

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

STARLIGHT RESCUE

By Alex Rosenzweig

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9304.26:

While en route back from our relief mission on Ahlyar, the Avenger has intercepted a distress signal from a passenger liner called the S.S. Starlight. We are well past the Daltexi sector, and have put considerable distance between ourselves and the Klingon border, as well. It is therefore doubtful that the signal is a ruse. According to the transmission, the liner apparently encountered a magnetic storm of unusual force for this sector of space. The strength and unexpectedness of the storm seems to have caught them unawares, and overloaded their shields, allowing energy surges to essentially 'fry' many of their internal systems. According to the records, the Starlight is a Sunshine-class vessel, built within the last 15 years. The Starlight reports a crew of 150 and nearly 500 passengers. The crew have their hands full trying to prevent panic. With damage severe enough to threaten the life-support systems, this is proving to be no easy task. In response to the call, the Avenger is making best speed for the Starlight."

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig and Commander Johnson sat across from Commander Padovan's desk in the Chief Engineer's office. On the wall, a viewer displayed a three-view graphic of the Starlight. Padovan's blue fire-lizard, Tiamat, was curled on a corner of the desk, watching the three men as they discussed the situation.

"Based on our current understanding of what's happened over there, an engineering team will be needed to assist with emergency repairs," Rosenzweig was saying.

"What about their own engineers?" asked Padovan. "Surely they must know the ship well enough to handle it."

"They're competent enough," Johnson explained, "but they're just not equipped to deal with a situation like this one. Under normal circumstances, ships like this one are set up to allow, in an emergency, enough jury-rigging to get them home. But with the kind of extensive systems damage they've suffered, the normal fallbacks just aren't enough."

"Moreover," Alex added, "most of the liner's crew are tied up dealing with the passengers. Where the engineers might normally be able to recruit extra hands from other parts of the crew, that option isn't available right now."

"What they need," said Johnson, "is enough patching so that the liner can get back to a base equipped to repair it, or at least to a point where the cruise line can send out a tow."

"Star Fleet could send a tug for them," Padovan pointed out.

"That's true," replied Johnson, "though that kind of tow would likely be very expensive. But even if they opted to take that approach, they're still in bad shape now, and we are duty-bound to respond to a distress call." Padovan nodded, taking the point.

At that moment, the intercom chimed. Padovan hit the switch. "Chief Engineer," he said.

"George, it's Klufie. Are the Admiral and Commander Johnson still there?"

"Yes. They're sitting right across from me."

"What is it, Mike?" asked Alex.

"We're approaching the Starlight," Klufas reported. "ETA is about five minutes."

"Thanks, Mike," said Bill. "We'll be up in a few minutes."

"Got it," Klufas responded. "Bridge out."

The Avenger dropped out of warp and closed on the liner. It was stationary, looking almost too placid. On the Rec Deck, several crewmembers stood at the forward viewports, watching as the liner grew larger outside the Avenger.

The Starlight seemed absolutely still, but beyond that, the ship looked in surprisingly good shape. The only external evidence of its difficulties was that its running and navigation lights were out.

"To my way of thinking," opined Ensign Corallo as he watched crippled liner hanging there, "that's the creepiest way to find them."

"No," replied Ensign Muzyk, who stood nearby, "there are worse. Try no external lights, no internal lights, and airlocks open to space. **That's** creepier."

After a moment of thought, Corallo nodded his agreement.

The turbo-lift doors slid apart, admitting Rosenzweig and Johnson onto the bridge. As the Vice Admiral stepped down onto the lower deck, Lt. Commander Maldonado levered himself out of the command chair and returned to the Sciences station.

"Situation?" Rosenzweig asked him.

Standing at the rail by the station, Carlos reported, "We're in intermittent contact with the Starlight at this point. They at least know that help is on the way."

"Communications are improving as we approach," Klufas added. "The remnants of the magnetic storm are still fouling sub-space."

"Try to hail them, anyway," Alex requested.

They were able to achieve contact, although the viewer image of the liner's bridge was still distorted and periodically washed with static. But it was enough.

They were greeted by the liner's master, Captain Toshiro. After thanking them profusely for responding, he quickly gave them a rundown of the Starlight's condition. It wasn't pretty. The main engines were down, and the impulse drives barely functional. Internal power systems were inconsistent, and everything was on batteries, just to be safe.

"Safety devices had kept crew and passenger casualties lower than they might have been," Toshiro added. He shook his head. "It could have been a lot worse. As it is, though, we're still staring at more than our infirmary or med-staff are up to handling."

"Captain," asked Rosenzweig, "if you wish, we can detail engineering and medical teams to assist."

The look Toshiro gave him was pure gratitude. "That help would be more than welcome, Admiral. Thank you."

"Of course," Rosenzweig replied.

Behind the Vice Admiral, Commander Johnson stepped to the Master Situation station. Tapping the intercom switch, the exec contacted both Padovan and Dr. Fillmore.

"All right," he said, "it's time to go to work. Scramble engineering and medical support teams, and have them report to Transporter Room 4. Let's move, Commanders." He switched off the 'com and nodded confirmation to Rosenzweig, who returned a thumbs-up gesture.

