

TRIP FOR TWO

By John Abbott

"Personal Log, Stardate 9108.15:

Preparations are nearly complete for the *Avenger's* time trip to the late 20th century, where we will conduct a number of studies, ranging from socio-economic to a look at popular culture.

While time travel technically is nothing new--warp drive is transversing time on a different scale--we are still adjusting to the myriad of issues associated with taking a firsthand look at the past. Ironically, Star Fleet rejected Admiral Rosenzweig's argument that an unmanned probe would be safer, not to mention more cost-effective, deciding that it was less risky to send a fully-crewed starship with its satchel of advanced technology into the past than to risk probe failure, thus landing three hundred years' of fancy widgets into the wrong hands. In other words, better that we fall into the wrong hands, where we would be in better position to straighten out any bollixes involving the Prime Directive than if, say, the matter and antimatter from the warp unit in the probe should accidentally combine and cook, for example, Cleveland.

Though my confidence in the crew with whom I have served for three years is solid, time is a tricky thing. We know what we know, based on other crews' experiences, and we're as ready as we'll ever be, but what if there's something we don't know?

Well, that comes from being human. Good news is that my good friend Lt. Commander Stephen Buonocore, a.k.a. "Bones," is temporarily back at his old post at the helm exclusively for this mission..."

"I wanted to prove to you once and for all that I **can** steer," Bones cracked to me while I ran my navigation diagnostics. I sipped coffee between computer acknowledgements and winked at my friend. The affectionate joke was as old as the day we both first sat down at the control console and simultaneously shot Captain Lane a look that said, I have to work with this guy?

"You're just getting lonely pushing kilobytes from one datapad to another," I chuckled, glancing around the *Avenger's* bridge. The first-line staff was there: Admiral Rosenzweig, Captain Lane, Commanders Fillmore and Davila, among others, readying for departure. The bridge lift doors softly swooshed apart and Chief Engineer Mike Shappe strode onto the bridge. Chief Shappe wore his tie-dyed rad suit--his acknowledgement of a special occasion.

"Any time those kiddies at the console think they can get this ship out of Earth orbit without messing up my engines, Captain," Shappe said, glancing our way with a look of mock impatience.

"Thank you, Engineer. Well, folks, we'd better get going before Mr. Shappe leaves without us. All stations, report," ordered Captain Lane. Shappe flashed his famous Cheshire Cat grin, threw a cheerful, exaggerated salute and disappeared into the turbolift to return to Engineering.

I awaited my turn to report, looking at Earth on the viewer. What a lovely world. While I have seen more beautiful planets in the galaxy, there was something special about my home planet. I had hoped to take a date whalewatching; as the repopulation program had progressed, that ancient pastime was revived, but the tours were sold out and there was no time before I had to return from leave--

"I said, 'Mr. Abbott'?"

"Oh, sorry, Captain. Diagnostics complete. Navigation shows all green. Next stop, right where we are, give or take three hundred years," I said. Lane nodded approval, then obtained reports from the other department chiefs, from Dr. Romano in Sickbay, to Lt. Commander DiMaio on standby in the chemistry lab, to the shuttlecraft bay crews.

Star Fleet signaled us clear for departure, and we blinked our running lights at our escorts, the *Duane* and the *Bonanno*, and Earth shrank to a blue-white dot as we sped away at three-quarters impulse speed.

Our plan was to clear the system, then make a leap at the sun, slingshotting our way around it to enter the time warp. Ideally, we would emerge close to Earth, circa 1992, old-style calendar.

Ideally.

* * *

Once, over lasagna in the Vulcan tourist quarter, Pavel Chekov tried to describe what it felt like to travel backward in time, the nausea and the powerful, conflicting emotions that gripped him. Pavel's a few years older than me, but at that moment, my friend looked much older.

I thought of Chekov as we banked and the course I had set into the computer kicked in, and the warp engines sang in harmony. The sun seemed to reach for us, as if in retribution for us tampering with nature, and the ship shuddered as the console, the bridge, even myself, seemed to dissolve.

Milky images and echoes blended until they made no sense. Equipped to sort out only so many images at one time, I...

...My first two-wheeled bicycle, pastel green and wow! A bell! Thank you, Daddy!...

..."Hey, Barbara, there's a dance at school next Friday night; I was wondering, um, ah, if you'd--you'd like to go?..."

..."Dear Cadet Abbott. Congratulations. You have been accepted into Star Fleet Academy..."

..."You will report to the *U.S.S. Pontiac* on stardate..."

..."Klingon attack group at 215 mark 9, sir! Plotting evasive...!"...

"...to full Lieutenant, assignment: *U.S.S. Avenger*; Chief Navigator..."

..."I love you, Kate..."

"...almost died on Prodigii IV..."

