

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

WHAT PRICE KNOWLEDGE?

By Alex Rosenzweig

The Jutland ran.

Captain Barron gripped the arms of his command chair as the ship shuddered from another near-hit. He glanced back and to his right, to where the science officer sat at her station, studying the readouts on one of the two overhead screens.

"Romulan warbird is closing to within 300,000 kilometers," she told him.

"They're still not responding to hails," the communications officer reported from the aft part of the bridge.

Barron tapped the intercom switch on the right chair-arm console. "Engineering? Mr. Malev, can you squeeze any more speed out of her?"

"I'm already past redline on the drive," the frustrated growl of the Tellarite engineer came back. "You're getting everything I can give."

Another Romulan disruptor bolt struck a glancing blow against their shields, sending another vibration through the ship. "It won't be enough," Barron whispered.

"Captain," interjected the navigator, "we're approaching the Namati System. The fourth planet is Class M."

"But it's in an ice age," Science Officer Yang commented.

An idea, a last-ditch solution, a way to preserve the data for which he and his crew were going to die, leaped to the fore in Barron's mind. He spun to face the Sciences station. "Lieutenant Yang, download all the recovered data into a Class 2 probe. Ready it for immediate launch." He turned rightward. "Communications, prepare and launch a distress beacon. Make sure it has all our logs for the last three days." He kept spinning in his chair, now facing forward. "Get us on a heading for Namati IV. Plot a hyperbolic course for a close flyby of the planet." He finished his revolution, ending up facing Sciences again. "As we approach the planet, launch the probe so that it can soft-land under the cover of the snow. Make sure its course data goes into the distress beacon. Maybe we can still get this information to the Fleet."

It took only a few minutes. The Jutland raced into the Namati System, firing off an automatic distress beacon as it did so. The pursuing warbird's crew were so focused on their quarry that they missed the beacon. The Larson-class vessel whipped around Namati IV, and in the few seconds that the planet was between the Jutland and its pursuers, a probe was fired out of the ship's forward torpedo tube. In a graceful arc, it dropped into the atmosphere and below the clouds, where it was lost to sight.

Yang looked up from her readouts. "Sir, telemetry indicates that the probe has soft-landed. As we programmed, the signals have stopped. It'll be inert until someone finds and reactivates it."

"Okay," Barron answered. "We've done what we can." He turned to the helm officer. "Lieutenant T'Vona, get us out of here, as far and as fast as she'll go."

As T'Vona turned to her task, the ship was jolted by another disruptor blast.

"Our shields are weakening," Yang reported. "They won't last much longer."

"I know," the captain responded. "At least we'll make the Romulans work for it."

Another shot smashed into the shields, and half the crew were knocked to the floor. They struggled back to their stations.

"Sir..." Yang began, but her voice trailed off.

"Lieutenant...?" asked the Captain. Yang just hit a switch and pointed to the main viewer. The image on the screen bore testimony to what the Science Officer could not put into words. The warbird had caught up with them. A furious volley of disruptor fire speared the Jutland over and over again, until Ensign Parsons at the Engineering station announced, his voice quivering, "We've lost the shields."

As Barron watched the main viewer, the emitters of the warbird's disruptor banks began to glow once more. The Captain smiled, just a little. "It was a good run, my friends. It was a pleasure serving with you."

And the Romulans fired.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9811.06:

The Avenger has been assigned to the Namati Star System, under classified orders. We are here to recover a downed probe. According to our information, the U.S.S. Jutland was sacrificed for the information contained in the probe's memory cores. Namati's proximity to Rihannsu space is a matter of concern, but Star Fleet Command has made it clear that recovery of this information is of the highest priority."

A flight of Avenger shuttles soared over the snowbound surface of Namati IV. Sensors keyed to detect the duranium casing of a Star Fleet probe, they searched across the stark white plains and among the craggy, ice-ridden mountains. So far, there had been no success.

