

## THE STAR WARS ENCOUNTER

By Alex Rosenzweig, and based in part on the "Star Wars" saga by George Lucas

The Imperial Klingon Cruiser *Ekru* moved silently through space. It was far from any star, and only the dim light of the interstellar sky reflected against its greenish-gray hull plates. If one did not know precisely where to look, one might not see it at all; its only lights glowed dimly, and at a distance might easily be taken for a group of stars.

On the battlecruiser's bridge, Lord Captain Kandar sutai-Drexa sat pensively in his command chair, gazing at the main viewer. Only stars showed in the image, and the sensor annunciators' readings indicated nothing within a full parsec. Even the *Ekru's* two support ships--the *Thanatos* and the *Hakask*--trailed a full half-parsec further behind. Kandar wanted a wide view as his squadron patrolled near the Federation Neutral Zone. His gaze dropped to the communications display situated below the main viewer in the lower section of the "nose cone" section of the bridge. His eyebrows knitted. There was too much subspace chatter between the support ships. It would have to cease.

Turning toward the communications console, Kandar saw that his executive officer had entered the bridge. "Report, Commander Korenn?" he growled.

The exec had no chance to respond, as the navigator exclaimed, "Captain, look!" Startled, Kandar turned toward him. He pointed toward the main viewer, and Kandar followed his gaze.

The viewer image showed a pool of fluid light glowing redly against the stars. In its center, a dark void gaped like a maw. No stars could be seen through the strange apparition.

"Captain," the helmsman said, "we are being drawn toward it. We cannot pull away, even at maximum power."

"Tactical," ordered Kandar.

"Acting," responded Helmsman Kedeck. He manipulated his controls, and the viewer image changed to a grid, upon which a graphical representation of the phenomenon ahead of them was superimposed. The sides of the display showed gravimetric readings.

"Weapons," ordered Kandar. "Arm torpedoes."

"Affirm," responded the weapons officer. He worked his controls. The gaping opening at the front of the primary hull glowed luridly as the torpedoes were loaded into the tube. "Ready."

"Fire," commanded the captain. Two spheres of red-orange light sped away from the ship and vanished into the central void. There was no reaction. "Again," said Kandar. Again, two torpedoes disappeared into the void, with exactly the same results, namely, none. Now Kandar was starting to worry. "Engines, full power. Attempt a sheer-maneuver."

"No result," reported Kedeck.

"Full reverse," ordered Kandar, silencing the objection with a sharp gesture. "Go beyond rated limits. Give it all there is. Everything!"

But it was to no avail. Its engines running furiously in reverse, the *Ekru* plunged into the void.

The battlecruiser had not gone completely unnoticed, however. Due to the squadron's proximity to the Federation border, all three ships were being tailed (at discreet distances) by spy drones sent out by the Epsilon 5 Monitor Station. When the drone tailing the *Ekru* sent back its images of the Klingon vessel's disappearance, there was a flurry of excitement. The station's commander immediately sent all the available information directly to Star Fleet.

The information was quickly reviewed by high-level strategic and scientific personnel. It was soon decided that a starship should be sent to investigate the phenomenon, which--it was concluded--appeared to be a warp of some kind.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9105.30:

The *Avenger* has been given an unusual assignment. We've been sent to seek out a Klingon battlecruiser. However, it is of course more complex than that. The *IKV Ekru*, our quarry, appears to have encountered a space warp of some kind. The nature of the warp is unknown, although it has been speculated that it may lead into another dimension. Reports from Monitor Station Epsilon 5 indicate that the warp was approximately 2.7 parsecs from the station when the Klingon vessel was drawn into it."

Rear Admiral Rosenzweig switched off the log recorder and gazed at the main viewer. There was nothing on it but stars. The admiral glanced toward the helm officer. "Mr. Andersen, how long until we reach our designated starting-point?" The orders from Star Fleet had specified a particular search pattern, much to the frustration of the *Avenger's* strategic and tactical specialists.

"ETA two hours, present speed, sir," answered Andersen, glancing back.

"Thank you," Rosenzweig said. He swung toward the sciences station. "What do we know about this thing?"

"Not much," answered Commander Fillmore. "We know that the *Ekru* found something odd, was trapped by it, and was...pulled into it. We have a visual image of it." Fillmore tapped a control and a viewer lit with an image of the phenomenon, as recorded by the drone. "And we know the whatever-it-is doesn't have wide-ranging effects. The drone's sensors didn't detect anything strange in its immediate vicinity."

"So we might just have to look until we stumble over it," said Lane.

"Essentially," Bob replied.

"That could take a while," commented Commander Bell, who sat at Mission Ops 1.

"If anyone's got a better idea," the rear admiral said, "feel free to speak up." No one did. "I didn't think so."

The *Ekru* came reeling out of the phenomenon, tumbling end over end. As it fell away, it stabilized, then sped backward, its engines still set in reverse. Staggering back to his chair, Captain Kandar glanced

at the main viewer. One look was all he needed, as he took in the sight of the stars going the wrong way.

"Engines, full stop!" he shouted. The reverberations died away and the star images slowed and stopped. The exec disengaged himself from the acceleration cushion onto which he'd been hanging and stepped across to the captain. Nodding toward the viewer, he spoke cautiously.

"Sir, the stars. They have changed position since we passed through the phenomenon."

Kandar whirled on the navigator, who nodded. "My lord, I am unable to get a fix on any known stars. We are obviously quite far from where we were."

"Perhaps," suggested Korenn, "in another dimension entirely." Kandar shot him a dirty look, then returned his attention to the viewer.

"Bring us to bearing 56 stroke 8.2 kelts."

The helmsman and navigator manipulated their controls. The battlecruiser swung around and settled onto the new course. Kedeck looked up. "Speed, sir?"

"Warp factor 6," ordered Kandar.

"Lord Captain," interjected Navigator Kuylehr, "the phenomenon has vanished from our sensors."

"To be expected," growled Kandar. "Go, helm."

With its crew still trying to orient themselves, the *Ekru* accelerated away.

Not far from the Klingon vessel cruised a huge, wedge-shaped craft. Captain Medla of the Imperial Star Destroyer *Warrior* stared at the stars shining through the large windows on the *Warrior's* bridge. He was confident that his newest assignment would be an easy one. A small planet on the Empire's flank had of late been displaying indications of Rebel leanings. The *Warrior* had been ordered to bring this world back into line--through diplomacy, preferably, but failing that, through whatever means were deemed necessary. Medla smiled as he considered the possibilities.

Suddenly, a shout came from the crewman at the scanner station on the far side of the bridge. "Sir! Spacecraft on scanners! It reads as less than one-eighth our size, but it's moving unusually fast. This is odd, sir. It's moving within a hyperspace bubble, like a sustained jump. It's probably got a very different propulsion system, sir."

"Confirmed," said one of the navigators. "It is on a course that will intersect our present course."

"Communications officer," said Medla, "attempt to establish contact with that ship when it comes into range." Something strange was going on, and Medla was damn well going to make sure it didn't interfere with his mission.

Soon afterward, the communications officer looked up. "There is no response, Captain. That ship is definitely within range now, and we've queried on all bands. Either they're not receiving, or..." He shrugged.

"Repeat the query," ordered Medla, "and inform them that they are not authorized to be in this region. If they do not identify themselves and give a reasonable account of their presence here, they will be seized and boarded."

"Yes, sir," acknowledged the communications officer. A moment later, he turned back to the captain. "Still no response."

"On the contrary," countered the navigator. "It is now angling toward us, and is slowing to make an approach."

"Sound alert," commanded Medla. Klaxons blared through the length and breadth of the star destroyer.

Aboard the *Ekru*, the bridge crew stared tensely as the main viewer showed the image of the approaching star destroyer.

"Shields," ordered Kandar. The weapons officer touched switches. Kandar studied his foot rest display. When it showed the deflectors to be ready, he looked up. It was hard not to be daunted by a ship over 20 times the size of the *Ekru* coming straight at them. Kandar sutai-Drexa, however, was not easily daunted. He swiveled toward the back of the bridge. Buttonholing the weapons officers with a look, he gave his order. "You will fire **only** on my command."

"My Lord," interrupted Ensign Kitar from the communications console, "they are sending another message."

"On viewer," said Kandar. The forward screen lit to show an image of Captain Medla. The Human-like officer spoke.

"Attention, unidentified spacecraft! This is your last warning! Identify yourself and account for your presence in this area, or you will be seized and boarded. We will not warn you again."

"Do not respond," ordered Kandar. The crew waited. After several minutes, they saw bursts of light erupt from weapons turrets on the star destroyer. There was a slight vibration as they struck the *Ekru*.

"No damage," reported Korenn from the damage control console. "In fact, these beams are less powerful than any shipboard weapons I have ever encountered."

"Is this perhaps a ruse?" wondered Kandar. "If so, their bluff shall be called. Ready forward disruptors."

"Ready," came the response from the weapons officers.

The captain raised his hand. Then, bringing it down sharply, he ordered, "Fire!"

The twin disruptor mounts on the *Ekru's* primary hull sent red beams of energy toward the star destroyer. The larger ship's screens flared brightly as they weathered the assault. The *Warrior* responded with further laser fire, which still barely caused a glow from the Klingon shields.

"Again disruptors," commanded Kandar. "Arm torpedoes. It appears they will learn painfully."

The *Ekru's* disruptors discharged again. Once more, the *Warrior's* shields flared. The star destroyer swung around, apparently protecting an injured flank.

"Torpedoes?" checked the captain.

"Ready," called the second weapons officer.

"Fire." Two spheres of red-orange light sped away from the *Ekru*, streaking toward the star destroyer. They struck and detonated. The big ship's shields flared white, and the *Warrior* began to pull away. A shrill battle cry erupted on the bridge. It died quickly, as a group of small craft dropped from a hatch on the bottom of the *Warrior*. They flew straight for the battlecruiser. They seemed to be little more than a cockpit, a drive, and two large, vertical panels. They began firing laser-like weapons toward the *Ekru*.

Kandar shook his head. "Target practice," he muttered. "Disruptors. All banks. Fire at will."

The small craft--Imperial TIE fighters--began strafing runs toward the battlecruiser. The fighter pilots were good, but so were the *Ekru's* targeting computers, and too often a disruptor beam

would strike a fighter, replacing it in a single shot with an expanding cloud of gas and debris. The number of fighters was rapidly decreasing.

Captain Medla winced slightly as he saw the explosion on a monitor screen of yet another TIE fighter. He had started with a total of 72 fighters. At the rate things were going, he could lose fully half of them. He shook his head. "That ship's just too strong," he muttered. "And it's so **small!**" Then, looking up, he turned toward the communications officer. "Signal our TIEs. Order general retreat. Then send a message to Sector Group Headquarters. Inform them of the existence of this ship and of our situation."

The TIE squadron commander's earphones crackled, and the voice of the *Warrior's* communications officer came through. "General retreat has been ordered. Captain Medla wants you back before you're all slaughtered."

The commander had been witness to entirely too many losses that day. Acknowledging the signal, he switched channels. "Squadron commander to all ships. The *Warrior's* signaled retreat. Let's get out of here." He pulled up on his control stick, guiding the TIE fighter in a wide arc over the nose of the Klingon ship. Sweeping around on the far side of the battlecruiser, he pulled into a straight line that would take him directly in front of the ship and back to the star destroyer. It was a mistake.

The squadron commander screamed as disruptor fire tore the TIE fighter apart.

The deck officer glanced at a readout. Then he looked up at Captain Medla, who stood on a platform above the work-pit where the deck officer was sitting. "All remaining TIE fighters aboard, sir."

"How many are left?"

"One in three survived, Captain."

Medla sighed. "Let's get out of here. He looked across to another work-pit. "Weapons Officer, do we have any shields?"

"Nothing, sir. Nothing at all."

Damn, thought Medla. The *Warrior* certainly couldn't undertake its mission now. If there were Rebel forces in the target system, his ship would be a sitting duck. He could only hope his superiors did not decide that this situation was his fault.

He didn't let his deep doubts show. "Acknowledged," he said crisply. "Helm, navigation, get us out of here, as fast as she'll go."

The two officers turned quickly to their consoles. The star destroyer swung around and accelerated away.

Watching the enemy's retreat, Kandar looked pleased.

"They're running," commented Korenn, sounding satisfied. The captain nodded.

"The three large glowing ports," he said, pointing at the viewer, "must be their engines." He turned to the helmsman and navigator. "Pursue." Then, directing his words to the weapons officers, he instructed, "Arm torpedoes. I want three of them, one in each engine of that ship. You will program for rapid-fire mode."

"Ready," said the first weapons officer a moment later. Kandar turned back to face the main viewer.

"Fire," he commanded.

The Klingon torpedoes arched after the fleeing star destroyer. As usual, the weapons officers' marksmanship was excellent. Three torpedoes entered the drives of the star destroyer, one to each drive. A split-second after the last torp disappeared into the engine nozzle, there was a blinding flash. Overloaded, the sensors shut down and went dark. When the viewer image came back a moment later, there was no star destroyer. There was only an expanding cloud of gas.

"Success!" exclaimed Korenn. Kandar nodded in satisfaction.

"There's nothing!" muttered Admiral Rosenzweig, as he sat in the command chair on the *Avenger's* bridge. "We've been trailing around this sector for half a day now, and we're detecting absolutely nothing." Frustratedly, he stood up and stalked to the sciences station, where Lt. Commander DiMaio was sitting in as Fillmore took a dinner break. "Are you sure you're not detecting **anything** that might suggest the warp's presence?"

"No, Admiral. Space out there reads as completely undistorted. There are no gravimetric anomalies, no photonic ones, no odd radiations, no--"

Alex cut her off. "I get the point." He wandered to the master situation station, then turned back. "There have been space warps encountered before," he went on, "and the encounters are fairly well documented. Is there anything we can cross-reference to get a better handle on this?"

"I've been trying," the chief scientist told him. "Maybe this is a new type of warp. That might explain the lack of clues from previous data."

"What **do** we have to go on?" asked Captain Lane.

"Not much," explained DiMaio. "From what data did come from the spy drone, there was no discernible change in the fabric of space more than a few thousand kilometers from the warp. The warp seemed to exhibit a tractor effect, which drew the Klingon vessel in."

"In short," commented Doctor Romano, who had just entered the bridge on Fillmore's heels, "we should expect the unexpected."

"Looks like," replied Lt. Commander Buonocore from Mission Ops 2.

"When you least expect it, expect it..." intoned Fillmore, as he replaced DiMaio at Sciences.

"Oh, wipe that demonic look off your face," Romano teased him. Fillmore responded by emphasizing the aforementioned look and wagging his fingers. He then turned to his console.

Turning to Lieutenant J.G. M'reen at the navigation station, Rosenzweig said, "I want all navigational deflectors at maximum. Keep the search sensors at extreme range, too. If you get so much as a twitch on those readouts, I want to know about it."

"Yes, Admirral," M'reen acknowledged. The Caitian navigator double-checked her controls, making sure the settings were correct.

Some time later, the third shift bridge crew sat quietly in their chairs. There had still been no sign of the warp. In the center seat, Commander Lynch was contemplating the reaction he might get if he called Rosenzweig and suggested that they call it off. Much more of this, he thought, and I might just do it.

At communications, a light blinked on. Ensign Kirkham put in her earpiece and switched her console to pick up a deep-space reception frequency. It was a message from Starbase 27, updating them on Star Fleet Command's view of things. As the message concluded, the signal garbled slightly, then cleared. Kirkham frowned. There was something wrong about that garbling. She acknowledged the message, but was still bothered. She turned toward the command chair.

"Sir?"

"Yes?" responded Lynch, swiveling to face her.

"Could you give me an opinion on--" She was cut off as the helmsman let out a shout.

"Mr. Lynch! On the screen!"

Lynch spun back. On the main viewer was a pool of seemingly-fluid light surrounding a dark blot at its center. "Helm, pull away! Ensign Cerrigone, what's the range to that thing?"

Cerrigone checked the readouts. "We're only 300,000 kilometers from it," he reported.

At the helm, Lieutenant Andersen was shaking his head. "Sir, we can't pull away. The tractor effect is too strong."

Lynch tapped the intercom switch. "Admiral Rosenzweig, Captain Lane, to the bridge please." He glanced toward communications. "Ensign Kirkham, sound yellow alert." Kirkham nodded. A moment later, the alert klaxons sounded through the *Avenger*. The turbo-lift doors split and Rosenzweig and Lane stepped onto the bridge. Lynch surrendered the command chair and moved to the engineering station.

"Kill that," Rosenzweig ordered, with a broad gesture clearly meant to refer to the klaxons. Kirkham nodded, and the alert went silent. Rosenzweig turned toward the sciences station. "What do you make of that?" he asked Lieutenant Brown.