..."Oh, God, no, Diane, please don't go...!"

..."always hold in your heart...boldly go where no one...no one...has gone..."

My vision refused to clear, until I realized tears were obscuring my sight. I felt drained and dysfunctional. Bones looked like hell. Nor must I have been much of a prize, if I looked half of how I felt.

"Everyone all right?" Admiral Rosenzweig managed to ask. His command tone was evident but even he lacked his usual punch, at first. "Aye, sirs" drifted in as systems, both living and ship's, regained themselves. We had expected this but it still hit us all hard.

"Communications, begin monitoring the old-style broadcast bands," Captain Lane ordered. The officer at the console turned to face him. The effort made her dizzy. She blinked and cleared her head.

"Sir, there's nothing there."

"Screen on," said Lane. The main viewscreen lit. In front of us, as beautiful as ever, was Earth.

"Good steering, Bones. You missed the planet," I jested. Steve's "you s.o.b." grin indicated he was all right. His grin faded as something appeared from the far side of the planet. Even at that distance we all recognized the shape of an *Avenger*-class starship.

"It looks like one of ours. That shouldn't be. It had better **not** be! Sensor scan," Lane ordered. Commander Fillmore bent over his board.

"Sensors are still...recovering, sir."

A moment later a signal on my console showed that the vessel was broadcasting a standard Fleet nav' beacon. I pressed the appropriate controls and the readout appeared. I felt sick.

"Captain. It's more than one of ours. It's--it's" I said.

"It's **what**, Lieutenant?"

I didn't want either the captain or the admiral to think that the time warp still affected me, so I transferred the readout to the screen, which assembled under the oncoming vessel like a caption as the letters on the primary hull became visible:

**U.S.S. AVENGER
NCC-1860**

"What the **hell**...?" someone rhetorically asked.

"Sensors, Mr. Fillmore," Lane quietly ordered. The big science officer turned to his station.

"Scanning...it's--what it appears to be, Captain. A heavy frigate. The readings are normal for, well, the *Avenger*," he reported. Then he stiffened.

"Sensor scan coming in, sir. Whoever they are, they're scanning us, too," Fillmore said.

"Yellow alert. Energize defense fields, activate weapons systems. We'll need some room. Mr. Buonocore, stand by for evasive maneuvers. Mr. Abbott, plot an appropriate course. Engineering...Mr. Shappe, stand by for warp speed. All ready? Very good. Now, let's see if they'll talk."

"Hailing--" began Lane, but he was interrupted by Communications.

"Message coming in sir," she said. Lane and Rosenzweig glanced at one another.

"On screen," said Lane. The mirror image of our ship dissolved into a starship bridge. Even Rosenzweig blinked at what he saw.

"Unidentified' vessel. This is Captain Jonathan Lane of the *U.S.S. Avenger*. Please identify yourself." Lane looked at, well, himself. I instinctively found my eyes searching the picture. There I was. Sitting at the console, right next to Bones. The other "me" must have done the same, because he raised the same skeptical

eyebrow that I often raise. It made me nervous. Lane also must have been, but you don't get to exec a starship by letting your nervousness show.

"Captain Jonathan Lane of the *U.S.S. Avenger*. Believe it or not," he said.

"To be candid, I'm not sure, and I'll bet you feel the same. But our sensor scans have identified you, as I'm certain you have also done," the other captain replied, with the same wry smile.

"Sirs, if I may play a hunch...?" interjected Bones. Both Lane and Rosenzweig nodded, and he addressed the screen.

"Lt. Commander Buonocore. What is today's stardate?" he asked the screen. Heads snapped around, and several faces on both bridges betrayed the theory that Bones had cracked, but I know Stephen too well. My gut said he was right. Lane must have agreed, for his frown grew deeper, and he doubtless had already guessed what had happened.

"Excuse me, but I'm not a lieutenant commander yet, er, sir. But to answer your question, 8808.07," the other Bones replied.

"Oh, no. We haven't gone back three hundred years. We've only gone back **three**. And we've managed to somehow overlap so that we've met up with ourselves--midway through the first five-year mission!" said Rosenzweig. The admiral looked at himself, standing behind the other Lane.

"Your briefing room or ours? We apparently have much to discuss," said the younger admiral.

"Ours. 1430 hours. Rosenzweig out. Department heads, Briefing Room One. Immediately."

* * *

Both *Avengers* were parked just outside of the solar system, having left Earth orbit as fast as possible without attracting attention, lest the planetside authorities learn of our presence. As it was, we knew that the planetary defenses had noticed us, but we were also reasonably confident that the computers would dismiss two *Avengers* as a faulty sensor scan.