"What's in the probe's databanks that's so important?" asked Captain Warren, as he and Admiral Rosenzweig sat in the Admiral's ready room. Captain Maldonado was aboard the lead shuttlecraft, coordinating the search firsthand, while Lt. Commander Kagan had the con on the bridge.

"I'm not quite sure," Rosenzweig replied. "The orders were very specific that the data itself was on a 'need-to-know' basis. Whatever it was, the captain of the Jutland felt that it was worth the loss of his ship and crew."

"Care to speculate?"

"Can't be sure, of course," the Admiral responded, "but we aren't far from Rihannsu space, so I wouldn't be surprised if it has something to do with them."

Warren nodded in agreement. "It was a standard probe, correct?" he asked.

Rosenzweig nodded. "Straight out of the Jutland's regular stores. Captain Barron had to think fast; a warbird was right on top of him. The probe wouldn't have a beacon, though, and that's why finding it becomes the challenge."

"I wonder how Carlos is doing out there," Warren said.

Carlos Maldonado was frustrated. His squadron of shuttles had been out for several hours, searching for a probe buried in the snow. The crew of the Jutland hadn't had time to do a thorough job of burying the probe. While the Romulans might have missed it, not really knowing what to look for, a trained team of Star Fleet officers shouldn't have that kind of problem. Nonetheless, what should have been a quick, in-and-out pickup was turning into an extended game of hide-and-seek. Worse, it looked like the wind was picking up, which would make the search more difficult. The Avenger's Executive Officer sighed. 'Well,' he thought to himself, 'it has to be here somewhere.'

Touching the controls on the Communications panel, Maldonado spoke calmly into the audio pickup. "Maldonado to all shuttles. Report, please. Have any of you had any more luck than me?"

The responses proved equally disheartening. Not only had the other shuttle crews not had any more luck than the executive officer, but aboard the Dominion, Ensign Flavich was hitting weather conditions that indicated an oncoming storm. She reported that the turbulence wasn't bad at the moment, but was concerned about what it might turn into.

Carlos nodded. "Keep on with the search," he said. "Report any dangerous conditions you run into."

"Aye, sir," responded the young pilot. She signed off.

Maldonado shook his head and looked at Ensign Karycinski, who was manning the sensors on the Phoenix. "How did the Jutland's crew manage to *hide* a probe while on the run like that? Whoever was controlling that probe must have been damn good." It was a rhetorical statement, and Karycinski knew it, but he nodded in agreement. One thing was certain: either the probe had been in the hands of a master, or it had been the wildest stroke of luck that left it concealed. Of course, in either case, it ensured that the crewmembers of the Jutland had not died in vain.

The search dragged on, Aboard the Avenger, Rosenzweig began to grow concerned that the Rihannsu might observe them and grow suspicious. On the Phoenix, Maldonado worried about growing weather turbulence, and the danger it could pose to the shuttles and fighters overflying the snowy plains.

Just as Rosenzweig was getting ready to order the shuttles home for a rest period, a signal came from Ensign Flavich. She had continued to skirt the storm front in her search area, staying out of the actual storm. But now, she was picking up a reading on the Dominion's sensors that seemed to indicate a duranium signature.

"Captain," she told Maldonado, "it looks like the probe, but I can't be sure at this range. I'm going to go in and take a closer look."

She must have been overexcited, Carlos thought, because she switched off her comm system before he could so much as get a word out. On the sensor display in front of him, he saw the shuttle angle into the storm system. Then the panel in front of him flashed, indicating another incoming call.

"Did I just hear what I thought I heard?" It was Lt. Commander Wilson, the Chief Flight Officer. She was aboard the Odyssey.

Carlos sighed, knowing that Amy wouldn't take at all kindly to the breach of protocol. One did *not* just change flight plans without so much as an acknowledgement from anyone. "Yeah, Amy, you did."

"When we get back to the ship, I'm gonna have some words for her," Wilson growled.