"I'm not sure, Admiral," she replied. "Sensors say that a powerful gravimetric force is being exerted on the ship, yet the indications are that it's far too localized to be a normal gravity field. Matter is being drawn into it, but I'm picking up no radiation. And this thing **is** in motion."

"Could it be a form of black hole?" Alex pressed.

"I don't think so. If it were, than at least some of the gravity readings would match known parameters for black holes."

"Admiral," interjected Lynch, "this is probably the warp the *Ekrú* found."

"I think Chris is right," Lane added.

A shudder ran through the ship. Rosenzweig glanced toward the viewer, which showed an enlarging image of the phenomenon. He nodded. "I do, too. And we're going straight in, just like they did. Ms. Kirkham, put me on shipwide."

"Aye, sir. You're on."

"All hands, this is the captain. We are being drawn into the warp. Escape is impossible. Prepare for entry, and hang on. It may be a rough ride."

All around the bridge, crewmembers grabbed chair arms and snapped them down to become lap restraints. Rosenzweig gripped the arms of the command chair. Lane grasped the railing next to him.

On the viewer, the last glimmers of light disappeared. The screen was completely black.

"We're going in," said Brown. The bridge vibrated once more, and the lights flickered. Suddenly, the ship tilted at a crazy angle, hurling anyone without a firm enough grip across the bridge. The lights went out.

Commander Luke Skywalker cruised in his X-wing fighter, following a standard patrol route to guard against any Imperial craft that might learn the location of the Rebels' newest base. The destruction of first the Yavin and then the Hoth bases had made the leaders of the Rebellion steadily more desperate, and each new foothold was guarded ever more carefully.

As Luke angled the fighter to avoid a small chunk of rock, he heard a low tone in his helmet 'phones, signaling an incoming message. He pressed the "Receive" button on the control panel, and was nearly deafened by the barking of an excited Wookiee.

Shaking his head, he grinned. Pressing the "Reply" switch, he asked, "That you, Chewie?"

Chewbacca barked again, an acknowledgement, and then Luke heard another voice on the speaker. "Chewie, calm down! Hello, Luke?" Another bark. "Chewie! Luke, this is Lando."

"I hear you, Lando," Luke responded, "and I certainly hear Chewbacca! What's he so excited about?"

"I'm not sure. He heard something over an Imperial frequency, I think. Luke, we're out here on orders from the princess. Leia heard something over the same frequency that Chewie's monitoring, and she wants everybody back for a conference."

"Why send you guys out?" asked Luke. "Why not just call from the base?"

"Your guess," said the former Bepin administrator and now Rebel, "is as good as mine. Maybe she doesn't want the Empire to know we're listening."

Luke shrugged. "Okay. Here I come." Executing a steady turn, he swung the X-wing around and brought it up beside the *Millennium Falcon*. As he did so, a series of beeps and whistles sounded in his earphones. He glanced toward the translator unit, watching the computer's translation of Artoo-Detoo's speech scroll up the screen.

"Nothing serious, Artoo," he replied to the droid's question. "Leia wants us all back at the base." There were more beeps. "I don't know why, Artoo. If I find out before we land, I'll tell you." Artoo beeped, whistled, and added a couple of slightly more unusual noises. After another look at the translator readout, Luke said, "No, Artoo, I won't forget."

After touching down and securing his fighter, Luke hurried to the main conference chamber. Stepping into the large room, he realized that it was crowded almost beyond its capacity. Virtually everyone on the base must have been there, and the thought ran through the young commander's mind that it was lucky that the Empire **didn't** know the base's location. It would be a perfect time for a surprise attack. A call abruptly broke into his reverie.

"Luke, over here!" It was Wedge Antilles. Wedge, a close friend of Luke's, sat in the front row. Next to him was an empty seat, and Wedge was motioning for Luke to join him. Quickly, before someone else could take the seat, Luke did so.

"Thanks, Wedge," he said, sitting down. Just as he settled himself, a door on one side of the raised platform at the front of the room slid open. Princess Leia Organa entered the room, trailed by General Rieekan and a young Lieutenant. Stopping at the control

panel, Leia reached out and flicked a switch. A large viewer at the front of the room lit, a pearly glow suffusing across it. Leia touched another control, and the screen displayed a computer graphic of a spacecraft. Luke and Wedge traded looks. Neither had ever seen a ship like that before.

The princess raised her hands for silence, and a hush fell over the crowd. Leia looked out at the people in the audience. "Earlier today," she began, "the base's on-duty communications officer reported picking up a message from the Imperial Star Destroyer *Warrior*, on a frequency we have been monitoring. The *Warrior* was attacked and destroyed by this craft." She gestured at the image on the screen. "This ship is estimated to be at most one-eighth the size of the *Warrior*." The crowd erupted in a cheer, and Leia smiled at their exuberance. "However," she went on, "upon checking, we found that no planet associated in any way with the Rebel Alliance has a ship like this one. Indeed, the design cannot be traced to any planet in the Empire. We must therefore be on our guard. If anyone sights this ship, or anything like it, inform either General Rieekan or myself." She turned, switched off the screen, and left the room.

Everyone started talking at once. Amidst the hubbub, Wedge looked at Luke. "What do you make of it?"

"I don't know, Wedge. But think about it. A star destroyer wiped out by a ship an eighth its size? Whew!"

"Yeah," agreed Wedge. Abruptly a small beep emitted from his wrist-com. He glanced down at it. "Oops! Got to go, Luke. See you later."

Luke watched Wedge hurry out, then followed the crowd into the corridor. There he met Artoo, who had been patiently waiting for him. The small, barrel-shaped droid let out a string of whistles and beeps. Luke shook his head.

"If you're asking what went on in there," he said, "Leia picked up an Imperial communication in which a star destroyer was destroyed by a ship an eighth its size."

Artoo beeped excitedly. Luke grinned and started down the corridor, with Artoo close behind him. Ahead, Luke saw a golden, man-shaped droid.

"Threepio?" The droid turned back.

"Master Luke! What's been going on? Why is everyone so excited?" Once more, Luke explained what had transpired. "Oh," said See-Threepio. "I gather they must have been quite lucky."

"Probably," Luke replied. He shrugged. "Well, I'll be in my quarters. See you later."

"Very well, Master Luke."

On the bridge of the *Avenger*, Rear Admiral Rosenzweig shook his head and clambered back to the command chair. "Damned lack of restraints," he muttered.

Jon looked at him. "You keep saying that you don't miss your old chair," he kidded.

"Okay, okay," growled Alex. "In this particular case, I do."

Lynch knelt by Ensign Cerrigone, who lay semiconscious by the navigation station. "He didn't secure his restraints in time," the assistant chief engineer explained.

"I've got him covered," reported Andersen.

Rosenzweig nodded, then tapped his chair-arm intercom switch. "Bridge to sickbay. We need a med-tech up here, with first aid gear."

"Acknowledged," came the reply.

At the helm, Andersen studied the readouts patched over from navigation. They didn't make sense. Or maybe, he mused, they did, if they had gone through a warp. He could detect none of the stars of the sector in which they were supposed to be. Potentially worse, there were no signals from any navigational beacons or sector markers, the standard means of position-determination. He looked back toward Rosenzweig.

"Sir, we're not receiving any signals from the Federation navigational aid systems, and the stars are all wrong. We're obviously not where we were."

"Hmmm," the admiral said. "Lieutenant, plot a projection of where we would be if we had not passed through a warp, taking into account our speed just before entry."

"Aye, sir." As Andersen turned to his task, the turbo-lift doors slid open and Doctor Gifford stepped onto the bridge. Rosenzweig pointed toward Cerrigone, and Gifford nodded. Crossing into the central bridge area, she knelt down next to Lynch and Cerrigone. After a quick glance at the cut on Cerrigone's forehead, she reached into her medipouch and drew out an anabolic protoplaser. Neatly, she fused the wound closed.

"He'll be fine," she assured Lynch, as Cerrigone began to stir. Lynch smiled at her and returned to the engineering station. Gifford quickly glanced around the bridge. "Anyone else hurt?" Everyone shook their heads, and the doctor closed up her medipouch. Standing up, she looked at Rosenzweig. "Admiral, what happened? We lost power in sickbay for a moment, just after whatever it was shook everything up."

"Best guess?" asked the CO. "We went through the warp. Right now, it's the only explanation that fits the known facts."

Gifford glanced at Lieutenant Brown, who nodded silently.

"Admiral, I have a few more facts, if you'd like," interjected Andersen.

"Of course, Lieutenant."

"I've completed the projection. Assuming no warp, and allowing for our speed, we should be 7.2 parsecs further along our course. I cross-checked our current observations against the expected ones, and nothing matches."

"Confirmed," added Cerrigone, who was back at his station and checking Andersen's calculations.

"To no one's great surprise," Lane said softly. Rosenzweig ignored him.

"Thank you, Mr. Andersen," the admiral replied to the helmsman. He swiveled to sciences. "What do you make of it, Ms. Brown?"

"I'm not sure," the chief scientist answered. "I'd say we've either traveled a great distance in space, or are in an entirely different universe. But I don't have any way of determining which yet."

At that point, Gifford stepped over to the command chair. "Admiral, everyone else appears okay. Just keep an eye on Mr. Cerrigone. If he appears dizzy or complains of headaches, send him down to sickbay."

Alex nodded. "Will do. Thank you, Doctor."

"Of course, sir." Gifford headed toward the lift.

Lane, meanwhile, turned his attention to the sciences station. "Lieutenant, any sign of the warp?"

Brown shook her head. "None."

"Any suggestions, Jon?" Rosenzweig asked.

"Whatever we do," Jon replied, "we ought to see that we can get back here, just in case the warp does hang around this sector."

"Noted," Alex responded. Turning to Andersen and Cerrigone, he ordered, "Mark this area, then set a course--" He paused, considering.

"Admiral, may I suggest 34 mark 217, relative plot?"

Rosenzweig turned toward Brown. "Any particular reason for that course?"

Kate indicated a viewer. "According to the readings I'm getting, there's a fairly advanced trans-stellar civilization in that direction. They might be able to help us."

"It's a thought," commented Lynch.

"It is at that," Alex agreed. "Very well. Mr. Cerrigone, plot course 34 mark 217, relative. Mr. Andersen, warp three."

Getting an affirmative reply from the helmsman and navigator, Alex glanced down at his wrist chrono. He glanced at Jon.

"We still have a few hours 'til our shift. I'll be in my quarters. Why don't you get some rest as well?"

"Good idea," Lane agreed.

The admiral rose and turned to Commander Lynch. "Chris, the bridge is yours." He made for the turbo-lift, Jon close behind. Lynch watched them go. Then, sitting back in the command chair, he gazed at the main viewer. "Well," he said, "let's go see what there is to find."

Two spacecraft traveled along the fringe of the Galactic Empire. One was the *Avenger*, a star destroyer of the same class as the ill-fated *Warrior*. The other was a huge, ominous-looking craft, five times the length of its companion. It was the *Executor*, the personal super star destroyer of the Dark Lord of the Sith, Darth Vader.

On the *Executor's* bridge, a door slid open. A tall, black-robed, masked figure stood in the entryway. Crewmembers cast nervous glances in the figure's direction. They were ignored.

Admiral Piett, the nominal commander of the *Executor*, stepped forward. Vader's attention settled on him, and he felt the tongues of evil force lancing through him. Then Vader softened his gaze, and Piett relaxed slightly.

"Have you found anything?" Vader asked, his deep voice sounding harshly through his breath mask.

"No, sir," answered Piett. "This region seems to be clear. The *Avenger's* captain reports all quiet, as well."

"Very well," rumbled Vader. "Keep searching."

"Sir," Piett added, "the idea of a ship that can wipe out a star destroyer is not one that exactly instills confidence in our mission."

"I, too, am concerned," Vader responded. While Piett recovered from that admission, Vader continued, "But this ship is much larger than a standard star destroyer. And you will, of course, take appropriate precautions."

"Yes, of course, Lord Vader."

Barely listening to Piett's reply, the Dark Lord whirled and stalked from the bridge. Piett turned back to the huge triangular windows. He gazed into the depths of space, searching for any

evidence of a ship that might well be the instrument of their destruction.

"Admiral!" The call came from one of the bridge controllers. "I have a pickup!"

Piett strode to the controller's desk and examined the readouts. They indicated a ship approaching Imperial space, though it was still too far away to get any specifics.

"Increase resolution, if possible," ordered Piett. The controller pressed a switch and moved a slider two notches over. The focus on the viewer image sharpened slightly.

"It's not one of ours, Admiral."

"Rebel?" asked Piett.

"No Rebel design like that on record," said a scanner officer.

Turning to the communications officer, Piett ordered, "Signal Lord Vader. Tell him we've found something." The officer nodded and turned to his panel.

A few moments later, Vader strode onto the bridge and over to the scanner operator's desk. Glancing at the viewer, he immediately punched in several control codes. The viewer image was replaced by a computer schematic of the alien ship. Vader hissed slightly.

"It is not the same one," he growled, "but it is not Imperial and not Rebel."

The *Avenger* was back on Alpha Shift, and was on yellow alert. Rosenzweig gazed at the main viewer, and at the images of the two star destroyers. He shook his head.

"Readings, Bob?"

Fillmore studied his viewers. "The smaller ship is 6.8 times our length and almost 5 times our beam. Crew appears to be about--" He stopped and looked up. "37,000 persons."

"37,000?!" Buonocore seemed almost dumbstruck.

"And the larger ship?" Rosenzweig pressed.

"34 times our length. 17 times our beam. I don't even want to think about its volume. Crew numbers...over 250,000..." Even Fillmore looked rocked by what the sensors were telling him. The members of the bridge crew looked at each other. Abruptly, Wonder and Rodimus, Rosenzweig and Fillmore's fire-lizards, popped onto the bridge, crooning their concern.

"It was our mental surprise," Fillmore said, comforting brown Rodimus. Rosenzweig did the same with Wonder, then both men sent their fire-lizards back to their quarters.

"Anything else you want to shock us with?" Captain Lane queried Fillmore.

"Not shocking," the chief science officer replied, "but rather interesting. Although both ships have deflectors, they're very weak in comparison to ours. It seems as though they rely more on hull armor for defense."

"Admiral," interjected Lt. Commander Anbinder, "I'm receiving a transmission. Odd frequency, but clearly directed at us."

"Can we hear it?" asked Rosenzweig.

"Yes," Anbinder replied. "We just need to compensate a little. There. Got it."

"On viewer, then, Mark."

The main viewer switched from the view ahead to an image of a male humanoid. He looked to be in his early 50s, with a formal bearing and a stern expression. His dark gray uniform was adorned only with a badge worn over the left breast, showing two rows of rectangles, six red above six blue. Behind him, a huge control center

could be seen, with men and women working in control pits and moving across catwalks. The man spoke immediately.

"Attention, alien vessel. I am Admiral Piett of the Super Star Destroyer *Executor*; personal vessel of Lord Darth Vader. Identify yourselves and give your purpose for being in this area."

"Return frequency," ordered Rosenzweig. At Anbinder's nod, he spoke. "This is Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig, commanding the starship *U.S.S. Avenger* of the United Federation of Planets. We appear to be the victims of an accident. We believe that we have been drawn through a warp in the space-time continuum, bringing us here from a completely different universe, one which we call home. Our sensors indicated an interstellar civilization in this direction, and we hoped that the civilization could assist us in relocating the warp which brought us here, in order that we can return home."

Piett's expression softened slightly. He glanced off-screen for a moment, then returned his gaze forward. "My apologies, Admiral. The *Executor* and the smaller ship near us--also named *Avenger*--have been patrolling the fringes of our Galactic Empire in search of a very small but unusually powerful spacecraft that destroyed another star destroyer."

Rosenzweig traded glances with Lane and Buonocore. He leaned forward. "Admiral Piett, did the ship that destroyed the...star destroyer by any chance look something like this?" Quickly turning toward Fillmore, he went on, "Show him a picture of a *K'tinga*-class battlecruiser." With equal quickness, Fillmore complied. A window popped into the upper left corner of the main viewer, displaying the image that Fillmore was sending.

Suddenly, in the background, they heard a deep voice exclaim, "That's it!" and a tall, masked, black-cloaked man strode into the field of view. Piett came to an attitude of brisk attention. A moment later, he turned back to his viewer.

"Admiral Rosenzweig, this is Lord Vader."

"I'm honored," Rosenzweig responded, with a nod of his head. He felt oddly unsure of himself, gazing at this towering...presence, even through a communication link. At the periphery of his vision, he could see that the rest of the bridge crew were equally nervous. It made no sense, but the feeling of heightened tension was undeniable.

"Yes," Vader said simply. "I would ask that you join us in our search, especially if you know of this vessel."