In Transporter Room 4, the first medical team was preparing to beam over to the Starlight. Headed by Commander Gifford, their job would be to begin the process of getting the liner down from a crisis level. Given the situation, thought Diane, that would be no small feat.

Ensign Lyons scrutinized the read-outs on the transporter console. They looked okay, but when dealing with ionic or electromagnetic interference, one could never be too careful. There were stories of thoroughly bizarre incidents occurring as a result of transport through such environments, and **he** certainly didn't want to send a team into some alternate universe, or scattered chaotically through our own.

"Bridge," he said into his intercom. "I'm still getting unclear readings on the residual magnetic fields from the storm. I'm worried about transporter safety."

On the bridge, Johnson glanced over at Maldonado. The scientist ran several sensor programs, studying the results on a viewer. Shaking his head, he pressed his intercom switch.

"Ensign, sensor scans from here suggest that the residuals are of only minimal concern. Watch for any odd fluctuations of the containment beam, but as long as it stays within specs, go ahead."

Gifford exchanged looks with Lt. Commander Re'ming'ton and Lieutenant Richardson, who were going along to help the Starlight's crew deal with potential panic situations. Great, thought Diane. Not only a ruined ship, but a gamble getting over there. Re'ming'ton gave her people's equivalent of a shrug, and they looked forward again.

"Got it," Lyons was saying. "Thanks, Commander."

"No problem. Bridge out."

Switching off the 'com, Lyons returned his attention to the panel. Then he looked up at the medics on the platform. "Ready?"

"Energize, already," was Richardson's reply.

"Energizing," Lyons said, punching in the final sequences. The boarding party was enveloped in blue-white light, and disappeared.

Just as the medical team vanished, the transporter room doors slid open, admitting the next group, from Engineering. The Engineers were led by Lt. Commander Zulkowski, the ship's Assistant Chief Engineer. As usual, Zach was talking. Zach talked a lot. On the one hand, it was often true that he often had interesting things to say. On the other, he also tended to crack a lot of jokes. His "hit rate"—that is, the percentage of jokes that were actually funny—was about 40-45%. That wouldn't be so bad, except that his attempt-rate seemed to average about one per minute. When he hit, he often hit big. When he didn't... Fellow crewmembers usually hoped that the hits were big enough to balance out the groaners.

The engineers entered the room just as the last vestiges of the transporter effect faded from the platform. Zulkowski looked over at Lyons. "Was that the Medical team?"

"Yes, sir," Lyons replied.

"Good." Zach led the group toward the platform. On the way, he paused. "Y'know," he said, "it's a really good thing the liner's shields held up."

"Agreed, sir," replied Ensign Riccardelli. "Wouldn't that go without saying?"

"Yes," Zulkowski said, "except to note one thing: if they hadn't, our medics would be about to learn new meanings for the term 'magnetic personalities'." He grinned. Everyone else groaned. They got onto the platform.

Lieutenant Valentine leaned over to Riccardelli. "Don't encourage him," he warned. Riccardelli looked properly abashed.

Lyons shook his head and engaged the transporter.

On the bridge of the Starlight, Captain Toshiro watched a series of monitors at the primary control station bank. They were displaying views of various areas of the ship, including the infirmary, main engineering, and a variety of passenger areas: ballrooms, gyms, observation lounges, and so on. There really wasn't that much to see; most of the passengers who weren't injured were following instructions to stay in their cabins. Those few who weren't were being rounded up by the Security teams.

"Captain?" Toshiro looked over as the Situations Officer addressed him. "The groups from the Avenger are aboard."

"Oh, good. Now we might have a fighting chance. Call Ms. Valborg to the bridge."

"Aye, sir."

As they stepped into the corridor outside the Starlight's transporter room, the Medical team looked around.

"Chaym," began Gifford, "would you go up to the bridge and debrief Captain Toshiro? The rest of us will be in the infirmary."

"Okay," Re'ming'ton replied. "I'll meet you there after I finish upstairs."

With that, the Mohnan strode off in search of a lift to the bridge. After finding two that weren't working, she decided that a more direct approach would be necessary. Buttonholing a steward she found in a side passageway, she explained who she was and that she needed to reach the bridge. The steward was very helpful, telling her that the turbo-lifts had been turned off to save power. He showed her the forward stairwell, indicating that the bridge was four levels up.

"Thank you very much," Chaym said, as she took her leave. Entering the stairwell, she dropped to all fours and loped up the stairs.

Reaching the top, she stood up again and hurried through the doorway into another corridor. Ahead of her was a sign saying "BRIDGE" in large letters. Walking through the double doors, she found herself in a large room with an array of consoles and monitor systems.

Looking around, she walked toward the man in the center of the room. As he seemed to have the most braid, she figured that he was likely the Captain. Introducing herself, she found that her guess had been right, as she made the acquaintance of Captain Masaki Toshiro and First Mate Katrina Valborg.