"I figured you would," the Executive Officer replied. "Just in case, though, better get a shuttle over there. Flavich should have some backup if she's going to be flying into a storm."

"Uh-huh," Wilson answered. "I'm on it." A moment later, on his tactical display, he could see that Wilson had altered the Odyssey's course toward the Dominion.

Aboard the shuttlecraft Dominion, Ensign Flavich guided the craft onto a direct course for the duranium readings she had picked up. The rattling of the shuttle reminded her of the storm raging outside, and she wondered if she shouldn't have waited for a confirmation from Maldonado before heading for the source of the readings. Well, she thought, what's done is done. She concentrated on getting the shuttle to the source of the readings and finding out whether they actually were the probe.

As the shuttle flew onward, Flavich noticed that the storm seemed to be getting worse. She began to get uneasy about her situation. "Great job, Erica," she muttered to herself. "The first time you forget the regs since you get out of the Academy, and it has to be to fly into an electrical storm." She just had to hope that her luck held, and that she got in and out of this without anything nasty happening.

There are good reasons for Star Fleet's regulations. One of those reasons is that luck can be notoriously fickle, both for young officers recently out of the Academy and for experienced personnel with years of service. Unfortunately, Flavich was about to learn this the hard way. Less than five minutes after her comment to herself, the shuttlecraft was struck by a bolt of lightning.

The young pilot swore as the craft rocked violently. She struggled with the controls. It took only a moment for her to realize that the propulsion systems were gone, fried by the energy of the bolt. With sick horror, she grasped one unalterable fact: the small craft was going down, at high speed. Desperately, she hit the controls for the communications system. It was functioning erratically, but she needed to get a signal out.

As Maldonado guided the Phoenix toward the Dominion's position, he silently urged the craft to more speed. The shuttlecraft raced over the snow-covered plains. As he aimed for where he thought the Dominion should be, a light glowed on the comm-panel. Ensign Karycinski tapped the control, and for a second, they expected to hear Wilson giving some new instructions. The voice that came through instead froze them both for an instant.

"Mayday, mayday. This is shuttlecraft Dominion," Flavich's voice emerged from the speaker. "I have been struck by lightning. Engines are gone. I'm going to try for a soft landing, and I think I'm still headed for the duranium trace readings I detected." There was a *thunk* in the background, and Flavich's voice abruptly pitched higher. "I can't hold it! I'm starting to tumble! Please help me. Please he—" With a *fizzle-snap*, the channel went dead.

"Dominion, come in." Carlos' voice was tense. "Ensign Flavich, answer me." But there was no response.

A moment later, the comm-system activated again, and Admiral Rosenzweig's voice came through. "Avenger to Maldonado. Did you hear the Dominion's distress call?"

"Yes, we did, Admiral," Carlos responded. "We're headed that way now."

"Okay. Is there anything we can do from up here?"

"I don't think so—wait! Can you triangulate on the signal and give us a precise location? Flavich had flown into a storm, and all the electrical activity is hampering our sensors."

"Hang on," Rosenzweig said.

On the bridge, the Admiral turned toward the Sciences station. "Lieutenant Antrim, can you get a fix on the Dominion's position?"

"I'll try, sir." Antrim's fingers played over her console as she focused the sensors. "Captain Maldonado was right about that electrical activity. What a mess." She paused, then said, "Wait... Wait... Got it!"

"Feed the coordinates to the Phoenix."

"Aye, Admiral." Antrim tapped a control, opening a direct link to the shuttle. "I'm transmitting now, Captain," she told Carlos.

"Acknowledged," Maldonado answered from below. "I'm relaying to the Odyssey, as well. We're on our way."

"Keep us informed, Carlos," Alex ordered, his voice edged with concern for the imperiled pilot.

"Definitely," the exec responded.

As the Phoenix approached the coordinates that Antrim had fed down from the Avenger, Carlos brought the shuttle closer to the surface of the snow, trying to fly below the worst of the storm. Coming in from the other direction, Amy was doing the same aboard Odyssey.