Rosenzweig nodded. "Very well. If it is a Klingon vessel bedeviling you, they don't belong here, either."

"Our ships will hold station at this position," Vader responded, "until you rendezvous with us."

"Very well," acknowledged Rosenzweig. "We'll arrive shortly. Out."

Vader's image faded from the viewer, replaced again by the view forward. As soon as he was sure the channel was broken, Fillmore stood up and stepped to the command chair, joining Lane and Buonocore in standing near the CO.

"I don't trust him," he said quietly.

"I don't, either," Jon commented.

"Why not?" asked Rosenzweig. He wasn't at all sure that the science officer was wrong. But these people offered the best hope of the *Avenger* getting home.

"I'm not sure," Bob answered. "It's just a feeling. But something about him screamed 'evil' at me."

"I don't know about 'evil'," said Rosenzweig, "but he did make me nervous, for no reason I could figure out." He paused, then went on. "We will rendezvous with them." He put up a hand to forestall Lane's protest. "**However**, we will keep our guard up."

On the *Executor*, Admiral Piett looked over to where the Dark Lord gazed out across the bridge. Seeing that Vader was unoccupied, he hesitantly approached. Vader looked up, and Piett stopped.

"What is it, Piett?" growled Vader.

"Lord Vader, if I may be allowed to speak?" A nod. "If this ship is from the same place as that other, or if it has at least survived a previous encounter, then it may well be as powerful. It is as fast."

"What is your point, Piett?"

"My Lord, we may be able to enlist the aid of these people against the Rebels. A ship able to wield such power, tied to maneuverability far superior to that of a star destroyer, could be a great asset to us, tactically."

Vader paused. Piett fretted. Then the Dark Lord nodded. "A good idea, Piett. But we must be patient. It is not yet the time to make such a suggestion to Admiral Rosenzweig. For now, maintain standard status. I shall be in my meditation chamber." Without waiting for a reply, he wheeled around and stalked from the bridge, his ebon cape billowing behind him.

Swiftly, the *Avenger* approached the star destroyers. She angled upward to ease herself over the *Executor*. The heavy frigate, one of Star Fleet's most powerful vessels, was dwarfed by the vastness of the craft it pulled alongside. On the bridge, Rosenzweig stared at the immense ship, its image filling the viewer. He turned toward Anbinder.

"Hailing frequency, Mark." Anbinder touched controls, then nodded.

"Ready, sir."

"Thank you. *Executor*, this is Admiral Rosenzweig aboard the *Avenger*. Come in, please."

"*Executor*: This is Piett. We read you."

"Admiral Piett, we are in position. Can you tell us the current position of the battlecruiser?"

Piett shrugged. "Unfortunately not. We were hoping that you might have some idea as to where they might go."

"Not knowing your space, we're really ill-equipped to make even a guess." Alex paused. Then his expression brightened.

"Admiral, I'd like permission to send over a team to examine your navigational charts and other pertinent materials."

After only the slightest of pauses, Piett nodded. "Very well. I will send across a transfer shuttle."

"There's no need," Rosenzweig told him. "We can beam directly to any point on your ship. Is your bridge a suitable place?"

"Beam?" Piett looked confused.

"We use a matter-energy scrambler as a transportation device. It allows us to move about in a non-material state, arriving at our destination and rematerializing."

"Amazing," Piett responded. "In that case, yes, the bridge is fine."

"Very good. The party will beam over in, say, ten minutes?"

"Fine. Until then..." The screen darkened, then returned to the image of the fore view.

Rosenzweig swiveled toward Anbinder. "Commander, have Lieutenants Abbott, M'reen, and Setak report to Transporter Room One." He stood up. Lane opened his mouth. "Before you say anything, Jon," Rosenzweig cautioned, holding up a hand, "keep in mind that this is also a diplomatic mission."

"Then let me go," Lane replied bluntly.

"No, I think we'd better do this one 'Admiral-to-Admiral'. Besides, if anything should go wrong, I want you here."

"Yes, sir," Jon responded, though he didn't sound happy about it.

Rosenzweig walked to the lift doors, then turned back. "Jon, you have the bridge." He entered the turbo-lift.

As he reached the transporter room, with Lieutenant Setak in tow, the Admiral saw that the two navigators were waiting for them. He quickly brought them up-to-date on what it was they were looking for. Finishing his explanation, he asked, "Everybody ready?"

"I am," Abbott replied brightly. "Are you, M'reen?"

"Yes," the Caitian affirmed.

"Good," said Rosenzweig. Turning toward the operator's booth, he asked, "Mr. Obara, did you get the coordinates for the star destroyer's bridge?"

"Yes, sir. I can put you over there any time you're ready."

"Very good." He stepped up onto the transporter platform. The others followed him, taking positions on the pads. Rosenzweig turned back to face Obara. "Energize," he ordered.

Obara engaged the unit, fingers flitting across the panel. The group on the platform were enveloped by showers of sparkling light. They were replaced by pillars of lambent energy, and vanished.

The party from the *Avenger* rematerialized on the bridge of the *Executor*. Several controllers looked up, startled. A guard reached for his sidearm, believing they were being boarded, but another grabbed his arm before he could do anything rash. As the final shimmers faded from around the *Avenger* personnel, the controllers stared at M'reen. Imperial policy toward non-Humanlike races was such that to see one operating as part of a vessel crew was highly unusual. For her part, M'reen stared back at them. Embarrassed, the controllers turned back to their stations.

Rosenzweig glanced around the bridge, taking in its scale. It was a chamber that dwarfed the control centers of Federation starships, with controllers in work pits below the main deck-level, and railed observation-platforms above. After a moment, Alex saw Admiral Piett approaching them, trailed by Darth Vader. Briskly, he stepped toward Piett. The two men shook hands.

"Admiral," Rosenzweig began, "allow me to introduce my support personnel. This is Lieutenant Abbott, Chief Navigator; Lieutenant Junior Grade M'reen, a navigation officer; and Lieutenant Setak, one of our physicists."

Vader spoke, indicating both Setak and M'reen. "These two are of differing species."

"That is true," Setak replied calmly. "While Admiral Rosenzweig and Lieutenant Abbott are from Earth, my homeworld is Vulcan and that of Lieutenant M'reen is Cait."

"The Federation is an alliance of many different races and cultures," Rosenzweig explained.

"I see," Vader said.

"Diversity is one of the Federation's great strengths," added M'reen. "It makes us far more powerful than those who strive for uniformity."

"Prejudgements," Vader responded, "are unwise."

"Very true," agreed Alex, eager to turn the conversation to less sensitive topics. "Shall we examine your information?"

"Yes," Vader said. "This way." He indicated a portal on one side of the bridge, and strode toward it.

The group from the *Avenger*, trailed by Admiral Piett, followed Vader into a much smaller, dimly-lit, adjoining chamber. The room was dominated by a large, smooth-topped table at its center, surrounded by cushioned chairs. The room's angled walls sported large, inset viewers. At the table's far end was a control station.

Vader stepped to that control station and began flicking switches. The console viewer lit, with images of pictures and charts flashing by at high speed. Finally, Vader punched in several code terms. The wall screens flashed on, displaying a series of large-scale regional maps. Vader hit yet another switch, and the surface of the table began to glow, revealing that it, too, was a viewer. A picture appeared on the table-screen, displaying a large portion of the Galactic Empire. Near the Empire's border, a small blip winked on and off.

Setak turned to Vader. "Sir, what is the significance of this blinking light?" He pointed at the blip.

"It is at that spot that the 'Klingon' ship, as you call it, destroyed the star destroyer *Warrior*. It remains a reference point."

"Did you get any course projections?" asked Abbott. The Dark Lord shook his head.

"Insufficient data," he rumbled.

"May I see?" asked Abbott. Vader turned to the control station and punched in a code sequence. The regional map on one of the wall screens vanished, to be replaced by a close-up of the area they were studying. A dotted line ran from outside the Empire to the point of the *Warrior's* destruction, which was marked with the pulsing outline of a star destroyer. Looking at the screen, M'reen turned to Vader.

"Lorrd Vaderrr, I suggest that they will parallel the star destroyer's course."

"Why?" asked Vader tersely.

"As you know," M'reen replied, "they come from another universe, as do we. They have no knowledge of where they are in relation to this galaxy. Seeing a ship flying in a particular direction, they would have nothing to lose by following that same course. I'm surprised that such an elementary concept didn't occur to you. Perhaps you should get some retraining in astrology."

Vader turned to the Caitian and raised his right hand slightly. "You will learn respect," he intoned. M'reen's hands went to her throat. Her eyes bulged, and she sank to her knees, struggling for breath.

Rosenzweig dropped down next to the navigator. His gaze shot back to the Dark Lord. "Vader! Stop it! Let her go!" He wasn't quite sure what it was Vader was doing, or even how he knew it was in fact Vader who was doing it, but somehow the sense that it was indeed Vader was overwhelming.

Piett had no doubts. "Lord Vader!" he cried. "Lord Vader! Please sir, don't!"

Finally, with an infinitesimal flick of his hand, Vader released M'reen. She collapsed onto the floor, gasping for breath. Seeing that she would be all right, Rosenzweig stood up and stalked over to face Vader.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?! That assault on one of my officers was completely uncalled for. Be careful, Vader, or--" Piett cut him off.

"Please, Admiral Rosenzweig, don't get him any angrier than he already is. Lord Vader has a...volatile personality, and often reacts without thinking of the consequences. He apologizes, I am sure."

Both Piett and Rosenzweig looked at Vader. For a moment there was silence, broken only by the Dark Lord's heavy breathing. Then Vader whirled and strode from the room.

Alex watched him go. Taking a deep breath, he looked at Piett. "Admiral," he said, "just what kind of person is Vader, anyway?"

"He is a fearsome man. You have to be careful around him. He has great power through what he calls The Force. I don't understand it, but Vader is quick to use it, even to kill if someone or something displeases him."

Setak came up to them. "Admiral Piett, I could not help overhearing your reference to the "Force". Could you explain it further?"

Piett gazed at the Vulcan. "As I told Rear Admiral Rosenzweig, I don't really understand it my-self. It seems to be a form of mentalism, or telekinesis, or both. Beyond that, though, I am totally in the dark."

"Admiral Piett," asked Abbott from the table, "is this the system that the *Warrior* was bound for?"

"Yes," Piett told him.

"Then I think you should follow the *Warrior's* course. It'll be the only chance to catch the Klingon ship before it reaches that planet."

"Yes, of course," said Piett. He stepped into the doorway and issued the orders to the bridge crew. The *Avenger* personnel felt a slight vibration as the star destroyer's engines were engaged. Rosenzweig drew out his communicator.

"Rosenzweig to *Avenger*."

"*Avenger*: Lane here. Al, what's going on over there?"

"Jon, we're joining these people in a search for the *Ekru*. Have Mr. Toland set a parallel course with their ships, within transporter range."

"Are you sure, Admiral?" Alex could well imagine the wealth of concern that his exec was packing into that simple question.

"Yes, Captain, I'm sure."

"Aye, sir. *Avenger* out."

As the three ships settled onto their new course, Rosenzweig stepped back out onto the *Executor's* bridge. The other *Avenger* crewmembers followed. Looking around, he saw Piett on the bridge's upper level.

"Admiral?" Rosenzweig called up to him.

"Yes?" Piett replied.

"Do you need us here any longer?"

Piett thought a moment, then shook his head. "No, not for a while, anyway."

"In that case, we'll be returning to our *Avenger*. We'll stay in contact."

Piett nodded. "Very well. We will let you know if we detect anything."

Alex forebore from pointing out that it was far more likely that the smaller *Avenger* would detect something than for either of the star destroyers to do so. With a nod, he again raised his communicator. "*Avenger*?"

"Anbinder here," came the communications chief's reply.

"Commander, alert Mr. Obara. Four to beam over."

A moment later, Ensign Obara's voice filtered out of the communicator. "Ready, sir."

"Energize," ordered Rosenzweig. Again, light surrounded the four *Avenger* crewmembers, and they faded from sight.

"Amazing," muttered Piett as he watched them disappear. He shook his head and returned to duty.

It was evening on the Rebel base. Luke Skywalker stepped through the wide double-doors into the base's dining hall. He wandered over to a selector panel, and hit the code pattern for a standard meal. A moment later, a hatch in the counter projecting from the wall slid open and a tray rose out of its innards. Luke picked up the tray and glanced around the room in search of a free table. Finding one, he hurriedly went over to claim it. He'd barely sat down and begun his meal, though, when the loudspeaker came on.

"Commander Skywalker to the Command Center. Repeat, Commander Skywalker to the Command Center."

Luke muttered something less than wholesome and stood up. Dropping the tray and its contents into a retrieval slot, he stalked out the door. Hurrying down the corridor, he passed Artoo-Detoo and See-Threepio, who were engaged in an animated conversation in one of the side corridors. Artoo abruptly turned and rolled after Luke, beeping in his wake. Threepio, annoyed at the interruption, followed quickly, gesticulating as he went.

"Artoo!" he called. "Artoo-Detoo, come back here!" Artoo blithely ignored him. Catching up to Luke, the little, barrel-shaped droid warbled excitedly.

Luke, uncertain of what Artoo had just said, nodded noncommittally. "I'm going to the Command Center, Artoo. Can it wait?" Artoo beeped again and followed quietly.

In the Command Center, General Rieekan and Princess Leia intently studied a readout. It was a report from the Rebellion's intelligence network. Rieekan looked troubled.

"A **second** unidentified spacecraft? Different from the first? And it has contacted Vader on his ship? This is very bad news."

"Yes," Leia agreed. "Let's hope the Empire doesn't talk them into attacking us." Looking up, she saw Luke hurry in. A controller pointed to where Leia and Rieekan stood, and Luke started toward them, a smile forming on his face. At the sight of their grave expressions, the smile died aborning.

"Leia, General, what's wrong?"

"Take a look here, Luke." Rieekan indicated the screen. Luke studied the display.

"Uh-oh."

"There is one bit of hope," Leia said.

"What's that?" asked Luke.

"According to the intelligence report, several of that ship's senior officers are definitely suspicious of Vader. As for the first unidentified ship, it seems to be out for itself, not the Empire."

"True," agreed Luke. "So, what should we do. As long as the Empire doesn't know we're here, should we go on with business as usual?"

Rieekan considered for a moment, then nodded. "Unless circumstances change, I'd say so."

"Then can I go back and finish my meal now?" At Luke's mildly exasperated tone, both Leia and Rieekan laughed.

"Okay, Luke, go ahead," Leia told him a moment later, still grinning. Luke grinned and turned to leave. He paused as Leia again began to chuckle, then shook his head and kept going.

Aboard the *Executor*, a communications officer sat back in his chair, calmly gazing at his console. There had been no contact with the Empire for nearly a day. Abruptly, a signal came in. It was a report from Sector Group Headquarters. A scout cruiser had come upon one of the nexi of Rebel operations. The *Executor* and *Avenger* (the star destroyer) were to lead a battle fleet against the planet, in order to subjugate the Rebels there and gain information on other Rebel deployments.

The communications officer relayed the information to Admiral Piett, who gave the order to prepare to rendezvous with the other fleet units. He then ordered the comm-officer to signal the other *Avenger*.

As Admiral Rosenzweig appeared on his screen, Piett turned to face him. "Admiral, there has been a change in plans. We just received a report from our Sector Headquarters. An outpost of a rebel faction in our Empire has been discovered, and we have been ordered to capture it. Admiral, we would be most honored if you would join us in our mission to suppress a dangerous and illegal rebellion."

Rosenzweig paused. "I'd like to discuss this with my officers," he said.

"Very well," Piett responded. "I'll call again shortly."

As Rosenzweig's image faded from the screen, Piett heard footsteps behind him. Turning, he saw that Lord Vader had entered the bridge. Piett executed a salute. "Lord Vader, I have alerted the alien *Avenger* of our change in situation. Admiral Rosenzweig is discussing with his officers whether they will join us."

"Although they have no facility with the Force," Vader said, "the technological might of their ship would be a significant asset. Alert me to their decision."

"Yes, Lord Vader." With no further comment, Vader strode from the bridge.

On the *Avenger*, Rosenzweig turned to Anbinder. "Commander, tie in Mr. Shappe."

"Aye, sir." A moment later, Shappe's visage gazed out from one of the communications console's viewers.

Rosenzweig nodded to Shappe, and then swept his gaze over all the senior officers. "Gentlemen, I need an opinion. The *Executor* and star destroyer *Avenger* have been ordered to take action to put down an alleged rebellion. Question: Do we accompany them, or continue to seek the *Ekrú* on our own?"

"For whatever it's worth," said Shappe, "I'd recommend we go with them. We still don't know where the *Ekrú* may have gone, and these people do seem willing to help us find it."