In the briefing room, Doctor Illustre was saying, "Ironically, the armchair psychologists have always said that we should take a good, cold, hard look at ourselves from time to time. As individuals, it does us good. Yet if we were not such a serious situation, I'd be tempted to summon every crewmember who'd said that to me since I shipped aboard and suggest that now he or she or it has the perfect opportunity to do so," she remarked. She toyed with the datapadd in front of her before continuing her report.

"But actual confrontation with your complete yet separate self is another story. Each of us who makes contact with our younger selves has to consider a number of issues, the most important of which is to not reveal anything about our personal histories, this vessel or Federation history, however seemingly insignificant. The chance at reliving life for the better and its psychological relief may be fine for the moment, but the far-reaching effects may well be for the worst," she said.

"The Prime Directive on the most intimate of levels," said Captain Lane.

"Exactly. If we let anyone besides the senior officers who already have made contact meet with their counterparts, who knows what damage could result? I recommend quarantine and counseling for senior staff, Admiral," she concluded.

"Sciences report comes down to that we encountered an abnormality in the time continuum that swept us here, instead of the 20th Century. Analyses indicate we must return to our time or to the target time for the mission before we drift out of the

abnormality's influence--or it leaves us," the bearded science officer said.

"Time limit?" asked Lane.

"Unknown," answered Fillmore, looking at Chief Shappe to turn the sticky wicket to him. Our chief engineer looked as serious as I'd ever seen him.

"We'll have full power in about a half-hour. She's ready to go home. And so am I," Shappe said. The intercom whistled.

"Davila to Admiral Rosenzweig. Sir, our 'guests' have arrived in Transporter Room Two."

"Anyone here who isn't certain about taking Doctor Ilustre's close look can leave, without prejudice," said Lane. No one moved. The captain looked at Rosenzweig. The admiral pressed the intercom button.

"All hands, this is the Admiral. Clear the corridors, until I personally sound an all-clear. Rosenzweig to Davila. Bring our...friends...here."

* * *

"You look surprisingly content for three years next to 'Bones,'" my other self teased as we sat opposite each other. Spooky but somehow comfortable.

"He's a damn fine officer, and my best friend," I said, bristling. Did I usually irritate others this way? Before I could ponder the question, "my" Captain Lane interrupted.

"Lieutenant," he sternly said.

"Sorry, sir. I forgot."

"So did I, Captain. It's hard to resist the chance for such an...interesting perspective," my younger self said.

Forgot! How could I, in light of Irma's recommendations? Good gods, even the most innocent mention of any specific event in my last three years--the next three years to the newly-assigned Lieutenant Abbott of the starship *Avenger*--could be catastrophic. Then again, the nearly irresistible temptation to do certain things over; the heartaches I could avoid, the decisions that could be wiser, the toll this life extracts from us all, would make for a better officer and being.

I thought back. Kate. The incident with the Rihannsu on Prodigii IV. Diane. 'Interesting perspective'? Brother, you ain't seen nothing yet. I swallowed and looked at the changeable blue eyes. My eyes. The wonders they would behold, the tears they would yield, and I had to deny it all.

"I think I'm safe in saying 'interesting' is a good word for it," I said. He smiled in reassurance.

"You do look a little peaked, though. I'll take better care of myself," he said.

"You never did before," I said.

"Yeah, I suppose," he said.

"Belay that," said Lane. "let's get to the heart of the matter."

"What's especially puzzling is that none of us recalls this happening. Why?" asked the other Lane.

"Sir, we hypothesized that we--the latter-day *Avenger*--encountered an abnormality in the time continuum that placed us here. The abnormality must still have some influence, since we both are here. Also, there is a chance, indeed, it's likely we succeeded in returning, since none of us recalled this happening," said "our" Fillmore. A younger, heavier and unbearded version sat beside him and nodded.

"It works for me," he said.

"The fact we don't remember this is a good sign--" Fillmore said.

"Or is it a dead end?" the other science officer postulated.

The intercom whistled. "Lane here," both captains replied.

"Captains, Ilustre here. My office is full of crew who want to do everything from talk with themselves, literally, to those who are having difficulties facing the situation. We're doing what we can, but my diagnosis is that we must act fast, or both crews may suffer psychological damage that can likely last even after we get out of this. Assuming we can, sir," Irma's voice said.

"I concur," her second voice added.

"The best we can do is just repeat the time warp," said Fillmore. Chief Shappes, both of them, nodded.

"We're ready," said our Shappe.

"Same here. Nice rad suit," the younger Shappe said.

"Thanks. I have this idea about a paint job--"

"Mr. Shappe!" the admiral rebuked. The other Rosenzweig's eyes crinkled in bemusement.

"Paint job?" he asked.

"You can't know now, and believe me, you wouldn't want to," "our" admiral said.

