"I bet you're right. I think I'm looking forward to academic parties." Fillmore smiled. His tastes generally tended to run to the more conservative in his partying, and sometimes didn't mesh well with the slightly whackier side that sometimes came out when the Avenger crew cut loose.

"And you're going to get to study a lot of the kind of phenomena that there just isn't opportunity to get into here," the exec noted.

As Bob nodded, Wendy interjected, "But no more unannounced experimentation! I think that Cambridge would be very upset if you took their temporal physics building on some journey." She paused, then continued meaningfully, "Not to mention me."

"I know, Captain," Bob replied, using the new rank to which Wendy had just been promoted. "I promise that I'll be careful." Once again, Wendy saw that momentary flash of something dark and haunted in her husband's eyes, and she wondered what had happened on Veshkam III that had left such a mark on Bob. One day, maybe, he would be ready to talk about it. But even now, he

kept it deep inside. Wendy wondered if he'd even spoken to any of the psychologists about it.

"I know you will, dear," she said softly, and smiled lovingly at him.

Alex's gaze was warm at both of them as he watched the byplay. He knew enough to see the significance in what had transpired, but felt no need to point it out. "I've little doubt," he said, "that the future will hold its own wonders and challenges for both of you. I hope that, down the road a-piece, it might even bring you back to serve with us again."

"Maybe," Wendy said, but she did not elaborate, and Alex didn't press.

Then Chaym bounded over and flopped onto a seat next to Carlos. "Well, that's under control, at least. Mitzi and Paul are finishing the cleanup, and Leakala is putting the rest of the supplies away." She looked at Bob and Wendy, her eyes wide. "So, did you like it?"

"Yes," Wendy said with a grin. Bob smiled agreement. It might not have been his style completely, but he certainly appreciated how much everyone cared about the both of them.

"Good," Chaym said. "We're going to miss you."

"We'll miss you, too, Chaym."

"And you have to tell me everything about how things go with the baby."

"I will. Don't worry." Abruptly, Wendy yawned. Her eyes widened and she snapped her mouth shut. "Dangit, I was trying not to do that."

"It's okay," Alex said. "It is late." He stood up. "I'm going to do a quick check-in on the bridge, and then I'm going to grab some sleep, myself. Bob, Wendy, I'll see you in the morning for the send-off."

"Good," said Wendy. "'Night, Alex." Bob echoed her.

"Good night, folks." Alex nodded to Carlos and Chaym, as well, and walked toward the doors.

The next morning, most of the Avenger's senior staff met Bob and Wendy in Transporter Room 1. It was a tearful farewell, a mix of melancholy at the separation of good friends after so long, and hopefulness as both the Fillmores and the Avenger's crew moved forward on the paths of their lives. Because Bob had appointments at Cambridge that afternoon, he and Wendy were on a tight schedule, and they could not dally, so Alex and the others made their farewells as brief as they could. After the obligatory hugs, promises to stay in touch, and best wishes, the couple walked onto the platform.

The admiral turned to Ensign Csordos, who stood at the console in the operator's booth. "Energize when ready, Ensign."

"Aye, sir." As Csordos worked the controls, a hum filled the room as the equipment activated.

Alex turned back toward the platform and faced the Fillmores. As the power built up, he abruptly came to attention and raised his arm in salute, still Academy-perfect after many years. Wendy smiled and nodded, and then Bob did the unexpected. He came to attention himself and returned the salute, every bit as crisply. And at that moment, the beam engaged, and Bob and Wendy vanished, the columns of sparkle taking them and carrying them to the surface.

Alex brought his hand down, took one more look at the now-empty platform, and turned back to the other assembled officers.

"Well," he said, "time to get back to work. We have new orders coming in shortly." And the group left the transporter room.

There wasn't much time for introspection, for as Rosenzweig had known, new orders came through within the hour, ordering the Avenger back out to the frontier to join an exploration flotilla on a mapping-and-survey run through a newly-opened outer sector.

Back on the bridge, Alex reviewed the reports showing that the ship was fully ready. Ensign Szorentini had plotted their course out from Sol System, and Ensign Fernandez was ready to bring the impulse engines on-line.

The commanding officer glanced toward the Communications station, where Lt. Commander Rhea was listening to their instructions from Earth Orbital Traffic Control. After a moment, she nodded. "We're cleared to depart, sir."

"Thank you, Commander," Rosenzweig said. He turned forward again. "Ms. Fernandez, take us out."

As Earth fell away on the viewer, Alex looked at Captain Maldonado and Commander Warren, who stood near the center seat. He smiled slightly, and said, "Y'know, every once in a while I'm caught up short by the changes when they happen."

"How so, Alex?" asked Frank.

"Well, Bob had been aboard Avenger for over 10 years. Wendy was with us nearly as long."

"We've had a lot of officers who have stayed for a long time," Carlos noted.

"Yup," Alex said with a grin, knowing of course that both Carlos and Frank had spent a long time on the ship, too. "Still, it's going to take some getting used to, not having Bob and Wendy here. They will be missed..."

FINIS