"Also," put in Buonocore, "they know the area, and we don't. Trying to find the *Ekrú* could be like searching for a needle in a haystack."

Fillmore looked uncomfortable. "Bob?" asked Alex.

"I can't help it," Fillmore said, "but I just do **not** trust them."

"I don't, either," added Lane. "In addition, would we be getting involved in an internal matter? We have no treaties, agreements, or any formalities at all with these people. Where would taking action put us diplomatically?"

"Oh, for Elath's sake, Jon," exclaimed Shappe, "we're in another **universe!** Once we get home, we're not likely to find these people ever again."

"Should that matter?" Lane asked. "Further, should we be judging the legitimacy, or lack of it, of this so-called rebellion? There's two sides to every coin in that kind of situation. How do we know there isn't a very good reason for a rebellion here?"

"A point," said Buonocore.

"I still don't trust them, and especially not Vader." Fillmore was emphatic.

"But are we reacting based on a true reflection on Vader, or simply because he looks and acts fearsome?" asked Rosenzweig.

"I don't know," Bob replied.

"Just so," Rosenzweig noted. He leaned back in the command chair. "Thank you for your input. I'm going to lean toward the pragmatic in this case. We need their help, so until we have a reason not to, we'll give them ours."

"Have you thought this through, Admiral?" Jon asked.

"I think so, Jon. The word is given."

"I'll rig the engines," Shappe said. "Engineering out."

As Shappe vanished from the viewer, a light flashed on Anbinder's console. "Talk about timing," the communications chief said. "Admiral, a hail from the *Executor*."

"On main viewer," Alex ordered. He swiveled forward as the fore view was replaced by Admiral Piett.

"Admiral Rosenzweig, have you made a decision?"

"Yes, Admiral Piett. We will join you."

"Excellent!" Piett smiled broadly. "I am most delighted. We will be leaving shortly. I trust you'll be ready?"

"Just let us know," Rosenzweig told him. Piett nodded and broke contact.

In the Command Center on the Rebel Base, a communications technician listened intently to a report from Rebel Intelligence. As the report concluded, he nodded to his viewer pickup and signed off. Swinging around, he faced the platform on which Princess Leia stood with General Rieekan.

"General? I have bad news from Intelligence. The Imperials have located the base on Scopelon. They're sending a battle fleet. Our people there do not have any large ships to act as a defense force."

"We're the closest base to Scopelon," said Leia.

Rieekan nodded. "And we have several large cruisers here, as well as squadrons of fighters." His expression cleared abruptly, a decision made. Turning to an operations controller, he gave instructions. "Order the cruisers stocked and all available fighters readied. Inform everyone who's assigned to cruiser or fighter duty to

be ready to head for Scopelon in two hours." The operations controller spoke rapidly into a microphone, relaying the general's orders to the appropriate sections of the base, as well as to the cruiser service docks in planetary orbit.

With only a half-hour left before the fleet was scheduled to depart, Lando Calrissian caught up with Luke as he hurried toward the main ground-based fighter hangar.

"Luke! Chewie and I will be going with you. Where should we report?"

"Report to General Rieekan," Luke answered. "He'll know where you can be the most help." Lando nodded and turned a corner, while Luke strode through the big double-doors to the hangar and headed for the X-wing service area.

Lando, meanwhile, made his way to the Command Center, where General Rieekan gratefully accepted his offer of help, and followed up with instructions for him to take Leia with him. Leia protested, wanting to be on the fleet's lead cruiser, but Rieekan was adamant. Leia gave up what was clearly a losing battle, and as she left the room with Lando, she heard Rieekan signalling Luke.

"I want you to take an X-wing," he ordered when Luke responded. "When we get to Scopelon, I want you to serve as escort for the *Millennium Falcon*, in case things get rough for Mr. Calrissian."

"But, General," Luke protested, "I'm supposed to serve as a squadron leader."

"There are enough squadron leaders on the cruisers," Rieekan replied.

"But--" Luke began again.

"No buts," Rieekan said firmly. They just didn't have the time for an extended debate. "Go."

"Right," answered Luke, giving up. "Out."

Signing off, the general turned to the Rebel lieutenant who stood nearby. "I'm sure you'll be able to stand by here until I return."

"Yes, sir," the lieutenant responded confidently. "You can count on me."

"Good." Rieekan headed for the exit. Behind him, he heard the lieutenant call, "Good luck!" Then the doors closed. Rieekan hurried to the command shuttle, where the cruiser captains waited for him with the shuttle's pilot. He climbed aboard, and the hatch slid shut behind him. He could hear the hiss of air as the cabin pressure balanced. Strapping himself in, he gave the order to lift off. The pilot complied with creditable speed, and the shuttle accelerated into orbit.

Meanwhile, Luke stood tensely by his X-wing, awaiting the technicians' arrival with Artoo. Soon, they appeared, with See-Threepio following along behind. Luke glanced at the tall, golden droid.

"Threepio, the *Falcons* over there." He pointed. "Go with the princess. That is," he added, "if you're going at all."

"Oh, yes, Master Luke, I'm going, I'm going." Threepio turned and hurried off toward where Chewbacca was making some last-minute repairs on the freighter. He sure didn't sound **happy** to be going, Luke reflected, with a grin.

The technicians finished unloading Artoo, and Luke climbed into the X-wing's cockpit. He started running the preflight check sequence. Glancing over his shoulder, he tapped a switch.

"Artoo, are you ready?" The droid responded with a rapid-fire series of bleeps. Luke glanced quickly to the translation readout. "Good. We'll be following the *Falcon* as soon as she lifts."

There was another series of bleeps, this time with a more inquiring tone. Luke smiled and nodded.

"I'm sure Threepio will be fine."

Aboard the *Millennium Falcon*, Chewbacca climbed up a ladder onto the main deck and greeted Lando with a series of deep Wookiee barks.

"Good," Lando replied, with a grin. "Then we can get going. I'll call Luke and let him know." He glanced around at his passengers. "Strap in, everyone." Then he stepped forward into the cockpit. Settling himself in his seat, he punched in a call-sign, then flicked a toggle. "Luke? Come in."

"Reading you," was the reply.

"Luke, the *Falcons* about ready. We go in a couple of minutes."

"Got it," Luke answered. "I'll be right behind you."

"Good to know." Lando signed off, leaned over, and shouted back down the access corridor. "Chewie! Come on, get up here!" A moment later, Chewbacca ambled into the cockpit and climbed into his oversized chair. Strapping himself in, he joined Lando in running the prelaunch prep sequences. A moment later, he nodded to Lando and barked his readiness. He punctuated the comment with a wistful moan. Lando nodded.

"Yeah," he answered. "I wish Han were here, too. Maybe, after we deal with this Imperial problem, we'll have enough time to make some progress in finding him. We'll look for Han, Luke can finish his training, and we all can take a step toward ending this." Shaking his head, he again glanced back. "Leia? Threepio? You ready?" Getting affirmative answers, he turned his attention to the launch controls. With a sound of thunder, the *Millennium Falcon* shot skyward.

In the X-wing, Luke saw the *Falcon* rise. He swung the fighter's canopy shut and pulled back on the control handles. The craft lifted on its booster jets, then cut in its primary engines and followed the freighter into orbit.

As both ships reached orbit, they maneuvered toward the lead Rebel cruiser. Luke pressed a switch. "Red Five to *Falcon*."

"*Falcon*. What is it?"

"Lando, I have to touch down in the cruiser's fighter bay. I'll launch again as your escort when we reach Scopelon."

"Fine. We'll parallel the cruiser 'til we reach the system. Then, I guess, we'll hear from Rieekan. See you then, Luke. *Falcon* out."

"Out." Closing the channel, the young Rebel commander guided his fighter through the doors of the cruiser's landing bay. They slid ponderously closed behind him, and the fleet accelerated toward Scopelon.

The two *Avengers* and the *Executor* raced toward their destination. On the Federation ship's bridge, Lieutenant Wells had come onto the bridge and was configuring the Mission Ops 2 station into a backup weapons unit. In the midst of setting up the operating parameters, he looked over his shoulder.

"Admiral," he asked, "just where are we going, anyway?"

Rosenzweig glanced over at him. "We'll be assisting the Imperial personnel in putting down a rebellion. An outpost of rebels has been

found on a planet in the system toward which we're going. Admiral Piett didn't supply a name, but I'm sure we'll find out soon enough."

"Yes, sir. Should I plan for a large battle?"

"Better safe than sorry, Mr. Wells. Do so."

"At least," Lane added, "prepare to engage several ships the size of the smaller star destroyer out there." He pointed toward the viewer.

"Aye, sir." Wells turned back to the console and returned to programming the fire control computer.

Rosenzweig returned his attention to the main viewer, pensively watching the image of the *Executor* below and ahead of them. The other *Avenger* was out of sight to starboard, he knew. Alex was still mildly concerned about the lack of information from Piett. He swung toward the communications station.

"Mr. Anbinder, get Admiral Piett on the line for me, please."

"Aye, sir," Mark replied. After a moment of manipulating controls, he glanced at a response on an upper screen. "They're acknowledging. I'm putting the admiral on the main viewer."

"Thank you," said Rosenzweig, turning to face the viewer as Admiral Piett appeared on it.

"Can I be of service?" Piett asked.

"Yes, actually," Rosenzweig answered. "I'd like a bit more information. What exactly is in the system we're heading for? I know there's a Rebel base there, but what else? How many planets are there? Is it a single or multiple star? What is the name of the planet?"

"Oh. I see. Just a moment, please." Piett turned to one side and whispered to a controller. His voice was too low for the sound-pickups to transmit what he was saying. The controller glanced down at a viewer, then mouthed an answer back to Piett. The admiral turned back to his pickup. He smiled, and said, "I am authorized to give you some information about the system. It is a single star, known as Parv. The Rebel outpost is located on the fourth planet, known as Scopelon. The system only has five planets, the first three of which are small and rocky and the fifth of which is little more than an ice-ball. Scopelon is the system's only habitable world. There are no asteroids or other hazards in the system." He paused. "Anything else?"

"No, Admiral, that about covers it. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Piett out." As the viewer switched back to the exterior image, Alex turned to Jon.

"I'm beginning to wonder about Piett."

Lane looked at him. "I'm wondering about this whole thing." At Rosenzweig's look, he shrugged. "Sorry. What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure. Jon, do you think that his veneer of good fellowship could just be an act? He seems not to be the type to be working for someone like Vader, or for a Galactic Empire."

"What type of man works for an empire?" the exec asked straightforwardly. "It's not always clear, is it?"

"True. Granted, it's just a feeling. I don't have a logical reason for it, but it is there."

"Hmm," was Jon's answer. "We'll just have to keep an eye on them." He was damn certain **he** would. Ever since his Impression of his fire-lizard, the admiral's "feelings" were much more likely to be right.

It took several days for the three ships to reach the Parv System. As they approached, and the target planet came into the *Executor's* scanning range, the scan controller looked up at Darth Vader, who stood near his control desk.

"Lord Vader, the system is now in range."

"Report?" Vader asked him.

"There is a Rebel fleet already orbiting Scopelon. I count three cruisers, six support ships, and one hangar ship. In addition, there is what reads as a freighter near the lead cruiser."

"It must be the *Millennium Falcon*," growled Vader. "Excellent! I want it and its crew taken, **not** killed. Inform both of the *Avengers*." The communications controller nodded and spoke into the microphone at his console. Satisfied that his command was being properly executed, Vader turned toward the windows. Abruptly, he took a step toward the near wall, leaning against it, stiffening. Several controllers looked up as the Dark Lord stood completely still. He remained so for several minutes, then relaxed.

"The son of Skywalker is in that fleet!" he boomed. "I want him!" With that, he turned and marched from the bridge, leaving the controllers trembling in his wake.

Aboard the starship *Avenger*, Anbinder turned toward Rosenzweig. "Admiral, the *Executor* has sent a message. There's a small ship near the lead rebel cruiser. They identify it as the *Millennium Falcon*, and are very specific that it is under no circumstances to be destroyed. If we can, we're to capture it and do our best to keep its crew alive."

"Acknowledge that," the CO said. He rested his chin on his fist. "I wonder what's so important about that ship..."

"Leaders of the rebellion?" suggested Lane.

"Maybe. But if so, why on such a small ship?"

"Maybe they're hoping they won't be noticed." Alex glanced sideways at Jon, but it appeared that his exec was actually serious. He shrugged.

"We're closing on the rebel fleet," reported Ensign DenDulk from navigation. "Present range is now roughly 24 million kilometers."

"Thank you, Ensign." Rosenzweig swiveled toward communications. "Sound red alert."

Anbinder responded with a terse nod and hit a switch. Klaxons sounded and the lights shifted to red. A squad of crewmembers arrived on the bridge to assume the support stations. "Ready" reports came from around the bridge, as each crewman oriented him or herself to the situation.

Rosenzweig took it all in. Then he tapped his own intercom switch. "Engineering."

"Shappe here," came the slightly harried-sounding tones of the chief engineer.

"Ready, Mike?"

"Ready as we'll ever be, I guess. The engines read fine, assuming Jennifer hasn't decided to ruin my day again." Alex grinned, thinking of Mike's consternation as he periodically discovered odd alterations in the operating system code for the ship's computers. More realistically, the admiral highly doubted that Captain Levine would risk bollixing up the ship in a potential battle situation.

"I don't think she has, Mike. Thanks, and stand by." Turning his attention to Wells, he went on, "Lieutenant, full shields. Phasers and pho-torps on stand-by."

"Aye, sir, on stand-by," responded the chief ordnance officer.

Aboard the *Executor*, the navigation controller turned to Admiral Piett. "Sir, you asked to be informed when we reached terminal range. We have, sir."

"Good. Thank you." Shifting his attention to the communications controller, he ordered, "Inform the *Avengers* that we will begin the engagement." To the operations controller, he went on, "Launch a TIE fighter squadron."

Hatches in the outer hull of the Super Star Destroyer slid open, releasing a cluster of TIE fighters. The fighters assumed an attack formation and accelerated toward the Rebel cruisers. Halfway there, they were met by several squadrons of X-wings. Almost immediately, the sparks of exchanged laser-fire lit up amid the fighters.

The *Executor's* communications controller looked over his shoulder at Piett. "Admiral," he reported, "I have confirmation of the approach of the support fleet: two star destroyers and a cruiser."

"Very good," Piett responded. "Direct them to attack the flanks of the Rebel group, and advise them about the *Millennium Falcon*."

"Yes, sir." The controller relayed the orders. Then he looked back at Piett. "Sir, the Federation's *Avenger* is asking what you want them to do."

"Tell them to attack at will," Piett ordered.

Piett's instructions came through on the *Avenger* and were relayed by Anbinder to Rosenzweig. The admiral nodded and swung to face the main viewer. As he did so, a group of X-wings sped across the image. Two pairs executed a tight, banking turn and flew along the sides of the *Avenger*. Rosenzweig's eyebrows knitted. He glanced toward sciences.

"They're not supposed to be able to do that in a vacuum," he stated emphatically. "But, obviously, they just did. Any ideas?"

Commander Fillmore glanced up from his sensor read-outs. "Technologically, both the Imperials and the Rebels are apparently behind us. However, sensors are picking up a low-level subspace field around those fighters. It might be a field effect that allows them to move that way. Notice that the Imperial fighters, which look very different, move similarly."

"Good a thought as any," Rosenzweig answered. "Mr. Wells, make sure the fire-control computers will allow for that type of movement."

"Aye, sir," Wells responded from his station.

"Admiral!" came a sudden exclamation from Ensign 1st Class Toland. Rosenzweig's attention snapped forward again. An X-wing was arrowing directly for the bridge.

"Evasive!" snapped Rosenzweig. "Mr. Wells..."

"I have him," Wells answered. He hit the phaser control. A double-beam of bright blue lanced out, striking the hapless fighter, which promptly exploded, sending showers of metal fragments into the deflector shields. As the ship turned, other fighters began making attack runs. "Mr. DenDulk, back me up," Wells said. The navigator nodded, enabling his own fire control panel. Several phaser banks were soon firing simultaneously, as the *Avenger* found itself in the thick of battle.

Ahead of them, a larger Rebel cruiser was moving to one side. "Mr. Toland," Rosenzweig instructed, after a quick glance behind him at the Tactical station, "make for that cruiser."

"Yes, Admiral," Toland answered. The ship moved toward the cruiser.

"Mr. Wells, arm photon torpedoes."

"Torpedoes armed," Gary answered.

"Lock onto the aft section of that cruiser."

"Done."

Alex leaned forward. "Fire."