"Well, people, there's two of each of you to work on this problem, plus the computing power of two *Avengers*. And we are--and obviously will be--one of the best in the Fleet. Let's get to work," ordered the other admiral.

* * *

"Nice setup I'll have here," my counterpart said, seated at the nav console. The bridge looked like an identical twin conference as we prepared to re-enter the time warp. We worked on "our" *Avenger*, being the ship with the newer technology.

"Yeah, it was quite a refit," I said.

"I'll look forward to it."

"Enjoy it while you can. You won't remember it, if Fillmore's first theory is right," I said. I didn't want to consider the second.

"Good point. But unless I've changed, I'll always look forward to what life brings me. Things like relationships--" he hinted. I interrupted him with a laugh.

"Well, I still can drop a hint, but it's the first time I ever did it to myself. Well, Lieutenant, forget it. Just in case," I said, feeling a small twinge in my heart. I swallowed the temptation down and shook my head. It was still hard, though we had acknowledged our mutual presence for two solar days.

"Know thyself," he quoted as the computer chimed completion of its last preparatory task. One by one, our odd couples wrapped up their work.

"Exactly. Now get out of my chair. Yours is a few hundred meters that way. Computer, store both backup and contingency copies of Program Outtatime for online access," I said.

"Acknowledged. Working..."

"I should get back to the *Avenger*," my other self said.

"Yes. It's hard enough getting a date without having you along," I deadpanned as we entered the turbolift and ordered it to the transporter level.

"Sonofagun. Some things never change," he countered as the lift started downward.

"You'll be surprised," I retorted.

In the Transporter Room, our crew stood by as the other *Avenger* crew stood waiting on the transporter pads: Admiral Rosenzweig, Captain Lane, Lieutenant Buonocore, Commander Fillmore, Doctor Ilustre, Chief Shappe.

My other leaned toward and whispered out of the side of his mouth, "In case theory number two proves right, that this is it for you...I'd like to know. What's her first name?"

"You'll know. Trust me," I whispered back as he stepped up to the platform.

"Good luck. Energize," said Rosenzweig to our Shappe, and the others vanished in columns of sparkle.

"Red Alert! First-line staff to the bridge!" barked Lane, and we hustled to the lifts.

As our lift shot upward, Bones looked thoughtful.

"Some experience, wasn't it? I learned a thing or two about myself. I saw the differences. It was strange. I felt like a big brother of some sort. Now I know what it can be like," I said. Bones, who unlike me has siblings, shrugged.

"You're right about the differences. I felt them, too. But..." he trailed off.

"But what, Steve? What happened?"

"Well, it was just a little slip..."

"Stephen!"

"Well, when my other said he wanted to get a cat, I told him to watch the dust from the kitty litter; I developed the allergy--"

"Bones, you violated the Prime Directive!"

"I doubt it--"

"Great. Federation history gets rewritten because of **kitty litter?**" I shouted.

"Take it easy! I'd suspected that allergy since we were midshipmen at the Academy, so I didn't violate anything," he cajoled as we left the lift and took our seats. The lift doors opened again and other crew resumed their stations. Rosenzweig took his seat.

"Screen on," he ordered. It lit, and an older yet newer *Avenger* was departing. Good luck, kid, I wished myself on the other ship.

"Let's get on with it. Warp eight, Mr. Buonocore."

"Aye, sir. Entering warp on my mark...**mark**. Warp two...warp three... warp four point nine...warp seven point seven...warp eight...warp eight point seven...the same gut-wrenching and heart-tearing whiteness...fading to black.

* * *

"Lieutenant Abbott? John? Can you hear me?"

I was on my back. I risked opening an eye. The bridge lights were reddened. That meant we were still at Red Alert. Get up, get up! my mind screamed but the time warp stun effect was much stronger than before.

I heard the whine of a medical tricorder. The voice was Dr. Romano's.

"He's just shaken from the time warp," she said. I opened the other eye and tried to sit up.

"Mommy, can we open our Christmas presents now?" I wisecracked. A wave of dizziness made me fall back. I fought gravity but my head lightly thumped to the carpeted deck. In the scarlet lights the pearl gray carpeting looked black.

"That will teach you to be a smart ass with your CMO," she scolded. I heard a hiss then molten lava entered my bloodstream.

"A stimulant," she said as I got to my feet and took my chair.

"I'd rather have coffee," I said as I checked my board, then scanned around the bridge. We were all intact and as before, recuperating, though slower than before. It was a much rougher ride.

I looked at the viewscreen. Earth.

"Sir, old-style audio coming in, right where it's supposed to be," came the report from Communications. Lane looked around the bridge.

"And so are we. Reduce to Yellow Alert, screens up. So let's not waste any time--now that we've got it back."

#

-----END-----