"Do you have her yet?" Wilson asked Ensign Jones, who was manning the Odyssey's sensors.

"Yeah, almost there," Jones said, the twang of his accent coming out a bit more strongly as he concentrated. "Okay, got a lock. Ahead and 25 degrees to port."

Wilson adjusted the shuttle's course, casting a wary eye on the overhanging clouds and periodic lightning discharges. "Keep trying to raise Flavich," she told Jones. He had been doing so, but there had been no response.

A few minutes later, the Phoenix and the Odyssey converged on the Dominion's coordinates, and it rapidly became clear why there had been no reply. The shuttle was on the ground, nose having plowed partly into the snow. Its starboard nacelle had been snapped clean off, and lay about two hundred meters from the crash-site, a pile of twisted metal. The nose and the right side of the fuselage were crumpled inward, as if they had smashed into something on the way down. The craft lay completely still.

"Oh, my god..." said Carlos as he surveyed the site through the Phoenix's port. He tapped the ship-to-ship communicator. "I'm putting us down near the stern," he told Amy. "The side hatch is useless."

"Copy that," Amy said. "We'll follow you down."

The two shuttles touched down a bare 50 meters from the Dominion. A moment later, the hatches opened and four figures, swathed in heavy field jackets, emerged. They dashed over the

snow and gathered at the shuttle's large rear drop-gate. Carlos hurriedly tapped an override-code into the small panel to one side of the hatch, and they stood back as it dropped open.

The shuttle's interior was a mess, with chairs knocked off their mounts and consoles smashed. Carlos swept his gaze through the broken cabin, and it took him only a moment to find what he sought. The crumpled body of Ensign Flavich lay under the pilot's console. With Amy and the two techs right behind him, he dashed the length of the cabin to kneel next to Flavich. He stripped off his glove and pressed his index and middle fingers to her neck, hoping that he'd find a pulse there. There was nothing.

He looked up at Amy and the techs, his expression bleak. "She's gone." Amy closed her eyes, lowering her head. After a minute, she looked back up.

"Let's bring her body home."

Carlos agreed, and he pulled Flavich's body out. Finding a blanket in an emergency supplies cabinet, he had Karycinski and Jones wrap Flavich in it and take her back to the Phoenix. Then he pulled out his communicator and signaled the Avenger.

Maldonado's call reached the bridge just after the yellow alert had been sounded. Rosenzweig was listening to Antrim's report.

"I don't think they've detected us yet, Admiral, and they're not on an intercept course. But they're coming close enough that if they run a wide-field scan of the system, they might see us."

"Damn," muttered Rosenzweig.

Kagan then turned from the Communications station. "Admiral, I have Captain Maldonado."

Rosenzweig looked up. "Maybe he has some good news for us. Put him on."

Unfortunately, the news was not good, and after Maldonado passed it along, there was a pause on the bridge. Then the Admiral pulled himself together.

"Carlos, Antrim has detected a Rihannsu warbird at extreme sensor range. Have you had any luck locating the probe?"

"Not yet, sir, but we must be close, based on Flavich's telemetry."

"Find it fast, Carlos, or we're going to have to withdraw, and if the Rihannsu find the probe..." He shook his head slightly. "Do the best you can. We'll stay in touch."

"Aye, Admiral. Just in case, since we know it's got to be near here, let's get the other craft back aboard. Amy and the Ensigns and I will locate the probe."

"Smart thinking, Carlos. Will do. Avenger out." Tapping off the 'com, Rosenzweig turned to Kagan. "Recall the other shuttle and fighters."

"Aye, sir." Kagan turned to her console.

"We don't have much time," Carlos said, after Karycinski and Jones had returned, their sad duty completed. "Can we pull anything out of the Dominion's sensor logs?"