"Torps away," Wells answered calmly. Twin spheres of glowing red sped toward the cruiser. The first impacted against the cruiser's minimal screens, which flared brightly. The second hit and penetrated. A bright flash lit up an expanding cloud of gas near the impact point. When the cloud dispersed, the damage could be seen. One of the cruiser's two large engines had been hit and was severely damaged, its glowing aperture now darkened. The cruiser limped away, and the *Avenger* turned to engage a squadron of Y-wings belatedly coming to the cruiser's defense.

Leia sat stiffly aboard the *Millennium Falcon*, watching the unidentified spacecraft batter the cruiser. The viewer image shifted, and she saw a body floating amid the wreckage that had been blown out of the hole. Closing her eyes, she bowed her head.

In the cockpit, Chewbacca growled deep in his throat as Lando savagely swung the ship around in an attempt to avoid the lasers of several pursuing TIE fighters.

"I know, I know," Lando snarled back, "but there's nothing I can do right now. Leia," he called back to the princess, "see if you can raise Luke on intership."

"I'll try," she answered. Unstrapping herself, she crossed the cabin and switched on the auxiliary communications panel. Punching in a code signal, she got a quick response.

"Red Five here, *Falcon*. What is it?"

"Lando for you," Leia explained. "I'm switching you forward." Punching the appropriate key, she called, "Lando, I have Luke. He's on your 'com."

"Thanks," Lando called back. Punching the switch, he continued, "Luke? Things are really getting bad in here. I'm gonna have to pull the *Falcon* out before we get fried. We'll move to the edge of the battle area."

"I'll follow," Luke acknowledged. He brought his X-wing around in a wide arc to come alongside the *Millennium Falcon*, giving the freighter cover as the two ships pulled away from the thick of battle. Artoo-Detoo emitted a series of beeps. Glancing at the translator-readout, Luke responded, "Yes, Artoo, I know, but Rieekan wants us to be fighter escort for the *Falcon*, remember?"

Artoo beeped once and was silent. The two craft sped away from the battle.

On the *Avenger*, Fillmore looked up from Sciences. "Admiral, I think I have a lock on the ship they called the *Millennium Falcon*. It's moving away from the main battle area."

"Really?" Rosenzweig smiled. "Good. We're going after her. Mr. Anbinder, advise Admiral Piett." As Mark nodded and hailed the *Executor*, Alex had turned to Toland and DenDulk. "Pursue the *Falcon*," he instructed, "and prepare to capture." He turned toward engineering. "Mr. Lewis, prepare the tractor beams. You'll need to be

ready for at least two targets: the *Millennium Falcon* and that fighter escorting it."

"Aye, sir," Ensign Lewis replied quickly, turning to the task of readying the tractor beams.

The *Avenger* rapidly closed on the *Falcon*. Really, there was no contest, as the much smaller freighter couldn't hope to match the heavy frigate's speed. Lando continued to direct an occasional laser burst back toward the *Avenger*. These bursts were proving singularly ineffective against the larger craft's deflector shields. As the *Falcon* enlarged on the main viewer, Rosenzweig glanced to his left.

"Mr. Anbinder, open a channel to the *Falcon*."

Anbinder nodded. Punching in the appropriate control sequence, he glanced up at a viewer. Getting the result he wanted, he reported, "You're on. Go ahead, Admiral."

Rosenzweig straightened in the command chair, and fixed his gaze on the main viewer image. "This is Rear Admiral Alexander Rosenzweig of the Federation Starship *Avenger*. You are ordered to decelerate and surrender, or prepare to be taken by force and boarded."

Rosenzweig's voice filled the cockpit of the *Millennium Falcon*. Lando and Chewbacca exchanged glances. Chewie growled deep in his throat. Lando nodded.

"I know," he answered the Wookiee. "We can't outfight them, we can't outrun them..." He paused, a thoughtful look crossing his face. "There's only one chance." Suddenly, he went for the controls. Manipulating them with almost lightning-speed, he whipped the *Falcon* around the *Avenger* and accelerated away.

"He's running," Jon said, watching as the *Falcon* accelerated.

"Mr. Lewis..." Alex responded, as Toland swung the ship around to keep a bead on the fleeing *Falcon*. The engineer tapped the controls for the tractor beams. Two opalescent beams of light burst outward from the *Avenger*, catching and enveloping both the *Millennium Falcon* and Luke's X-wing fighter. Rosenzweig stood up and crossed the bridge, coming to stand near Lewis' chair. After a glance at the tractor status readouts, he turned on his heel and faced Anbinder.

"Mark, hail both spacecraft. Tell them that--" He stopped, then turned to sciences. "Bob, will the *Falcon* fit on a hangar deck?"

Fillmore shook his head. "Too big for the doors."

"Thank you." Alex turned back to Mark. "Tell them that we'll pull the *Falcon* alongside the primary hull docking port. We'll take the fighter aboard. Tell them that any potentially hostile actions will be dealt with swiftly and decisively."

Anbinder nodded. As he hailed the captured vessels, Rosenzweig hit the intercom switch. "Portside hangar bay."

"Hijiruach here," came the reply.

"Ensign, prepare to receive a small spacecraft. Open the bay doors on my order."

"Yes, sir."

"Mr. Lewis," instructed Rosenzweig, "bring the *Falcon* to Airlock #2. Then have a damage control team rig a docking tunnel to the *Falcor's* hatch. Have them call the pilot to find out

where it is. Also, bring the fighter around to the port hangar bay."

"Aye, aye, sir," Lewis responded. The tractor beams shifted, and the X-wing slid toward the back of the ship. The *Millennium Falcon*, meanwhile, was moved forward and underneath the *Avenger*. Despite valiant efforts, neither of the smaller craft could pull away.

"Open the doors," Alex said into the intercom, as the main tractors switched off of the X-wing and the landing tractors took over. Hijiruach responded and a few moments later, the fighter had been brought to rest in the center of the hangar. The doors slid closed and air filled the large chamber.

"He's aboard, Admiral," Ensign 1st Class Hijiruach reported.

"Very good. Bridge out." The admiral stood up. As he did so, the turbo-lift doors opened and Doctor Romano stepped onto the bridge.

"Admiral," she began, "what's all this about you bringing that fighter aboard?"

"Too late, Doc," Alex replied. "He's already in the hangar. Mr. Buonocore and I are on our way to meet the pilot." He cocked his head at the Second Officer, who started for the lift. "Jon, the con is yours. Have a security team report to the inner airlock." As Lane acknowledged, Rosenzweig strode toward the lift, with Romano right behind him. They joined Buonocore in the elevator, which started down the shaft toward the hangar bay. Arriving on Deck 6, the three officers stepped out of the lift and walked down a short stretch of corridor. At the hangar's entry lock, they met up with the security team. Lieutenant Scuri stepped forward and saluted.

"At ease, Lieutenant," responded Rosenzweig. "Is the fighter's pilot in there?"

"Yes, sir. Ensign Winkler has been monitoring on the viewer, and says he's climbed out of his ship."

"Very well. Phasers ready, everyone." Satisfied with the response, Rosenzweig looked back at Scuri. "Open the lock, please." The double doors slid open, and the group stepped through. Glancing around the hangar, Rosenzweig caught sight of Skywalker, who knelt beneath his fighter. He had leveled some kind of weapon and was aiming at them. "Down!" shouted Rosenzweig. The group hit the deck as a beam of energy seared through the air just above them. One of the security men rolled and came up, firing off several short bursts with his phaser. One of the bursts caught the diving Skywalker, who sprawled to the deck. Ignoring a warning from Scuri, Romano sprinted across the deck to where Luke lay. A moment later, she looked up.

"Nobody told me I'd need a medikit. Call sickbay, right now." Ensign Vega hurried to a wall 'com. A few minutes later, Lt. Commander Francesconi arrived with the needed medikit. "Ann," Romano instructed, "get me ten cc's of tri-ox." Francesconi pulled out a hypo from the medikit, snapped on a vial, and handed it to Romano, who leaned over Skywalker's unmoving form.

Rosenzweig and Buonocore approached the group. As they did so, there was a loud cacaphony of bleeps, whistles, and assorted other noises. Alex and Steve both looked up.

"What the--?" began Buonocore. Rising from the top of the X-wing was a small, barrel-shaped robot. It disconnected itself from what was apparently a socket in the fighter, clambered over a large structure at the side of the fuselage, rolled along the edge of the wing...and fell off. It struck the deck with a clang, causing the now-semiconscious Luke to jump. He looked up.

"Artoo!" he exclaimed, struggling to rise. He was restrained by Romano and Francesconi.

"Wait a sec," Wendy said to him. "You shouldn't get up just yet."

"Let me go!" Luke snapped. "What have you done to Artoo?"

"We haven't done anything," Alex explained, turning to Luke. "Your robot--"

"Droid," Luke interrupted. Rosenzweig nodded.

"Droid, then. Your droid fell off of your fighter. Our Second Officer is helping it right now." Luke followed Rosenzweig's gaze, to where Buonocore had just righted Artoo-Detoo. Settling himself back on his tracks, he beeped a grateful thank-you to Steve, then rolled over to where Luke was sitting.

"Artoo," asked Luke, "are you all right?" The droid responded brightly, with a series of beeps and whistles. Luke nodded, then got to his feet. Turning to look at the smaller man standing next to him, he asked, "Who are you?"

"I am Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig, commander of the Federation Starship *Avenger*, which you are currently aboard."

"My name is Luke Skywalker." He looked around, his eyes falling on the phasers held by the security team. "Do I gather correctly that Artoo and I are prisoners?"

"Unfortunately, yes," the admiral replied. "Once the crew of the *Millennium Falcon* are brought aboard, you will all be transferred to the *Executor*."

Luke's eyes widened in horror. "Vader's ship?! They'll kill us!"

"You should've thought of that before you started a rebellion," Buonocore commented.

"Started a..." Luke shook his head. "Federation starship..." His eyes narrowed, and he looked back at Rosenzweig. "Do you actually know what you're doing? You don't, do you? I didn't start the Rebellion. It's been going on for years. The Empire on whose side you're fighting is a tyranny. There are hundreds of planets held in virtual slavery by the Emperor, enforced by the iron fist of his Imperial stormtroopers."

"But any rebel could say something like that about the government he's rebelling against," Romano commented.

Luke paused. "Yes, they could. But you must understand that these people think nothing of annihilating a whole planet." At their skeptical expressions, Luke pushed on. "Look, if you have the *Falcon*, too, you can check its records. They'll prove what I'm telling you."

Rosenzweig paused for a moment. "Very well," he said. "We'll take a look, if the circumstances warrant it. Mr. Buonocore, let's take Mr. Skywalker to the briefing room."

"Admiral," Romano said, "I'd better go too. He may still need attention."

"Very well, Doctor. Go ahead."

Aboard the *Falcon*, Lando, Chewbacca, and Leia sat in the cockpit, waiting as the *Avenger's* damage control team assembled the docking tunnel between the *Falcon* and the larger ship. Finally, there was a heavy banging from just outside the main hatch. A voice called, "Open up in there!" Threepio came to the doorway.

"They're here, Princess Leia, Master Calrissian. What should we do?"

Lando stood up. He reached for his blaster. Leia put a hand on his arm, stopping him. She shook her head.

"Don't," she told him. "It'll only make things worse."

Lando nodded. Without a word, he put down the blaster. Walking out of the cockpit, he strode down the corridor to the hatch control. He pulled the opening-lever, and watched as the entry ramp dropped into the lowered section of the docking tunnel. As it opened to its full extent, he could see two men in maroon uniforms and light armor looking up the ramp. Three more were visible behind them.

"Hello," said the one nearest the ramp. "I'm Lieutenant Berman. May we come aboard?" Lando waved him forward. He started up the ramp, the others following, fingering their phasers. As Berman passed, Chewbacca growled at him. Looking nervously at the Wookiee, the security officer hurried past and into the cabin. As the second guard passed, Chewbacca lunged at him without warning, hands going for his throat. The armor he was wearing saved his life, for Chewbacca could not get a good grip on his throat, giving the third guard, Ensign Diaz, time to fire his phaser. Stunned, Chewbacca released Ensign Sussman and slumped to the floor. Leia went to kneel by him. Diaz shifted his glance between Leia and Lando.

"I'd watch him, if I were you," he suggested.

Berman came back to the entryway. He held up two blasters, a laser rifle, and Chewbacca's bowcaster. "Do you have any more weapons aboard?"

Startled, Lando shook his head "no". Berman had indeed found all the weapons they were carrying.

Berman smiled. "Good. Now, if you'll accompany us to a briefing room aboard the *Avenger*--"

"Interrogation room, isn't it?" Leia asked, unable to keep a bitter tinge out of her voice.

Berman seemed taken aback. "No, it's not. I really do mean a briefing room. But you do need to accompany us." He stopped near Chewbacca. "If he needs medical attention, I could call a doctor."

Lando knelt next to Chewie. "I think he'll be all right." He turned his attention to rousing Chewbacca. Awakening, the Wookiee got to his feet and docilely followed Lando, Leia, and Threepio into the docking tunnel.

Reaching the briefing room, they were surprised to find Luke seated comfortably in a chair at the table in the room's center. Two other men and a woman were with him.

"Luke!" cried Leia. Luke stood up as the Princess ran to him, and caught her up in an embrace. "Are you all right?" she asked him.

"I'm fine," he assured her. "They've been very nice about things."

"You mean they're not going to...?"

"No," Luke said, "I don't think so."

Leia sighed in relief. Rising from his chair, Rosenzweig stepped forward. "Mr. Skywalker, young lady, if you would please sit down, we can get things started." Glancing at Lando, Chewbacca, and Threepio, he added, "If you would..." He indicated the seats. Everyone found seats around the table, except for See-Threepio, who went to stand by Artoo-Detoo on one side of the room.

Rosenzweig, who had remained standing, looked at each of the Rebels in turn. "To begin," he said, "I'm sure you know--or have surmised--that Darth Vader is awaiting you. However, before I turn you over to him, I need the answers to certain questions. Mr. Skywalker has accused the Empire of tyranny, butchery, and various other unsavory practices. Because of our own predicament on this starship, we do not know much of your political situation. However, Mr. Skywalker has asserted that the *Millennium Falcon* carries records that will support his claims."

"Yes!" Leia exclaimed, jumping to her feet. "We do, and we can prove their legitimacy!"

"This is Princess Leia Organa," Luke introduced her.

"Call me Leia," the Princess said. "All the royal trappings were destroyed when the Empire destroyed my homeworld of Alderaan."

"Who can get those records?" the admiral asked.

"Any of us." Rosenzweig turned to the black man who had spoken for the first time.

"And you are?"

"Lando Calrissian, pilot of the *Millennium Falcon*. Her owner, Han Solo, is a friend whom Darth Vader handed over to a bounty hunter." Calrissian's anger was clear. Somehow, Alex thought, Darth Vader had lied to this man at some point.

"Very well," he replied. Turning to Buonocore, he instructed, "Steve, take Mr. Calrissian and get those records. I'd like to see them."

"Aye, sir." With Lando in tow, Buonocore headed for the door.

Soon afterward, they returned. Buonocore carried a reader/viewer, while Lando had a small case of data cubes. Steve noticed Alex's curious glance at the reader. He shrugged.

"Their records aren't compatible with our systems, so we brought a portable reader. I've verified that it hasn't been rigged."

"Good, Steve. Thanks. Let's put it on the table here." They set up the machine, and Lando slid in the first cube.

"This was from an Empire-wide broadcast," Leia explained. It showed a Rebel captain who, five years ago, had been captured on a planet halfway across the Empire from where they were. It also showed Vader. The Rebel was refusing to answer any questions. After several minutes of vain questioning, the Dark Lord raised his hand, and the captain began to choke. Finally, the Rebel collapsed, inert.

"Like what he did to M'reen," Rosenzweig whispered to Romano.

Lando switched cubes, and Leia continued her narrative. "This one came from a spy-cam." The scene showed the death of Ben--or Obi-Wan, as Leia corrected Luke--Kenobi. He and Darth Vader were dueling with swordlike weapons, only the blades were shafts of energy. Luke called them "light sabers", and Rosenzweig could not help but agree that it was an appropriate name. In the midst of the fight, Kenobi abruptly stopped, raising his saber to a vertical position. Vader halted, then shrugged slightly and cut the older man down with a wide sweep of the saber. Instead of being cut in half, though, Kenobi vanished, his empty clothing dropping to a heap on the deck, his light saber landing atop the heap.

Another scene--again from a spy-cam--showed the demise of one Admiral Ozzel. Formerly Piett's superior, Luke explained, he had brought an Imperial attack fleet out of light-speed too early, alerting the Rebel base on Hoth to its presence. The price of his mistake was death.

There was more, but it wasn't long until Romano asked for a halt to the demonstration. She turned to Buonocore. "You're sure this wasn't rigged?"

"Almost completely," the Second Officer assured her.