"The other members of our Medical team went to the infirmary," Re'ming'ton told Toshiro and Valborg. "They'll help your doctors assess the situation and figure out if we need to send additional supplies or people from the Avenger, move some of the injured **to** the Avenger, or simply reorganize things here, if appropriate."

"Good," said Toshiro. "It'll make our lives much easier. It has been very difficult dealing with so many injured and frightened people. You Star Fleet officers face danger on a routine basis, but most of our passengers simply weren't prepared for this."

"One of our hardest tasks," Valborg added, "is keeping everyone calm in the face of this. We've got little kids on board who simply don't understand what's happened. All they know is that everybody's suddenly scared and unhappy, so **they're** scared and unhappy, too."

"Then there's the usual retinue of...persons who simply don't care about the danger and just want the cruise they paid for, everyone else be damned," Toshiro added. "I have had it drilled into my brain for 15 years to always be completely and unfailingly courteous to the passengers, but I must honestly tell you that there are several with us this trip that—" He leaned forward. "—if anything happened to them, I'd probably order a round of drinks on me."

"Oh, Captain, it can't be **that** bad," Chaym said, surprised.

"Oh, yes it can," Valborg responded. "You'd be surprised."

"And to make matters worse," Toshiro continued, "we have passengers from an assortment of different races aboard, all of whom react differently to stress. In some cases, people are starting to get on each other's nerves."

"Now **that** I can understand," Re'ming'ton replied, thinking about how often she and Maldonado startled each other in the best of circumstances. "Don't worry, though," she went on reassuringly. "Lieutenant Richardson, our Doctor of Mental Health, is quite well qualified to help out your med-staff."

Toshiro didn't sound reassured as he replied. "Commander, our only medic with psych-training was killed at the height of the storm, when a console exploded in the infirmary. Don't get me wrong; our two other doctors are competent physicians, but they're not disaster-trained. They typically go out and spend two weeks patching up skinned knees or exhaustion or, maybe, an occasional broken bone. But this?" He shook his head. "No."

Chaym tried again. "Captain, Doctors Gifford and Richardson, as well as Ensign 1st Class Zwebner and Ensign Lynn, **are** all disaster-trained. They'll be able to deal with the problems. They might not have a proverbial magic wand, but they do have experience."

"I hope so," said Toshiro, "for all our sakes."

Upon arriving in the infirmary, Gifford quickly sized up the situation. The Starlight's doctor was a good man, and had certainly done what he could, given what he had to work with. However, that this was beyond him was quite clear. He—like most of the Starlight's crew—just hadn't been prepared for this much of a mess. Gifford fell into her training, and immediately turned one of the infirmaries into a triage center. She called in the liner's doctor, and began a rapid discussion about the condition of various injured crew and passengers. Because the Avenger's facilities were far more capable than those of the Starlight, it was quickly decided that the most

seriously injured would be transported to the Star Fleet vessel for treatment.

While she spoke to the liner's doctor, Gifford kept an ear on what was occurring in the main ward. She carefully listened to the sounds made by both patients and medical workers. She also listened to the comments that wafted through the room. Such comments were often the best barometer of people's moods. As she listened, Diane could hear Lieutenant Richardson comforting some of the children.

"It'll be fine, Thervin," Stephanie told the little Andorian boy who sat tearfully by the bed where his mother lay sleeping. Next to him, a small Human boy was trying to comprehend just what had happened and what it meant. All he really understood was that suddenly he wasn't allowed to play where only yesterday everyone said it was okay to be. He knew that his daddy had been hurt, too, and was beginning to put the two things together. As he did, he was getting more scared, but wasn't really sure why.

The infirmary door slid open, and Lt. Commander Re'ming'ton came through, looking quickly around to take in the situation. She had barely a chance to assess matters when a scream split the air, stopping her in her tracks. Her ears pricked forward and her gaze darted around the room, tracing the source of the scream. On one side, she saw a little girl sitting with a man and woman that Chaym took to be the girl's parents. The girl wore a bluntly terrified expression and her hand extended toward Chaym, pointing. Her parents looked startled at their daughter's reaction, but not afraid of Chaym.

Re'ming'ton didn't move for a few seconds, afraid of further scaring the child. Other children had looked up, too, and were beginning to show fear themselves, although Chaym was willing to bet that they had no idea why they should be scared.

Sensing the problem, Richardson hurried over. "What is it?" she asked, her voice a mix of lightness and concern. She knelt down by the little girl. "Michelle? Can you tell me?"

Michelle looked straight at Richardson, her eyes wide. She pointed at Chaym again, and in a tremulous voice said, "Wolf!" Re'ming'ton's eyes widened, and she drew her tail around herself.

"That's Lt. Commander Re'ming'ton," Richardson explained gently, as much for Michelle's parents as for the scared little girl. "She's a friend. She works with us on our ship. In fact," and Richardson gave Re'ming'ton a big smile, "she's in charge of making sure that we can play when we're not working!"

"She won't eat us?" Michelle asked.

"Oh, no, of course not!" Stephanie said emphatically. "Commander Re'ming'ton likes to play with children, not eat them!"