"I'll try," Ensign Jones said. He moved to the broken console, and drew out his tricorder. "I'm going to access the data storage units. Assuming they haven't been damaged directly, we have a chance."

As it turned out, the data was compromised, not completely destroyed. But the best that Jones could get from the logs was that the probe was within a 200-meter radius of their location.

"That's a lot of ground to cover," commented Wilson.

"What about the Odyssey's sensors?" asked Jones. "They're the most powerful we've got."

"Let's try it," Carlos responded, and the team quickly switched to the Odyssey.

Thankfully, by then, the storm was dissipating, and the electrical discharges that had so compromised Flavich's sensors until she was practically on top of her quarry had died down. It took comparatively little time for them to locate the probe. Reaching it would take longer, as it had burrowed some 15 meters down into the ice.

"Can we do it with phaser IIs?" asked Amy.

"We could, but it may take more time than we have," Carlos said thoughtfully. He signaled the Avenger.

A few minutes later, his request was answered, as a phaser bore materialized in the middle of the Odyssey's cabin.

"Excellent," was the exec's reply, as the last shimmers of the transporter effect faded away. "Let's go get that thing. Amy, Karycinski, help me with this." He pointed at the bore. "Jones, grab a pair of antigravs."

Quickly, they carried the equipment out to the spot where they had detected the probe. Setting up the bore, they began drilling. The powerful phaser unit penetrated the ice and within minutes they had reached the probe. Grabbing a reel of cable they had taken from the Odyssey's stores, they lowered the antigravs until they reached the probe and clamped to it using the magnetic locks. Jones had also thought to bring a remote control unit for the antigravs, which saved them a climb down the shaft cut by the bore. Steadily, they reeled back the cable, bringing the antigravs and the probe with them.

Once the two-meter long casing was lying on the snow, they disconnected the cable and began carrying the probe back to the Odyssey.

"Let's get ready to get off this planet," Carlos ordered, heading for the Phoenix. Once he and Ensign Karycinski had gotten aboard, they began their preflight checks.

On the Avenger's bridge, Rosenzweig listened as Maldonado updated him on the situation. At least, he reflected, the probe had been recovered, with whatever information the crew of the Jutland had felt was important enough to die for. Now they just had to get out of there before they were discovered.

"Admiral!" Lieutenant Antrim's voice was tense, and Rosenzweig whipped around to face the Sciences station. "The Romulan ship has just altered course, and is now headed directly for this system."

"Have they detected us?"

"Not enough information to be sure, but I'd have to say it's a good possibility."

Rosenzweig turned back to Communications. "Commander Kagan, get me the Phoenix."

"Aye, sir." A moment later, she nodded to tell Rosenzweig that the channel was open.

"Carlos, what's your status?"

"We're lifting off now, Admiral," Maldonado replied. "The Odyssey is right behind us."

"Get back here fast. The Rihannsu are heading right for us, and they won't be taking their time."

Maldonado and Karycinski exchanged looks. "Get on the 'com to the Odyssey," the exec ordered. "Tell Commander Wilson what's happening." As the Ensign nodded, Carlos hit controls on the pilot's console, urging the Phoenix to fly higher and faster. Moments later, he saw the Odyssey replicate his maneuver on the tracking screen, Wilson matching his choice of the most efficient course back to the ship.

"Open both hangars," Rosenzweig ordered. "Don't have the shuttles queue; just get them aboard, and then we leave."

"Aye, sir," responded Commander Meadows from the hangar control room. Both large doors slid open, and on a viewer at the Mission Ops 1 station, Rosenzweig could see the flickering force field that held the atmosphere in the bay. At Communications, Kagan passed the instructions on to Maldonado and Wilson.

"Shuttle ETA is 3 minutes," Meadows advised.

"And the Rihannsu?" asked Rosenzweig, looking at Antrim.

"Six to seven minutes, sir. We can get away, but it will be close."