"Then I'm convinced," the doctor replied. Lando reached out and switched off the reader. Luke and Leia looked expectantly at Rosenzweig. The admiral leaned over and whispered to Buonocore. Several times, the Second Officer nodded or whispered back. Finally, Rosenzweig straightened up again.

"I'm convinced, as well, as is Mr. Buonocore. It looks to us like, out of ignorance, we've stumbled onto the wrong side in this conflict. And both our Executive Officer and Chief Science Officer have already expressed their misgivings about the Imperials. I'd say we owe you an apology."

"Accepted," Leia said quickly. The others did not object, and even the large, furred individual, who had remained quiet throughout the exchange, looked mollified.

"Now what?" asked Romano.

"Now this becomes a full-blown strategy session," Rosenzweig answered. He tapped the intercom. "Captain Lane, Commander Fillmore, to the briefing room, immediately." Double-tapping the switch, he signaled Engineering.

"Shappe here."

"Mike, tie in to the briefing room. We're in for a strategy session."

"What happened?"

"We're about to change sides in the fight we've stumbled into."

"Really?"

"Yes." Rosenzweig paused as Lane and Fillmore arrived. Quickly, he began another round of introductions, meeting Chewbacca and See-Threepio in the process. Then he outlined for Shappe, Lane, and Fillmore what had just transpired. Finally, the rear admiral turned to Luke.

"Do you know," he asked, "anything about Imperial battle tactics?"

"Not much," Luke answered. "Only what I've had to defend against in actual battle, and that seems pretty chaotic, usually."

"Not unexpectedly," Alex commented.

"What about a deception, instead of a head-on attack?" suggested Fillmore. "If we have the power to hold our own long enough for a retreat, we might be able to hit the Imperials in a way they won't expect."

"Mike?" Alex queried.

In Engineering, Shappe glanced at his readouts. "We have about 95% power to the engines and 97% to the shields. Given an hour or so to regenerate, we can push it up to 100."

"I think 95-plus is good enough," Rosenzweig answered. Lane nodded. Both turned their attention back to Fillmore. "What's your plan, Bob?"

"What if we were to bring our group of prisoners to Darth Vader?"

"WHAT?!" exclaimed Luke and Lando simultaneously. Lane just stared at Fillmore, not quite able to believe what he heard.

"I'm not suggesting we actually hand them over," Bob said, a trifle defensively. "I suggest that, before we 'actually turn them over', we send the X-wing over to the star destroyer's main hangar. In the cockpit, we can conceal a matter-antimatter explosive. Hopefully, the explosion will cripple the star destroyer. We'll get the heck out of the way at that point, preparing to take on the rest of the Imperial fleet."

"The rest of this fleet...?" Leia sounded shaken. Lane hastened to explain.

"Based on what we've seen so far, this ship is about twice as well defended as the *Executor*. Our weapons, designed for use against similarly well-defended ships, are far more powerful than either Imperial or Rebel lasers. We stand a reasonable chance against even the full Imperial fleet that's sitting out there." He pointed, generally indicating outside the *Avenger*.

"I like it," Alex said. "Well done, Bob." Fillmore smiled devilishly. Turning to the viewer, Rosenzweig addressed Shappe again. "Mike, was the docking tunnel made so we can easily release it?"

"Yes."

"Good." He looked back at the group in general. "I suggest this: We'll put the *Falcons* crew back aboard her, then move her underneath the *Avenger*, between the engine nacelles. When we retreat after dropping off the X-wing, we'll release the *Falcon*. Lando, you'll pull her away from us at that point, giving both ships full maneuverability."

Lando nodded. "Chewie and I will fly the *Falcon*. Could Luke, Leia, and the droids stay on the *Avenger*? It'd probably be safer for them here, if what you say about your ship's capabilities is true."

"Very well." Rosenzweig stood up. "All right, let's go. Mike, first order of business, how long to put together that explosive?"

"No more than a couple of hours," Shappe replied.

"Good. On your way." Shappe acknowledged and signed off. The other *Avenger* officers scattered. At the door, Romano stopped and turned to Lieutenant Berman.

"Get passenger cabins for Luke and Leia, and see to it that their droids accompany them."

"Yes, Doctor," Berman answered. Then Romano was gone.

Arriving on the bridge, Rosenzweig took the command chair back from Commander Bell. He looked at Jon. "I bet Chaym will regret not having gotten to meet Chewbacca."

"You're probably right," Jon answered. "Even the Wookiee language sounded like Mohnan."

"Not to a Mohnan, I suspect," Alex replied. He swiveled toward Anbinder. "Commander, get me Admiral Piett."

"Aye, sir." A moment later, Piett's visage gazed out at the bridge.

"Piett here."

"Admiral," Rosenzweig announced, "I have good news. Luke Skywalker, Leia Organa, Lando Calrissian, and Chewbacca have all been captured and are being held aboard the *Avenger*."

Piett grinned broadly. "Excellent, Admiral! This is definitely very good news! Well done, friends from the Federation. We will have the star destroyer *Conqueror* rendezvous with you to pick up the prisoners."

"Its estimated arrival time?" Rosenzweig asked.

"About three of your hours."

"Very well," the *Avenger's* CO answered. "Out." As Piett's image faded from the viewer, Alex's smile vanished as quickly as it appeared. "Go to yellow alert," he ordered. Amid the changing lights and klaxons, he looked at Jon. "I'd hoped they'd send the *Executor*."

"Psychological trick," the exec replied. "Tell the prisoners they're not even important enough for you to get them yourself; you're sending some lackey for them."

"Good point." Pausing, Alex thumbed the silencer control, and the klaxons stopped. The crew readied themselves for the shift to red alert, and waited.

The three hours were almost up. On the viewer, the image of the *Conqueror* was steadily expanding. Rosenzweig had been gazing at it pensively. Abruptly, he looked up. Swinging toward the communications station, he gave the order.

"Mr. Anbinder, sound red alert. All hands to battle stations." Anbinder nodded and touched the alert control. The lights shifted to the red battle illumination and the klaxons again sounded. After a moment, Rosenzweig leaned back. "Mark, hail the *Conqueror*, audio only. Inform that we will be transferring the X-wing to them prior to the prisoner transfer. Also, we will be sending the prisoners across by transporter, so they should prepare a suitable area to receive them and send us the coordinates."

Anbinder, smiling, turned to his console. Soon afterward, he turned back. "Admiral, the *Conqueror* acknowledges. They're asking why you're handling it in this manner."

"Tell them there are security measures that we must take for this."

"Right."

Rosenzweig tapped his intercom switch. "Hangar control."

"Hangar. Hijiruach."

"Ensign, prepare to release the X-wing from the hangar."

"Aye, sir. Ready at your order." The Ensign 1st Class sounded confident. Rosenzweig hoped he would, too.

"Stand by, Ensign." Alex turned to Lane. "Jon?"

"We're ready when you are, Admiral."

"Good. Here we go." He returned his attention to the intercom. "Mr. Hijiruach, release the X-wing." He swiveled to face the engineering station. "Mr. Lewis, grab the X-wing with a tractor as soon as it's clear. Maneuver it across to the *Conqueror's* main hangar." He glanced at Anbinder. "That is where they want it, isn't it?" Mark nodded. "Good. Go ahead, Ensign Lewis."

The X-wing slipped out of the *Avenger's* hangar, dropping behind the ship. At the same time, the docking tunnel fell away, and the *Millennium Falcon* quietly slipped under the *Avenger's* weapons pod and away from the ship. The pale light of the tractor beam enveloped the X-wing, swinging it around and ahead of the *Avenger*. Extending the beam, Lewis moved the fighter across to the *Conqueror*. The star destroyer's main bay doors slid ponderously open. The *Avenger* released the X-wing, and the star destroyer's tractor beam caught it and drew it into the bay. The doors closed.

There was a collective sigh on the *Avenger's* bridge, as everyone released the breath they were holding. At the mission ops stations, Bell and Wells exchanged looks. A light flashed at communications, and Anbinder touched a switch.

"Admiral, signal from the *Conqueror*."

Rosenzweig glanced toward Bell. "Normal lighting, please. Then put the signal on the viewer."

The lights shifted, and the viewer lit with an image of the star destroyer's captain. He spoke with no preamble. "We have received the X-wing, and await the transfer of the prisoners. We will transmit a signal to give you the location of the destination point."

"Very well, Captain," the *Avenger's* CO responded. The *Conqueror's* signal cut off. A moment later, Anbinder reported that he'd received the transmission in question. "Patch them through to Transporter Room 1. Tell Ensign Vestri to record them. Then signal the *Conqueror*. Tell them we've got a security problem, and that there'll be a short delay in transport."

"Got it," Anbinder answered. He turned back to his console, executing the admiral's instructions. A few moments later, he turned back. "Everything's set. The *Conqueror* acknowledges our 'delay', and Ensign Vestri has the coordinates suitably filed."

"Good. Thanks, Mark." Alex tapped the intercom switch. "Commander Shappe."

"Shappe."

"Mike, is that explosive on a timer, or can you detonate it manually?"

Shappe's voice had a smile in it when he replied. "Both, actually. What do you need?"

"Prepare for a manual detonation in five minutes," instructed the rear admiral.

"Aye, aye, sir. Engineering out."

Rosenzweig signed off and turned to Ensign 1st Class Toland. "Helm, in exactly 2.5 minutes, back away from the *Conqueror*. Then swing around, so that if any of the other Imperial ships attack, we'll be ready for them."

"Aye, sir." He nodded to DenDulk, and both men began programming the appropriate tactics into the nav-computers.

At the appropriate time, Toland tapped a switch, and the *Avenger* slid smoothly into reverse. The *Conqueror* edged forward, trying to maintain relative position. Alex counted on his fingers, watching the main viewer. He'd just reached six when Anbinder looked back from communications.

"Sir, the *Conqueror* is asking what's going on."

Alex winked at Jon, who nodded. "Don't answer," he told the communications chief.

The *Avenger* continued to pull away, with Toland actually managing to broaden the distance between the ships. Suddenly, there was a flash. From amidships on the *Conqueror*, a fireball bloomed outward. The star destroyer blew apart, scattering debris outward in an expanding sphere.

Rosenzweig swung toward Anbinder. "Mark, signal the *Executor*. Advise that there appears to have been an 'accident' on the *Conqueror*. Inform them that we'll be rendezvousing with the *Executor* to complete the prisoner transfer." He swiveled forward. "Mr. Wells, full shields. Ready phasers, arm photon torpedoes. Mr. Toland, bring us toward the *Executor*. But slowly, Ensign, slowly."

Aboard the *Executor*, Pielt leaned over a console, scrutinizing a visual record of the *Conqueror's* destruction. He looked up as Darth Vader strode onto the bridge. The Dark Lord stalked over to where Pielt stood.

"I do not like this," he said simply.

"Lord Vader, I don't believe it was an accident, despite the word of our 'allies' on this starship."

"Explain," Vader commanded.

"Look at this recorded image." Pielt had reset the record. Now he hit the "play" button. "You can see," he explained, "that the explosion occurs several minutes after Skywalker's X-wing is

brought aboard the *Conqueror*. Further, additional telemetry from the *Conqueror* gives no indication of equipment failures anywhere on the ship, let alone anything significant enough to cause such an explosion."

"Explosives are not a normal component of a Rebel fighter's cargo," Vader said.

"Correct, my lord. And the Rebels have nothing that could yield such a powerful explosion in such a small package. I believe that the explosive used was placed aboard the fighter by the *Avenger's* crew."

"Could even they create such a powerful explosive?" Vader was frankly skeptical. Pielt was far from certain himself, but he had only limited options to guess from.

"My lord, we do know that their technology is more advanced than ours in a number of areas."

"Admiral?" called the deck officer. "The Federation ship *Avenger* is approaching us, at medium speed."

"Up shields," Pielt ordered quickly. "Alert all fighter crews. Contact the star destroyers *Avenger* and *Combatant*, as well as the cruiser. The battle may be at hand." The *Executor's* bridge crew busied themselves at their tasks.

On the *Avenger*, Rosenzweig and Lane called the Rebels to the briefing room to update them on the situation. They sat at the conference table, facing Luke and Leia. Again, Artoo-Detoo and See-Threepio stayed in the background. The droids had been quick to notice that the Federation made little use of such automata, and that a number of the crew were not completely comfortable around them.

Rosenzweig leaned forward. "We'll soon be going into battle, and we'll likely start by engaging the *Executor*. The *Falcon* is on its way to rendezvous with your fleet, assuming no one decides they had something to do with the *Conqueror's* destruction and goes after them."

"Admiral Rosenzweig," Leia questioned, "is it wise to pit yourselves against the *Executor*?"

"It is the command ship of this little fleet," Lane said.

"But it's over a hundred times this ship's size," Luke said, looking worried.

Alex smiled. "Don't worry. Size is not always everything."

The meeting was concluded quickly, and the CO and XO returned to the bridge. As the *Executor* loomed on the main viewer, the tension on the bridge rose. The turbo-lift doors slid open, and Doctor Romano stepped onto the bridge. She exchanged smiles with Fillmore, then stepped down near the command chair.

"Are you sure this is such a good idea?" she asked.

"Not completely," Alex answered her, not taking his eyes from the viewer.

"No way to talk our way out of this, is there?"

"Not with people like these," Jon said. "And we're going to need somebody's help to find the warp, and I for one would rather work with the Rebels."

"I guess you're right," Wendy acknowledged. "I just hope I won't be needed."

"So do we," Alex noted. He did glance over his shoulder then, giving the doctor a tight smile. She held up crossed fingers and vanished into the lift.

As the *Avenger* closed on the *Executor*, Anbinder reported an incoming signal from the huge vessel.

At Rosenzweig's order, he switched it to the main viewer. Admiral Piett appeared, all veneer of pleasantries stripped away.

"Admiral Rosenzweig," he said sternly, "we know that you and your people engineered the destruction of the *Conqueror*. I would advise you to surrender now. An attack on the *Executor* will be futile. You are outsized, outgunned, and outmatched."

Rosenzweig returned his gaze calmly. "Are we really?" he said, his voice soft and unwavering. Glancing at Anbinder, he made a quick throat-cutting gesture, and the communications chief cut the channel.

Piett paced back and forth on one of the *Executor's* bridge balconies. It was rare for him to be concerned about a military engagement. Super star destroyers were the largest vessels known within all explored space. They were virtually a fleet unto themselves. They could reduce a planet to slag, or challenge a fleet of enemy craft. With over 700 weapons emplacements, 200 smaller craft carried aboard them, and a crew of over a quarter-million persons, they were matched by nothing. But, despite the fact that this starship *Avenger* was less than one percent of the *Executor's* size, something inside him told Piett that he should worry. Maybe it was Rosenzweig's almost casual reply to his implied threat. Maybe it was that he knew the *Avenger* to be extremely powerful for its size. Whatever it was, though, Piett was nervous as he gave the command for the first barrage of turbo-laser fire.

The beams lanced outward from the *Executor's* turrets. They reached the *Avenger*. And Piett's fears began to be realized, as the tiny ship's deflectors easily warded off the powerful lasers.

The *Avenger* returned fire then, its phasers striking the forward areas of the *Executor*. The star destroyer's shields flared brightly. Again, the *Avenger* fired, and the impact was felt more strongly this time. An elevator arrived at the bridge level, and Vader stepped off. He strode across to stand next to Piett.

"Report, Admiral."

"Lord Vader, we fired on the *Avenger* with full power lasers, with no apparent effect. They have returned fire, and while our shields continue to hold, the generators are being severely drained." He pointed at a display on one of the defensive stations.

"After only two shots?!?" Vader seemed as close to complete astonishment as Piett had ever seen him. It was not a comfortable thing, the admiral decided.

"Uh--yes, my lord."

Vader's gaze ranged across the bridge. "Weapons officer, fire from as many turrets as possible simultaneously upon the *Avenger*. Communications officer, signal the *Combatant*. Tell them to launch their fighters and rendezvous with us as soon as possible."

The *Executor's* turbo-lasers began to blaze, the beams converging on the *Avenger*. There was little visible effect, save a slight shimmering near the ship. The heavy frigate swung around, making a high-speed approach to the *Executor*. It soared over the star destroyer's superstructure, releasing blasts from its bottomside phasers as it went. The first two blasts breached the already-strained shields of the huge vessel.

The rest tore into the *Executor's* hull. Explosions rocked the bridge, throwing Vader and Piett against the railing.

Aboard the *Avenger*, Rosenzweig watched the silent detonations. He shook his head. Turning to Anbinder, he said, "Signal the *Executor*. Inform them that, if they so choose, we will accept their surrender."

After a moment, Anbinder shook his head. "They refuse to surrender, sir."

"Very well." Alex looked at Jon. "We tried." Jon shrugged.