"Are you sure?" Michelle asked, though she sounded a little less scared. "She won't make us think she's nice, then sneak up on us and eat us?"

Michelle's parents looked at each other for a moment, surprised. Then a light dawned. "Of course!" said her father.

"What?" asked Richardson.

"Just before the storm was at its worst," he explained, "while we were all confined to our cabins, Michelle was watching a tape of 'Little Red Riding Hood'. Lt. Commander Re'ming'ton bears a striking resemblance to the way they illustrated the 'Big, Bad Wolf' on the tape. And between the storm and the story, well..." He shrugged. Then he looked down at Michelle, "Honey, that was just

a story. It's not real. Lt. Commander Re'ming'ton isn't a bad wolf; she's a friend."

"Friend?" asked Michelle, looking at Chaym as if she still didn't quite believe it.

"Really?" asked a little boy named Tommy, who walked up next to Re'ming'ton and looked up at her. Slowly, Chaym knelt down, trying to appear non-threatening. Tentatively, she extended her tail toward him, holding it in front of him but not touching. Tommy looked at her, then reached out and touched the tip, very tentatively. Almost immediately, he drew his hand back, but when nothing horrible befell him, he reached out again. "Soft!" he said delightedly, stroking the tail. With a smile, Re'mington lifted her tail and tapped Tommy lightly on the head. He giggled.

Richardson looked around and saw several of the other children watching closely. She motioned Chaym over to the chairs where Michelle and her parents were sitting. She also beckoned the other children over. "Michelle, Tommy, let me introduce Lt. Commander Chaym Gale' Re'ming'ton, the Chief of Recreation on the starship Avenger."

"Call me Chaym," Re'ming'ton said, as some of the children seemed to struggle with the syllables of her last name. "And Chief of Recreation just means that I help the people on the Avenger play when they're not working, like Dr. Richardson said."

"Are you a wolf?" asked a girl named Sarah.

"On the planet where I come from, people evolved from creatures like wolves. But, no," Chaym shook her head, "I'm not a wolf."

"Even though the people from Chaym's planet of Mohna look like wolves, they're not mean or nasty like the wolf in the story Michelle read," Richardson explained. "They're just regular, nice people, just like us."

Michelle, after a quick look at her parents, slid off her chair and walked over to Re'ming'ton. "What's Mohna like?" The other children gathered around as Chaym started to answer Michelle's question.

When Gifford came out of the doctor's office, she saw Re'ming'ton seated on the infirmary floor, surrounded by the children. She was telling them what Gifford recognized as a Mohnan folktale.

"...and when the day and the night began to dance around the earth and the land, everyone was very excited. Soon, day and night each had dance companions of their own, as the sun danced alongside the day and the moons danced together and also with the night..."

The children were listening with rapt attention as Chaym wove her tale. Diane could see that the fear had left their faces in their fascination with the story. Glancing at the parents who were conscious, she could see unadulterated relief on their faces. For a few minutes, at least, the children were forgetting to be afraid.

With a smile, Gifford turned to the task of preparing patients for transfer to the Avenger.

Lt. Commander Zulkowski was worried. He stood near one of the main systems monitoring boards in the Starlight's Main Engineering room, studying the readouts. It certainly could have been worse, he thought as he contemplated the display. Most of the liner's systems were in good enough shape that they could at least be jury-rigged. For the most part, it looked like they would hold long enough to get the Starlight home. But the display also was showing what might be a serious problem. There was a power

drain occurring somewhere in the system. Zach feared that there was a malfunctioning device that was absorbing power in a way that it shouldn't be, drawing it away from the rest of the liner's main EPS net. Unfortunately, he had been unable to locate the source of that drain. The problem was that if the device in question overloaded at a crucially bad time, the results could be...well...messy.

Glancing around, Zulkowski saw the Starlight's engineer, Ahmad al-Ashram, talking with one of the liner's junior engineering techs. Approaching them, he paused to let al-Ashram finish his sentence.

When the tech had been dismissed, Zach stepped over to al-Ashram. "May I talk to you, please?"

"Of course." al-Ashram followed Zulkowski back to the main display.

"Look here," Zach said without preamble. He pointed.

"Uh-oh," growled al-Ashram. "This could be a serious problem."

"Can you figure out how to track it from here?" Zach asked him.

al-Ashram studied the board. "If the sensor-net were working, we'd be able to pin this right down. As it is, we'd be lucky to determine which deck it's on."

"Well, if I read this board correctly, it's at least along one of these conduits." Zulkowski reached out and tapped a part of the screen.

"Yes," said al-Ashram, "but that's still a **lot** of system to have to trace."

"True. Is there any way to do that from here?"

A haunted look came over al-Ashram's expression. "Not without the sensors."

It soon became clear that the only alternative was to do it "the hard way", as Zach put it, with a manual, "hands-on" search along the suspected conduits. They weren't happy with it; it was hardly an ideal solution. But the alternative compelled it.

With the idea established, they moved on to choosing a team. It was quickly decided that the team would consist of several crewmembers from the Avenger and those engineers the Starlight could spare from the other repair efforts. The Avenger team and the Starlight's best propulsion specialists were gathered and quickly briefed on the situation. They then decided who would go where, and prepared to begin the search.