The Admiral swiveled back to face the main viewer. "Ensign Kovacs," he told the navigator, "plot us a course out of this system and in the direction of the nearest starbase." He glanced slightly left to the helmsman. "Ensign Romany, be ready. As soon as I give the order, get us out of orbit and into warp as soon as is reasonable." Both men nodded and bent to their tasks. Rosenzweig turned further left, to where Lieutenant Rupprecht sat at the Engineering station. "Lieutenant, I want the shields up as soon as the shuttles are aboard."

"Aye, sir," Rupprecht nodded.

Satisfied, Alex turned back to the main viewer, watching the stars and the planet below, his eyes focusing on the image as if he might possibly be able to see the warbird, if only he looked hard enough.

"Shuttles are closing," Meadows reported. "On final approach."

"Hangar bay ready?"

"Yes, Admiral," Meadows responded.

"Here they come," said Antrim. "She touched a control, and the viewer switched to an aft angle, looking out behind the ship. The two shuttlecraft arced up from below the angle of view and settled into a parallel approach, one heading for each bay.

"Rihannsu ETA?" queried Rosenzweig.

"Three minutes, sir," Antrim responded.

On the viewer, two beams of opalescent light reached out and surrounded each shuttle, drawing them toward the ship. "Tractors engaged," Rupprecht reported.

"Shuttles are aboard," Meadows added a moment later. As soon as he said it, Rupprecht tapped the shield control and the ship's main defensive fields energized.

"Very good," Rosenzweig said. "Mr. Kovacs, Mr. Romany, if you would...?"

The helm and navigation specialists were ready, and the ship slid smoothly out of orbit. It smoothly accelerated, leaving the planet behind.

"Admiral, the Romulans are hailing us," Kagan said.

"Commander, give them our greetings, and tell them we're on a very important mission. We'd be happy to talk another time. That's it."

Kagan smiled a bit and nodded. "Aye, sir." She began speaking into her console-pickup.

By the time the Chief of Communications was done, Romany reported that the ship was well clear of the Danilkyw Limit and ready for warp speed. Rosenzweig nodded, and the Avenger leapt into warp, quickly leaving Namati, its fourth planet, and the Romulans behind.

The Admiral called Captain Warren to the bridge, and as soon as the second officer arrived, he headed for the lift. Riding down to the hangar complex, he hurried to the bay where Maldonado was just finishing the safing procedures for the shuttlecraft Phoenix.

"The probe?" he asked.

"Aboard Odyssey," Maldonado told him. "Flavich's body is here on Phoenix."

Just then, Doctor Rosen and a medical team came into the bay, carrying an antigrav stretcher. Rosen looked inquiringly at the Executive Officer, who pointed toward the Phoenix. Rosen nodded and led the techs aboard the shuttle.

"Was it worth it?" Carlos asked a moment later, as the medical team re-emerged, Flavich's wrapped body lying on the stretcher. "She was a good pilot."

"I wish I knew, Carlos. Star Fleet Command thinks that whatever's on that probe was important enough to justify the loss of an entire ship. Certainly the Jutland's crew seemed to think so. But nobody's telling me anything."

"So one more pilot on the tally sheet isn't going to change the balance, eh?" the exec responded.

"Maybe not." Alex shook his head slowly. "We can only hope that, in the long run, the information will make enough of a difference that the spirits of that crew, and of Ms. Flavich, can rest easy."

"Captain's Log, Supplemental:

The probe left by the Jutland has been recovered, and we have left the Namati System. There was no confrontation with the Rihannsu, although our presence was detected by a warbird. We were able to depart without incident. Although near Rihannsu territory, the planet is in unclaimed space, so there is no issue of trespass. The mission was not without cost, however. Storms on the planet have claimed the shuttlecraft Dominion, and the life of its pilot, Ensign Erica Flavich, who first detected the probe before being forced down. A requisition is being sent for a new shuttlecraft, but what can replace a life? Indeed, what can replace a life?"

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