"Admiral, we have another signal," Anbinder said.

"From the *Executor*?"

"No, from the lead Rebel cruiser. A General...Rieekan is in charge."

"On viewer," instructed Rosenzweig. The main screen switched to an image of a tense man dressed in a green Rebel uniform. He gravely saluted Rosenzweig.

"Rear Admiral Rosenzweig, I am General Rieekan, commanding this fleet of the Rebel Alliance. Lando Calrissian and Chewbacca have reported that you have now allied yourselves with us."

"Quite true, General," Rosenzweig answered. "Both Mr. Skywalker and the crew of the *Millennium Falcon* showed us records of the Galactic Empire's atrocities. We could not stand in support of such an institution as would carry out such acts. It further seems clear that there would be little hope of peaceful negotiations." There was a slight hopeful tinge to the rear admiral's last sentence, and Rieekan clearly heard it.

"We only resorted to armed rebellion when the Emperor refused to hear out our concerns, and indeed tried to destroy us instead."

"I understand," Rosenzweig told him.

"Do you require backup?" asked the general.

"We certainly wouldn't say no," was Alex's reply.

"We're on our way," Rieekan advised.

"General," Rosenzweig said, just before Rieekan could sign off. The other man looked up. "Allow me to extend apologies for the earlier attack on your other vessel. We didn't know the truth of the matter at that time."

"Accepted," Rieekan answered. "We'll be there shortly." He signed off, and the viewer again displayed the *Executor*.

The Rebel fleet and the *Combatant* arrived almost simultaneously. All the capital ships immediately launched fighters, and soon the whole area was a tangle of soaring fightercraft and intersecting laser beams. The *Avenger* swung around and bore down on the *Combatant*. Anbinder had tied Rieekan in with Lieutenant Wells, who had promptly gotten a description of where key target areas--like the bridge and power generators--were located within the star destroyer. Expertly, he focused on those areas, along with the laser turrets. Steadily, the *Avenger* advanced. Equally steadily, the *Combatant* drew back. Abruptly, a Rebel cruiser and frigate moved in directly behind the star destroyer, forcing the *Combatant* to redirect power to its aft shields. A phaser blast from the *Avenger* penetrated the *Combatant's* forward shields, hitting an auxiliary power plant and sending power surges throughout the huge ship's systems.

"Their shields just went down," called Fillmore.

"Mr. Wells, go for the conning tower," ordered Rosenzweig. At the same time, Lane had Anbinder warn the Rebel ships to pull back.

Wells expertly shifted the phaser tracks. A quick succession of three phaser shots lanced toward the tower. When the vapor cleared, the conning tower was gone. Delivering a coup de grace, Wells fired a photon torpedo into the gaping hole left by the tower. The torp detonated, and its explosion was promptly followed by a second, much larger one, which tore apart the aft section of the star destroyer and sent it reeling into a cluster of TIE fighters returning to aid their mothership. Many pilots were too shocked to take evasive action as the hulk tumbled into their midst, and almost 50 fighters were destroyed. The remaining TIEs peeled off to aid the *Executor* and star destroyer *Avenger*.

Those two ships were also having a hard time with the Rebel craft. The star destroyer *Avenger*, outnumbered, was slowly being worn down. The *Executor*, although far larger than the *Avenger*, was in worse shape. With its shields already overloaded by the Federation starship *Avenger's* earlier attack, it was taking damage even from individual fighters. In the midst of the battle, Vader and Piett had abandoned the main bridge complex. Only moments later, an X-wing had blown out several of the huge triangular windows. Within seconds, explosive decompression had killed the entire bridge crew.

Arriving on the auxiliary bridge, Vader and Piett were informed by the deck officer of the *Combatant's* destruction. Piett looked nervously at Vader.

"My lord, for all its small size, this alien *Avenger* is nightmarishly powerful. With such a ship as its ally, this Rebel fleet will be unbeatable today. With regret, I must respectfully suggest that we retreat."

Vader looked at a bank of viewers for a long moment. One monitor displayed an image of an approaching X-wing. Vader concentrated, then gestured. The fighter exploded. An A-wing sped through the debris, lasers blazing. The Dark Lord looked back at Piett.

"Signal retreat."

Aboard the lead Rebel cruiser, a crewman shouted. His tactical display showed the *Executor* moving off, with the star destroyer *Avenger* following. A second check confirmed the reading. A lusty cheer rang through the bridge. The navigator began plotting a pursuit bearing. Rieekan saw the action.

"No pursuit!" he called. "Signal the fleet. If Scopelon is secure, we return to base." As the controllers acknowledged the orders, the deck officer approached Rieekan and saluted smartly. Holding out a data flimsy, he reported, "We lost one cruiser and a support ship. The surviving crew were taken aboard the other cruiser."

"Very well. Thank you." Taking the flimsy, Rieekan turned to the communications officer. "Put me through to the *Avenger*."

"The star destroyer?!" the officer asked, surprised. Did the general mean to gloat?

"No, no, no," Rieekan responded, exasperated. "The Federation ship!"

"Yes, sir." The comm-officer turned back to his panel. "I should've known," he muttered to himself.

On the *Avenger's* bridge, Rosenzweig was watching the viewer, which displayed the retreating *Executor* and star destroyer *Avenger*. Ensign 1st Class Toland looked back at him.

"Admiral, shall we pursue?"

"Can we?" Wells jumped in, all enthusiasm. "Please? Those bastards deserve it. Let's go give it to them."

Rosenzweig shook his head. "As you were, Lieutenant." Wells looked crestfallen, but quieted. "No, Mr. Toland, we will not pursue. Destruction is not our mission."

"Admiral?" It was Anbinder. "General Rieekan is hailing, sir."

"On viewer." The main screen displayed an image of a rather pleased-looking Rieekan. "Rosenzweig here, General."

"Admiral Rosenzweig, the Imperial forces are in retreat. We will be returning to base, and would be honored if you would accompany us."

Alex smiled. "The honor is ours. We'll rendezvous with you in a few moments." The contact was broken.

"It's over?" Rosenzweig turned to see Doctor Romano exiting the turbo-lift.

"It's over," Lane confirmed. "We're going back to visit a Rebel base."

At the doctor's look, Alex added, "By invitation."

"Really?"

"Yep. General Rieekan of the Rebel forces extended it."

At that point, Lt. Commander Buonocore arrived on the bridge. Steve was holding a datapadd. He stepped down next to the command chair. "Admiral, I have a damage report."

"Very well," Rosenzweig said, giving the Second Officer his attention. "Go ahead."

Buonocore smiled. "Almost none, sir. Deflectors down maybe 5% over the whole battle. Lt. Commander French is working on regenerating the extra power now. A minor circuit overload did disable Airlock 3. A damage control team is at work on it now, and it should be operational again in an hour or so."

"And?" Rosenzweig prompted, when Buonocore stopped. The younger man shrugged.

"That's it, sir."

"Excellent! My compliments to the crew, and thank you for the report." The admiral winked at Buonocore, then swiveled forward again. "Mr. DenDulk, when we reach the Rebel cruiser, take up stationkeeping relative to it. We'll follow them back to their base."

"Aye, sir," replied the navigator.

Once the *Avenger* had rendezvoused with the Rebel cruiser (which, they learned, was called the *Triumphant*), the fleet set course for the base. Rieekan hailed the heavy frigate.

"Admiral," he began, "I'd like to thank you for your assistance. Without it, we would not likely have beaten the Imperials."

"Maybe true, maybe not," Rosenzweig responded, "but you're welcome either way."

"Would it be possible for me to visit your vessel?"

"We would be honored, sir," Alex responded formally. "Would you like us to transport you over?"

Rieekan shook his head. "No, that won't be necessary. I'll fly across in a shuttle. Would it be possible to bring along Lando Calrissian and Chewbacca? All are interested in seeing more of your *Avenger*."

Rosenzweig smiled. "Of course." Rieekan returned the expression.

"We'll be over shortly, then," he said. "Rieekan out."

"Rosenzweig out." The channel cut off.

About ten minutes later, a graceful, winged vehicle cleared the main bay of the *Triumphant* and flitted across the space between the cruiser and the *Avenger*. It was a smaller vehicle than the *Falcon*, and Fillmore assured Rosenzweig that it would fit into the *Avenger's* hangar. The admiral had the shuttle guided to the starboard bay, where it smoothly slid through the doorway and touched down on the deck.

"Shuttle aboard," reported Lieutenant Lai from hangar control.

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Rosenzweig answered. Switching off the intercom, he stood up. "Jon, Wendy, with me. Steve, the con is yours." Buonocore nodded. On his way to the lift, the admiral stopped. "Mr. Anbinder, have someone from security escort Mr. Skywalker to the hangar's entry lock."

"Aye, sir," Anbinder responded, patching the order through.

Rosenzweig, Lane, and Romano rode the turbo-lift down to the hangar bay. Exiting the lift, they met Luke, Leia, and their security escort, Ensign 1st Class O'Rourke.

"We'll take it from here," Lane told the specialist. "Thank you."

Acknowledging the dismissal, O'Rourke saluted and headed back down the corridor. Rosenzweig turned to Luke and Leia.

"I'm sure you'll both be pleased to know that the *Avenger's* visitors are your friends. Lando and Chewbacca should be accompanying General Rieekan." Alex looked at Jon, who was checking a monitor. "Everything okay?"

"Looks like it," Lane replied.

"Well, all right, then. Open 'er up." Lane tapped in a code combination, and the lock's doors slid aside. Stepping through, they saw Rieekan and the others standing next to the open hatch of their shuttle, looking around the bay. Lando saw the doors slide open, and tapped Rieekan on the shoulder, pointing toward Luke, Leia, and the officers from the *Avenger*. Rieekan smiled as they approached, and shook hands with Rosenzweig when they reached him. He had a firm, confident grip.

"Welcome aboard, General," Rosenzweig said formally. He introduced Lane and Romano, whom the other Rebels already knew.

"You have a most impressive hangar bay," Rieekan said, when the introductions were concluded.

"Would you like to see the rest of the ship?" Rosenzweig asked.

"Very much," the general replied, his eyes lighting eagerly.

"Then follow me." The admiral led them toward the lock.

As they walked, Jon turned to Luke. "If I'm right about what the admiral has in mind," he told the younger man, "there will be plenty that you and your friends haven't seen yet, either. I'm sure you won't be bored."

"On a ship like this," Luke answered, "I don't think I'd be bored even if I had already seen it all."

Alex began in the officers' lounge, running an orientation tape on the ship. He then led the group through the science labs, where Lieutenants Johnson and Csuti showed off just what

the *Avenger* was capable of. Next was sickbay, where Romano took charge of the tour. Then came the cargo bays, and finally engineering.

Entering main engineering, Rosenzweig gestured toward the intermix shafts. "This is where almost all of our ship's power is generated." He smiled as Commander Shappe and Lt. Commander Padovan came over to meet their guests. Rosenzweig introduced them, and asked if they would explain how the *Avenger's* engine systems worked.

Shappe and Padovan were both only too happy to comply, and launched into a colorful description of how the various systems worked. Lane, listening to them, nodded approvingly as he noted that both kept the level of detail well under control.

Once they were done, Rieekan gazed longingly at the intermix shafts. He looked at first Shappe, then Rosenzweig. "Would it be possible," he asked tentatively, "to get a set of plans for these engines?"

"I'm sorry," said Shappe, "but that would be impossible. Even if we could, unless you understood the rudiments of warp physics, you wouldn't even be able to understand them."

"I guess you're right," Rieekan said.

"It would be so nice, though," Leia said, "to surprise the Emperor's minions with a fleet of ships powered like this one."

"I'm sure it would," Lane commented, "but it wouldn't be quite that easy. And the minute a spy got into your network, or a ship was captured, you'd be back where you started."

"That's all too true," Lando said. "Even on Bespin, I was always dealing with complaints about industrial espionage between rival companies." He shook his head. "It used to be so much easier, before I went legitimate." He shrugged.

"Well," said Rosenzweig, before the mood could get too melancholy, "we still have the rec deck to show you. Follow me." He led them back out of engineering and into the corridor. They crowded into a turbo-lift, which took them to a stop near the rec deck.

"I knew we should've taken two cars," Lane muttered to Romano as they piled out. It had been distinctly...close...in that lift. Getting out made the exec appreciate open spaces all the more. He thought of shore leaves spent hiking in the mountains with his fiancée. He was due to send her a stargram soon, he remembered...if they got back to their own universe.

Entering the rec deck, the Rebels looked around. There was a large viewer on one wall, with three smaller viewers underneath. A number of crewmembers were sitting comfortably in the two lounge-pits, and others were seated at the tables, playing games.

Lieutenant Re'ming'ton stepped out of her office on the level above, and walked forward. Seeing Lt. Commander Comune in the reading area, she went over to say hello. While talking to him, she happened to glance back over the railing.

"What--?" Excusing herself, she turned fully and gazed down at the group near the viewers. The admiral was there, along with Lane, Romano, and a group of unusually-dressed persons that the chief of recreation took to be the Rebels on whose side they'd been fighting. Her eyes fell on Chewbacca, and a smile lit her face. Her long tongue licked her lips. There were few enough lupine crewmembers on the *Avenger*, and no other Mohnans. And this creature was tall, strong-looking, attractive, and furred. "I'll be back," she said to Comune, who glanced down to see what she was looking at. He saw Chewbacca and smiled.

"Go for it," he told her. Re'ming'ton headed for the lift.

Rear Admiral Rosenzweig was in the midst of noting the Federation seal on the rec deck's main viewer when the lift doors slid open and Re'ming'ton stepped out. She made straight for the knot of visitors, slipped around the group, and sidled up behind the admiral.

Alex's only warning came when he saw Jon's eyes dart over his shoulder, then close briefly. Before he could react, he felt a tail slip around his waist. Turning to follow the gentle pressure it was exerting, he swung on his heel to face the rec chief. She released him, and he smiled at her.

"Hello, Lieutenant." Glancing back at the group, he explained, "This is our chief of recreation, Lieutenant Chaym Gale' Re'ming'ton." He went on to introduce each of the Rebels in turn. When he reached Chewbacca, he saw Chaym's eyes light slightly. Chewie, in turn, scrutinized this female who was quite different from most of the other crewmembers on this ship. He leaned over and made a comment to Lando. Chaym smiled upon hearing his words.

"Not that different from Mohnan," she said to Alex. "I bet he could teach it to me." She looked at the group. "Can I borrow Chewbacca for a little while?"

"Up to him," Lando said. Chewbacca nodded, and Chaym went to join him.

"Lieutenant," Rosenzweig said, "not too far, please."

"Yes, sir." Re'ming'ton looked disappointed, and Rosenzweig shook his head. The admiral returned his attention to the others.

"We do have a more serious situation, though, still to deal with. The other completely alien ship. You recall it? The one that's about our size, but very different in shape?"

"Yes," Rieekan said. "We did get intelligence reports on it."

"Good. It is presumably around here somewhere. We have several choices at this point. One: We can seek it out ourselves. Two: We can leave it alone, hoping that the Klingons will focus their destructive power on Imperial, rather than Rebel, forces. Three: We can contact the Empire, and attempt to seek a temporary truce to find the Klingons together."

"What if we just went about our business and left them alone?" asked Leia.

"If I understand Admiral Rosenzweig correctly, though," Lando replied, "there's no telling how those folks might react, or what would provoke them. Rebel ships or personnel might as easily be on the receiving end of their attacks as easily as the Empire. Or even noncombatants."

"Exactly," Lane said. "Worse, the Empire might be able to gain their assistance by appealing to the kindredness of totalitarian systems."

"There is that," Rieekan noted.

"The only chance the Rebellion would have would be to convince the *Ekrus* captain that aiding the Rebellion here would benefit the Klingon Empire, and I could hardly see you trading one dictatorship for another."

"Won't they be trying to get home, too, though?" Romano put in.

"Presumably. In which case, whichever side could more credibly offer help might also gain in deal-making," Rosenzweig

answered. "Personally, I think option one is our best bet. We're better equipped for this sort of investigation than either Rebel or Imperial spacecraft."

"And at least the Klingons know us," Lane said.

Rosenzweig smiled. "Yeah. They may not like us much, but they know us."

"I think that's a good idea," Luke said, "and I'm sure the Rebellion would be happy to help you find them."

"Agreed," said Rieekan. He exchanged glances with Luke. "We certainly don't need a wildcard like that running around."

"Well, then it's settled," Rosenzweig said firmly. "We'll work together, and we'll get the Klingons--and ourselves--out of this universe." He turned to Rieekan and shrugged. "I think we're going to have to miss seeing your base, General."

"Speaking of missing things," Lane asked, "where are the droids?"

"Still in my cabin," Luke explained. "We noticed that your crew didn't seem too comfortable around them."