Meanwhile, Zulkowski signaled Padovan on the Avenger to alert him to what was transpiring and to confer with him on strategy. George agreed to the plan, but urged the team to be careful. Zach assured him that they would. He did, however, request that several anti-rad suits be beamed over. (The Starlight's crew had their own.) Padovan assured him that they'd be sent immediately.

Only a few minutes later, the suits arrived. A steward ran them down from the transporter room. Thanking him, Zulkowski quickly distributed the suits and the team got into them.

When everyone reported ready, al-Ashram led the way to a Jefferies Tube access hatch. Opening it, he looked at the others. "Let's go." He crawled inside, Zulkowski behind him.

On the Avenger's bridge, Vice Admiral Rosenzweig watched the image of the Starlight on the main viewer. Around him, he saw the sensor readings that were feeding in and heard the reports coming across the com-channels.

"Admiral," Klufas said from Communications, "report from Doctor Fillmore. Ten patients from the Starlight have been beamed aboard and transferred to Sickbay. Wendy and Dr. Rosen are attending to them."

"Thank you, Commander," Rosenzweig answered him. It was reassuring to know that that aspect of the situation was under control. By contrast, Lt. Commander Zulkowski's report about a power-drain was quite worrisome. The Admiral was not an engineer by trade. He had, however, made a hobby out of studying starship design and construction, and he knew quite well that power leaking into inappropriate places had an unfortunate tendency to go BOOM at inconvenient times. Given the condition of the Starlight, that BOOM could happen sooner rather later.

Alex swiveled to face Communications. "Mr. Klufas, put me in touch with Captain Toshiro, please."

"Aye, sir." A couple of minutes later, he reported, "He's on."

Toshiro's image appeared on the main viewer. "Admiral Rosenzweig," began the liner's captain, "greetings. What can I do for you?"

"Captain," Rosenzweig, "have you spoken to your engineers recently?"

Toshiro nodded. "Yes. Mr. al-Ashram reported the situation to me."

"Good. Captain, do you have an emergency evacuation plan for the Starlight?"

"Evacuation?" At Rosenzweig's nod, Toshiro looked intently at him. "Yes, Admiral, we do. It has periodically been drilled, but not in some time." His expression sobered. "We have always viewed it as an action of last resort."

"Captain, I understand that well. It's always hard to abandon a ship. However, in light of the reports that our engineers have given us, I think it might be a good idea to pull it out of mothballs. Distasteful as it may be, we might need it."

Toshiro sighed. "You may be right," he replied. "Very well. I will discuss this with my officers."

"Thank you, Captain. Avenger out."

As Klufas broke the contact and the viewer returned to the image of the Starlight, Alex leaned back in his chair and sighed. "I hate having to tell a captain that," he muttered. Then he straightened and tapped his intercom switch. "Rosenzweig to Bell."

"Bell here," came the response.

"Brenda, I have a question for you. The Starlight may be facing evacuation. There's a serious problem in her engine systems, and it's problematic whether either their engineers or ours will be able to fix it. We may have to get everybody off in a hurry. What I need to know is what we would be able to do to help, should such an eventuality come to pass."

"We ought to be able to be of considerable help, Admiral," Bell replied. "I'll be able to get you specifics shortly."

"Good. Thanks, Brenda."

"You're welcome, sir." The circuit broke.

Zulkowski and al-Ashram crawled through a Jefferies Tube on the Starlight. Both carried tricorders and wore toolpacks on their belts. As they crawled, they studied the readings on their tricorders. They'd been tracking the power-flow along the conduit paralleled by this Jefferies Tube. Based on the readings they were getting, it seemed that they'd found the location of the problem.

Unfortunately, that was the last of the good news. The malfunction was located in an auxiliary reactor near the main impulse deck. The reactor had developed the equivalent of a "short", and power was draining through the reactor's control circuits. To make matters worse, several modules have been fused, so the unit couldn't simply be turned off to correct the fault. Power would have to be rerouted **while** the unit was running, and before the flow increased to the point that the governor circuits blew, which could result in an explosion.

al-Ashram pulled out a communicator and signaled the bridge. When Toshiro responded, the engineer quickly reported the situation.

"It's a nasty situation, Captain," he concluded. "We have a chance at getting the repairs done, but I must honestly tell you that the chance is a slim one."

"I understand," Toshiro answered him. "We have pulled out the emergency evacuation protocols and are getting them ready for use, if necessary. The Avenger has told us that they are able and willing to assist, should it be required."

Zulkowski leaned in toward the communicator pickup. "I'm glad to hear that, Captain. Still, we're going to give it a mighty try before we give up."

"Thank you, Mr. Zulkowski," Toshiro said sincerely.

When al-Ashram was done reporting in, Zach opened his own communicator. "Zulkowski to Avenger engineering team. We've located the problem." He gave the reactor's position and access instructions. "Those who are free, please meet Mr. al-Ashram and me there."

Acknowledgments came in from Lieutenant Valentine and Ensign Longo. Both reported that they were en route.