"They're not used to automata like that," Alex said, "but that's probably all it was. If they want to come out, they can."

The plan was soon settled. Rieekan returned to the *Triumphant* to arrange the Rebels' participation. It was decided that the rest of the fleet would return to base, but that the *Triumphant* would join the *Avenger* in the search. The *Falcon* being in the *Triumphant's* hangar, Lando and Chewbacca opted to remain aboard the *Avenger*, to Re'ming'ton's delight. The *Ekrus* projected course, which Lieutenant Abbott had secured on the *Executor*, was entered into the *Avenger's* navigational banks, and they set off in quest of the Klingons.

When they reached the point where they could match courses with the *Ekrus*, they accelerated to warp 7 and began the search.

"What about the *Triumphant*?" Buonocore asked. "They can't maintain a steady warp speed."

"They'll be leapfrogging along with us," explained Fillmore, "using the hyperspace engines. It's more complicated, but they will be able to approximate our speed."

"No wonder they wanted our engine plans," Lane commented.

"Admiral," Fillmore continued, "it is going to take some time to find the Klingons. We might as well relax."

"Good idea," said Lane.

"It's almost the end of the shift, anyway," Alex added. "Mark," he said to Anbinder, "have our Rebel friends meet myself and Jon on the rec deck in five minutes."

"Aye, sir." A moment later, he added, "Luke acknowledges, sir. They'll be there."

"Good." Alex stood up. "Mr. Buonocore, you have the con." He and Jon headed for the lift. Once inside, he closed his eyes for a moment. With a soft "pop", Wonder appeared in the lift and settled onto Alex's shoulder. The admiral scratched his fire-lizard's eye-ridges, while the little bronze crooned contentedly. Lane watched with an expression of envy. "Don't worry, Jon," Alex said to him. "Wendy's Lyric is probably due for a mating flight soon. Then we'll have more eggs."

"You're right," Lane told him, "but gods, the waiting'll be hard."

Alex grinned. "I know. They're special, these creatures." He patted Wonder's head. The fire-lizard's eyes wheeled with pleasure.

The turbo-lift came to a stop, and the doors slid open. Alex and Jon stepped into the corridor and headed for the rec deck. In the corridor, they met Doctor Romano, who had Lyric on her shoulder. Lane looked from one to the other, a "what did I do to deserve this?" expression settling onto his face. Alex and Wendy both laughed.

"Thanks," muttered Jon. "I appreciate that." The admiral patted him on the shoulder, then looked back at the doctor.

"Rec deck-bound?" he asked.

"Actually, yes. Bob's supposed to meet me when he finishes on the bridge."

"Would you care to join us?" Alex offered.

"Why not?" Wendy fell into step with them.

"The Rebels must be waiting for us by now," Alex said. The three of them walked down the corridor, then went through the rec deck doors. "Hmm," the admiral said, looking around. "I wonder where they are."

Jon was also looking around. Then he pointed. "Up there." The four Rebels were on the forward balcony, near the viewports. Lieutenant Re'mington was with them. The three *Avenger* officers rode the small turbo-lift up to deck 4, then crossed around to where the Rebels stood.

"Hello, Admiral," Luke said. "We were just relaxing." His eyes drifted to the fire-lizards on Alex's and Wendy's shoulders, and Wonder and Lyric were quickly introduced.

"Looking out the window?" Jon asked, gesturing toward the port.

"Yes," Leia answered, her eyes drifting back to the port. Spreading out below them was the starboard side of the primary hull. Beyond the ship, thousands of stars washed across the sky, glowing like multi-colored gemstones set against the blackness of space. "It's beautiful," the princess continued, gazing at the vista.

"It is, indeed." Rosenzweig's gaze also traveled out beyond the chamber they were in. He thought back to other times he'd shared views like this one. Wonder crooned softly, and he pulled his awareness back to the group he was with. "For good or ill, though, there are things to discuss." He indicated the currently-empty snack bar area. "Let's go sit down."

Once they were settled, Luke asked, "What do we need to discuss?"

"What we're going to do," Alex answered, "once we find the Klingons. We'd also like your assistance in finding the warp through which we entered this universe."

"You'll have it," Leia said. "It's the least we can do, after your assistance to us."

The discussion of the details continued for some time. In the midst of it, Fillmore did join them, Rodimus nestled in the crook of one arm. The brown fire-lizard blinked as he became the center of a new round of ooh's and ahh's from the Rebels. Even Chewbacca was intrigued by the small creatures, and Re'mington responded by trying, unsuccessfully, to coax Wonder away from Alex and onto her own shoulder.

Finally, all that could be settled was, and the group divided. Bob and Wendy took charge of the Rebels, and Re'mington led them all off to a nearby game room, just down the corridor from the main recreation complex. For their part, Jon and Alex retired to the admiral's cabin for some tea and relaxation.

For the next several days, all was quiet, as the *Avenger* and *Triumphant* stretched their sensors to the limit, searching for the *Ekru*. On the fourth day, Rosenzweig got a call from the bridge. Yawning, he sat up in his bunk and tapped the intercom switch. "Yes?"

It was Lt. Commander French. "Admiral," Scott said, "Lieutenant Warren reports a sensor pickup. He thinks it may be the *Ekru*."

"Good," Rosenzweig responded. "Sound yellow alert, and call Captain Lane and Commander Fillmore to the bridge, as well."

"Aye, sir. Bridge out." The admiral rolled out of bed and dove for a uniform.

Alex, Jon, and Bob met at the turbo-lift two minutes later, and rode up to the bridge. "Report?" the CO asked, as he and the others stepped off the lift. In response, French pointed at the viewer.

An image of a Klingon *K'tinga*-class battlecruiser was steadily expanding on the screen. Rosenzweig replaced French in the center seat, and the watch officer took up a position next to him.

"It's still ahead of us," he said. "Range is about a half light-year. Course is roughly parallel to ours."

"Very well. Take engineering." French moved to comply, and Rosenzweig swiveled toward communications. "Commander Studley, hail the Klingons, would you?"

"Aye, sir." The blond communications officer hit controls. A moment later, she looked up. "I'm getting response, Admiral."

"On visual," Rosenzweig ordered. Studley nodded, and the main viewer displayed an image of a Klingon captain on his ship's bridge.

"This is Captain Kandar of the Imperial Klingon Cruiser *Ekru*. We accept your offer of communication. State your purpose for it."

Rosenzweig leaned forward. "This is Rear Admiral Alex Rosenzweig, of the Federation starship *Avenger*. We offer cooperation in our joint objective: locating the warp that will lead back to our universe."

Kandar exchanged glances with the man standing near his chair, whom the *Avenger* crew assumed was the exec. Then he returned his attention to his visual pickup. "How do we know, Admiral, that you are worthy of our trust?"

"A good question," Rosenzweig countered, "and one we might easily ask of you. Consider, though, that we are in the same situation as you. What would we gain from lying? Even if we sought to leave you here, why seek you out and contact you?"

The Klingon exec leaned over and whispered to Kandar. The captain nodded. Looking back at his viewer, the Klingon nodded. "Very well. We will accept your reasoning. What do you suggest?"

"A moment, please." Alex swung toward communications. "Ms. Studley, hail the *Triumphant* and tie them in on this channel. Splitscreen the viewer."

"Aye, sir." A moment later, she added. "General Rieekan acknowledges." She tapped a switch and the viewer image split.

"Can you both hear me?" the admiral asked. Getting affirmative responses, he introduced Kandar and Rieekan. Then he glanced over his shoulder. "Now, my science officer will outline our plan."

Fillmore stood up. "It's fairly simple, actually. We'll use our three ships to create a triangular formation, with each ship at a point of the triangle. The triangle's size will be determined by the maximum communications range of the ship that has the shortest such range." He paused. "Are you with me?" Both Kandar and Rieekan indicated

that they were, and Bob continued. "We'll all establish a common course orientation, holding parallel courses with each other. Once we're ready, we'll turn sensors outward at maximum range to search for the warp. I have a rough guess of its course, which we will follow. If one ship locates the warp, they'll let out a holler to warn the others. Any questions?"

There were none. The formation was rapidly assumed, and Fillmore transmitted the course bearing to the *Ekru* and the *Triumphant*. That done, the three ships set off.

Luke and his friends remained aboard the *Avenger* during the search. Chewbacca and Re'ming'ton spent a great deal of time together, and Lando reported that Chewbacca had confided that he found her quite interesting. Rosenzweig wasn't quite sure what to make of that. The Rebels spent a lot of time soaking up what knowledge they could about the *Avenger*, evidently hoping that they could make use of it when they returned to their own fleet. Lane and Shappe both assured the admiral that they were getting virtually nothing useful, not least of which because while the translators the Rebels had been given allowed them to understand spoken Galacta, the written language was another issue. The *Avenger's* linguists, it turned out, were learning much more about the Rebels' language than vice versa.

By the time the search had entered its fourth day, Rosenzweig was flirting with the idea of calling it a failure. They simply weren't finding anything. Fillmore talked him into giving it another twelve hours. This, it turned out, was fortunate.

A few hours later, Anbinder swiveled from the communications station, "Admiral, I have a signal from the *Ekru*." He smiled slightly. "They sound awfully excited, especially for Klingons."

"Really?" Alex smiled also. "All right. Put them on." The main viewer switched to an image of Captain Kandar. Mark had been right; he did look excited. "*Avenger* here, *Ekru*. What is it?"

"We found it, Rosenzweig. We found it!"

"Excellent! Transmit the coordinates."

"Transmitting," Kandar said, after a quick glance toward Communications Officer Kitar.

"They're coming in," Fillmore confirmed.

"Keep track of it," Lane said quickly. The exec turned toward Rosenzweig. "We'd better beam our guests back to the *Triumphant*."

"Agreed," the admiral said. "See to it, Jon."

"Aye, sir." The exec had Anbinder call Luke and tell him to gather his friends and meet Lane outside his cabin. Then he headed into the turbo-lift.

Reaching Luke's quarters, he found the group waiting for him, including the two droids. "We located the warp," he explained, "so it's time to send you back to the *Triumphant*."

"Will you call for a shuttle?" asked Leia.

Lane shook his head. "No need. We'll beam you back with our transporters." At the uncertain looks on the Rebels' faces, he smiled reassuringly. "Don't worry. It's perfectly safe."

The Rebels collected their personal belongings, while Lane updated Rosenzweig. The admiral said that he'd meet them in the transporter room. Once they were ready, Lane led them there. They found Rosenzweig waiting for them. They were

directed to put their luggage on the platform, and Ensign Obara sent it back to the Rebel Cruiser. Then the four Rebels and two droids took their places on the platform. Artoo-Detoo bleeped nervously, and Luke patted his dome to reassure him. Turning forward, he stood straight and cleared his throat.

"Admiral Rosenzweig, Captain Lane," he began formally, "before we leave, I'd like to thank you all one more time for your assistance in the defeat of the Imperial fleet. Without it, our victory might not have taken place."

Both Star Fleet officers nodded gravely. "We did," Alex said, "what we felt we ought to do."

"And we thank you," Luke answered. "It meant a great deal. Among the Rebel Alliance members, there is a saying: 'May the Force Be With You'." At Rosenzweig's somewhat uncertain expression, he smiled, "It means, 'Good luck'."

"And to you," the admiral answered. "I doubt we'll meet again, but we will remember you, and will hope for your success."

"All the best," Jon added.

The Rebels nodded in reply, and both Rosenzweig and Lane stepped back from the platform. "Ensign Obara, do you have the proper coordinates?"

"Yes, sir," the transporter specialist replied.

"Very good. Energize." Obara's hands moved across the console. The six figures on the platform were enveloped in cylinders of blue-white light. They became indistinct, and vanished into the shimmer. Exchanging nods with the ensign, Rosenzweig and Lane left the transporter room.

As they got back to the bridge, Ensign 1st Class Toland looked up from the helm. "Sirs, the Rebel cruiser is moving off."

"They sent a brief signal just before they got underway," Buonocore added. "General Rieekan reported the safe return of Mr. Skywalker and the others, and conveyed the thanks of the Rebel Alliance for our help. I took the liberty of acknowledging for the *Avenger*."

"Well done, Commander." Rosenzweig replaced him in the command chair. The CO glanced toward navigation. "Mr. DenDulk, plot a course into the warp."

"Course already plotted, sir," DenDulk replied brightly.

"Distance?"

"Approximately 750,000 kilometers, Admiral."

"Mark," Alex said to Anbinder, "are the Klingons ready?"

The communications chief spoke into a console microphone for a moment. Then he looked back to Rosenzweig. "They report that they're ready."

"Good." He paused, then squared his shoulders. "Put me on shipwide, please."

Mark tapped a switch. "You're on, Admiral."

"All hands, this is the captain speaking," began Rosenzweig. "We're about to head back into the warp, on a course that will, hopefully, take us back to our own universe. As we discovered the last time, this is apt to be a rough ride. If you can get to restraint-equipped seating, do so. If not, get a grip on something solid, and hold tight. Rosenzweig out." He exchanged looks with Lane and Buonocore, then hit the log control switch.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9106.11:

Our search has been successful, and we are now approaching the warp. Our Rebel companions have moved off, with our best wishes for eventual success in their campaign. With luck, this transit of the warp will bring us home. One way or the other, we'll know soon."

Switching off the recorder, Rosenzweig looked around the bridge. It appeared that everyone was ready. "Mr. Toland, take us into the warp."

"Aye, sir. Moving ahead."

Aboard the *Ekru*, Kandar watched his main viewer. On it, the *Avenger* closed on the warp.

"They're getting under way," Navigator Kuylehr reported.

"Wait until they enter," Kandar instructed, "then follow."

"Yes, Lord Captain," acknowledged Kedeck from the helm.

On the viewer, the *Avenger* shrank steadily as it approached the warp. The ship's outline was still visible as it reached the central void. It shimmered, just slightly, and vanished into the darkness. Kandar pointed toward the viewer, his finger directed at the warp, and the *Ekru* also began to accelerate, diving toward the pool of light.

The *Avenger's* bridge crew silently watched the main viewer as the warp's image expanded. Inexorably, more and more of the image was swallowed up by the inky black void. Finally, it was totally dark.

"Restraints," Lane said. He spoke softly, but his voice carried throughout the bridge, and was rewarded by the clicks as the bridge crew snapped their chair-arms into place over their laps. Lane himself tightened his grip on the bridge rail, and watched as the admiral locked his hands on the command chair's arms.

The ship suddenly reeled sickeningly. Everyone hung on, as the bridge lighting went red.

"Here we go," Buonocore said.

In engineering, Shappe grabbed the railing surrounding the intermix shaft. He looked around, seeing both his Assistant Chiefs and assorted crew hanging on to rails, consoles, or poles. Shifting his gaze to a status display, Mike winced as he saw several strain read-outs shift to red. "Hang on, damnit," he muttered.

In sickbay, Doctor Romano held tight to the sides of her desk. As far as she knew, everything had been battened down, and Doctor Gifford was ready...just in case. As the ship rocked and surged, Wendy prayed silently that no one would lose his grip. If that happened, the medical staff would be busy once the *Avenger* had cleared the warp.

And then it was over. The ship steadied, the inertial dampers no longer faced with overload conditions. Crewmembers slowly released their grips and looked around.

"We're through," Lane said. He let go of the rail and straightened up.

"But," asked Rosenzweig, "did we get home?" He didn't want to deal with yet another universe. If the warp was not symmetrical, they might well spend the rest of their lives jumping from universe to universe, seeking the way back to their own.

Looking up, even as he spoke, the admiral noticed that the viewer was blank. "Mr. Toland, can you get that viewer on?"

"Working on it, sir," the helmsman responded. A moment later, he added, "Got it. View aft." The viewer lit up, showing an angle on the warp. A moment later, a Klingon battlecruiser soared out of the warp. It slowed and paused, then turned and began to pick up speed again.

Anbinder swiveled from his station. "Admiral, Captain Kandar reports that he's making for the border of the Empire. Now, he says, is not the time for a violation of territories."

"How does he know--?" Alex began, starting to swing toward sciences. Toland interrupted him.

"I have a forward view, sir." The CO swung back. Framed by the stars, and hanging in the center of the viewer, was an Epsilon station.

"I see," Rosenzweig said, matter-of-factly.

"Admiral," Anbinder said again, "the station is hailing us."

"On visual." The forward view was replaced by an image of a Star Fleet communications officer.

"This is the Epsilon 2 station, calling *U.S.S. Avenger*. Do you read us? Come in, *Avenger*."

"Reply frequency, Mark," the admiral said, smiling.

"You're on," said Anbinder. Alex straightened in his chair.

"This is *Avenger*; Rear Admiral Rosenzweig, commanding. We're home."

>>>>FINIS<<<<