Zach looked at al-Ashram. "I guess we'd better get to the reactor." His compatriot nodded, and they resumed crawling through the Tube.

On the Avenger's bridge, Alex turned as the lift doors opened to admit Commander Bell and Lt. Commander Csuti. They nodded to Commander Johnson and stepped down next to the command chair. The exec followed.

"Admiral," Bell started, "we've got the ship in condition to take on any Starlight evacuees."

"Good," Rosenzweig answered. "Any particular difficulties?"

"It'll be a very tight squeeze," Csuti said. "We're talking about putting nearly 1,100 people onto a ship built for 400 at the most."

"He's right," added Bell. "There'll be a considerable strain on both the environmental systems and our supplies. I'm having the Mission Support staff work on ensuring that we'll be able to keep everyone fed, along with providing for basic hygiene and sleeping arrangements."

"I'm most worried about the security risks of having so many people crowded together," Csuti said. At Johnson's questioning look, he added, "It's not so much an issue of secrecy as dealing with the problems involved with that much crowding. You know, fights and the like."

"Can we deal with that?" asked the exec.

"I think so," the security chief told him. "We'll have to be very careful, but the entire division is reviewing the manuals on crowd-control." He paused, then added, "I never thought I'd be worrying about crowd control **on board** ship."

"I told you this job would surprise you," Johnson said with a smile.

Csuti nodded. "Yes, you did. You just didn't say how much."

"Well, then," Rosenzweig, bringing the banter to a close, "we can get the job done. I shall leave the three of you to take care of the details."

"Aye, sir," Johnson replied. Joined by both Bell and Csuti, he headed for the Mission Ops stations.

Aboard the Starlight, the engineering teams converged on the malfunctioning reactor. Fortunately, there was a service bay alongside the reactor. al-Ashram told the Avenger engineers that this reactor and a couple of others like it supplied much of the liner's secondary power. If anything went wrong, ready access would be of particular importance. As he studied the reactor's monitor displays, though, his expression became grave. He looked up at Zulkowski. "According to this, we have 27 minutes to accomplish these repairs. If we do not manage to do so in that time, the power flowing through here will overload the lines, resulting in an explosion."

"Were the diagnostics right about those control modules?" Zach asked.

al-Ashram checked the control console. Then he scanned the unit with his tricorder. "Yes," he told Zulkowski. "If we were to just turn off this reactor, the remaining circuits would shunt the full and unfiltered power-flow straight into the main impulse fusion reactors. They're not designed to handle that kind of back-door surge, and it would most assuredly destroy them."

"What effect would this reactor exploding have?"

al-Ashram looked straight at Zach. "If this reactor goes, it will set off an explosion of the impulse engines. And if the impulse engines explode, the ship—and all aboard—could be lost."

There was a long silence following al-Ashram's pronouncement. It was broken by Zulkowski, who shook his head and muttered, "Marvelous. Either way, it's great balls of fire." al-Ashram just gave him a black glare, while several of the others groaned. Zach shrugged.

Without further comment, the engineers set to work.

With 23 minutes left before the reactor was to explode, Captain Toshiro made a decision. He turned to First Mate Valborg. "Put me on the ship's speakers."

Katrina looked at him. "What are you...?"

"Please," Toshiro said, an deep weariness creeping into his voice, "just do it."

Valborg looked at him for another long moment. Then she tapped a control. "You're on, Captain."

Toshiro looked at the microphone. He took a deep breath. "Attention, attention, this is Captain Masaki Toshiro. At this time, given our situation, it is my duty to inform you that we are now considering an emergency evacuation. All crew personnel, please hook into Secure Circuit 1 and log on." He watched the Internal Communications Display. When he was satisfied that everyone who could listen was in fact doing so, he gave a run-down of what was happening, including the current reactor difficulties. He told them what he planned to say to the passengers, and warned them to be ready in case of problems.

With that done, he switched back to the public circuit. He told the passengers what to expect and reminded them to follow the instructions of the crew if and when an evacuation was necessary.

Throughout the stricken starliner, both Starlight and Avenger crewmembers worked to stave off panic. Following Captain Toshiro's announcement, tensions had again jumped, and the passengers had to be reassured that all was under control and that they would be taken care of.

And even as they reassured nervous passengers, the officers and crews of both liner and Star Fleet frigate began to carefully move the passengers to the shuttle bay, emergency transporters, and lifeboat stations, in case the call to evacuate was sounded.

With 18 minutes left before the reactor was to explode, Lieutenant Wilson called the bridge of the Avenger. Johnson took the call while Rosenzweig spoke to Toshiro.

"Yes, Lieutenant?"

"Commander, we're set down here. We can deploy the shuttlecraft, travel pods, and work bees to assist in an evacuation. In fact, I have the Talisman, Genesis, and Accord at full readiness to launch, with a travel pod and two work bees ready behind them."

"Very good, Lieutenant," Bill replied. "Thanks."

"You're welcome, sir." Even through the tension and despite the fact that Wilson was on an audio-only circuit, Bill could hear the smile in Amy's voice. "Flight Control out."

"Damn it!" exclaimed al-Ashram. He traded looks with Engineering Mate Garcia.

"Won't work, eh?" asked the younger engineer.

"What won't work?" asked Zulkowski.

"We've been trying to get this control circuit back into operation," Garcia explained. "If we can, then we can reroute the power-flow away from the reactor."

"But it refuses to accept rerouting commands," growled al-Ashram, glaring at the panel in question.

"Is there anything else we can do?" asked Lieutenant Valentine.

"There's only one possibility left," answered the Starlight's chief engineer. "There is an override protocol that stands at least a decent chance of working."

Noting the uncertainty in al-Ashram's voice, Zulkowski pressed, "But..."

"To get it enabled and then do the necessary system modifications will take almost more time than we have."

"Almost?" Zach questioned.

"It'd be cutting it **very** close," al-Ashram said.

"Do you know of any alternative?" Zulkowski asked, for once with total seriousness.

al-Ashram shook his head mutely.

"Then we'll have to try it," the Avenger's Assistant Chief Engineer said. "If it's the only chance, then we take it."

al-Ashram set to work. Zulkowski called in to report to Captain Toshiro. When he described what al-Ashram was trying to do, Toshiro's image nodded.

"I believe I know which line of attack Mr. al-Ashram is following. It is risky...but it may be the only chance there is."

"Wish us luck, Captain," said Zach.

"Good luck," answered Toshiro. He broke the connection.

On the bridge, Toshiro stared at the 'com speaker. He heard Valborg come up beside him. "Is al-Ashram doing what I thought I heard Zulkowski say he was?"

"Yes," Toshiro told her.

"Risky."

"Very risky." Toshiro paused, then reached for the all-call control. "Attention, please. This is the Captain. Proceed with evacuation."

There were twelve minutes left... The space around and between the Avenger and Starlight was filled with vehicles. Shuttles, 'bees, and pods all flitted around the two ships, trying to ferry the erstwhile passengers of the hapless liner away from that ship before anything could explode. As quickly as possible, small craft were touching down in the Avenger's hangars and disembarking their passengers before taking off again.

Lieutenant J.G. Isejaeth Hijiruach had taken a work bee out to a distance of five kilometers from the ships to monitor the movements of the small craft. As he watched, two shuttles launched from the Starlight and darted toward the Avenger. Hijiruach quickly noticed that something was wrong. The shuttles he was watching were too close together. In fact, Jay realized, if something wasn't done right quick, they were going to collide! There was no time to try to hail them. Jay hit the thruster controls and arrowed in toward the shuttles. As he sped toward them, he activated the bee's grapple. Diving near one of the shuttles, he snagged with the grapple and literally forced it onto a different course.

His comm-unit crackled. "Work bee, this is Starlight shuttle Radiance. Just what the hell do you think you're doing?!"

"Radiance, this is Lieutenant Hijiruach aboard Avenger Work Bee 2. Look out of your portside window."

"What?" came the querulous response.

"Look!" There was a pause, during which Jay presumed that the pilot was actually looking. A couple of moments later, the comm-unit came to life again.

"Oh, my god..."

"You see?"

"Uh...yeah. Would've been too late if you hadn't. Thanks, and sorry for that initial transmission."

"Apology accepted. I know the pressure's on, but be careful, okay? We want you to get your passengers all the way to safety."

"You bet. Will do. Radiance out." Hijiruach sighed and shook his head as the channel closed.

On the Avenger, Lt. Commander Re'ming'ton had taken charge of the children. With Vice Admiral Rosenzweig's permission, she had set them up on the Rec Deck, where they'd have room to play but could have an eye kept on them. The fact that almost all of them found her fascinating, even though a few had been circumspect at first, made her the logical choice. Re'ming'ton had promptly corralled Ensign Mitzi to help out, and was thrilled to find that they took to her, as well. Between the two of them, they more or less managed to keep up with a bunch of children dealing with the first release of tension they'd had in hours.

Meanwhile, the Avenger and Starlight engineers continued to work on the reactor. However, trouble was about to arrive on their doorstep, as it were.

Longo had been monitoring the power-grid with his tricorder while al-Ashram and Zulkowski worked on getting the override protocol into place. Suddenly, the numbers began shooting up. There was only an instant... "Power-spike!" he exclaimed. But before anyone could do anything about it, the surge of energy poured through the EPS lines and into the consoles in the service bay. The unit where al-Ashram was working overloaded and exploded. The Chief Engineer was thrown back against the wall. When the smoke began to clear, Garcia scrambled over to al-Ashram.

"Chief!" But it was readily apparent that al-Ashram was unconscious.

Fortunately, there was an auxiliary console in the bay. Garcia dove at it and accessed the computer again. But al-Ashram was thoroughly out of action, and while the other Starlight engineers could do the repairs to the reactor, they didn't know the override protocol that al-Ashram was using. The group traded looks, and gradually all eyes went to Zulkowski. Zach, who'd been watching al-Ashram's progress, was their best hope. At least he'd been keeping up with what al-Ashram had been doing. Having no other option, Zulkowski shrugged and dove in.

"I was watching this," he told them, "but I didn't think I'd have to be doing it myself."

"Anything that we can do, just tell us," said Engineering Mate Meshev. Even his typical Tellarite pugnaciousness was muted.

There were four minutes left...

Almost the entire crew and passenger complement of the Starlight had been transferred aboard the Avenger. As Lt. Commander Csuti had predicted, it had been a **very** tight squeeze, but everyone took it in good part. Even the children behaved well.

Preparations were underway for the Avenger to back away from the liner, in expectation of a possible explosion. Ensign Lyons was on alert in the transporter room to grab off the last few people—including the engineering team—if the explosion appeared imminent.

With a speed born of desperation, Zach had managed to get the override protocol running. Meshev sat up straight and announced, "Override running!" Then he added, "Our turn," and he and Garcia dove at the console to reroute the power-flow.

Zulkowski got out of the way, and pulled out his communicator. "Avenger, this is Zulkowski. We're making progress here. The Starlight's engineers are rerouting the power-flow now."

"Zach," came Rosenzweig's voice, "you're cutting it awfully close. We can beam you out if you want."

Zulkowski glanced over at his companions. The Starlight engineers, not taking their eyes from their tasks, shook their heads vigorously. A moment later, Longo and Valentine echoed the gesture. Zach turned back to the communicator. "Negative on that. We think we've got a chance to beat this."

"All right," said the Admiral. "I don't like it, but I'll defer to your judgment. Avenger out."

There were two minutes left...

Garcia and Meshev looked at each other. "I think we've done it," said Garcia. "The power-flow is shifting and smoothing out."

They all watched the power-net monitors. For the most part, it looked as though all would be okay. Then Longo gasped. He pointed at a display. There was one last power-spike, a big one, coming through the lines in their direction.

"Where did it come from?!" demanded Meshev angrily.

"Could be anywhere, with the systems in this condition," Zulkowski answered.

Under the current circumstances, they realized, one of two things would occur. The repairs would hold, the surge would shunt into the bleed-units enabled by the jury-rigging, and all would be well, **or**...the repairs would not hold, the surge would hit the reactor, and...**BOOM!** All they could do was wait and hope.

Longo continued to monitor the EPS lines. He therefore knew when the surge arrived. According to his tricorder, a build-up was taking place within the remaining active console. "Back away from the console," he advised. They moved as far as they could. Watching the console, they saw its primary viewer begin to glow.

Everyone held their breaths as the viewer brightened. Then Lieutenant Valentine shouted, "Duck!" They all crouched down and closed their eyes, expecting the worst, as the viewer exploded.

"Time to explosion?" asked Rosenzweig.

"Thirty seconds," said Maldonado from Sciences.

The bridge crew, along with Captain Toshiro, divided their attention between the main viewer and the time displays. The count-down proceeded. The clocks reached the zero mark... and began logging positive time. The Starlight sat placidly on the main viewer.

"No explosion," said Carlos into the silence.

"Mike," Alex said to Lt. Commander Klufas, "signal Mr. Zulkowski."

"Aye, sir," Klufas answered. After a minute, he reported, "No response."

"Try again," Johnson told him. Klufas nodded.

The second time, he was more successful. What came over the speakers was loud and, after a moment, could be recognized as joyful. If Zulkowski had actually answered, it was quite inaudible. Amidst the incoherence, the sentence, "We're still here!" could distinctly be heard.

"Mr. Zulkowski?" asked Rosenzweig. "Mr. Zulkowski!...ZACH!!"

Finally, Zulkowski answered. "Here, Admiral! Hold on. Will you shut up for just a minute?" The shouting stopped. "Okay. Zulkowski here, sir, I am happy to say."

"Well, we're happy to hear you say," Alex replied. "What happened?"

"We **did** it!" Zulkowski said exultantly. "The power problem has been solved."

"Are all of you okay?" asked Alex.

"Mr. al-Ashram was injured. We think he has a concussion. We'll be bringing him out now."

"Excellent," said the Admiral. "Let us know when you're ready for beam-out."

"Aye, sir."

As the channel closed, Rosenzweig and Toshiro exchanged looks and sighs of relief. Toshiro turned to Klufas.

"If you would, please signal the Starlight's shuttles and pods. Tell them that it is safe to return to the ship."

"Of course, Captain," Mike said, as he turned to his station.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental:

The Starlight is secure, and its crew and passengers have returned to the liner. The Avenger is currently towing the Starlight, en route to a rendezvous with a tug from the cruise line. Commendations are due to the members of both the Medical and Engineering staffs who put in extraordinary efforts to assist in the rescue and assistance operations. Special commendations are due to Lt. Commander Zulkowski, for bravery and leadership in dealing with the reactor crisis on board the Starlight, and to Lt. Commander Re'ming'ton, whose assistance in watching over the children among the Starlight's

passengers was a particular relief to many parents.

A full report is being written, but for the moment, I will simply note that there are no additional casualties and that the Starlight's passengers will reach their destinations only a few days late. And, just for the record, the cruise line is **very** grateful."

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