


— STAR TREK — ENTERPRISE

The Enterprise runs against time to find Tucker,
and to reveal the plot that threatens the
Starbase of destruction...

STARBASE ONE PART 2

JQ. / 

LINDSAY

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We wish you a pleasant time reading this story.

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Revision 1

Lindsay

Starbase One

-

Part Two

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CHAPTER

1

Lieutenant Malcolm Reed sat in his quarters studying his panel. The screen displayed all the data he had collected from Starbase 1 during his investigation into Shran's kidnapping. He scrolled over schematics and power readings, looking over anything he might have missed. Tucker's kidnapping had weighed heavily on him; he felt responsible for not checking out the source of the strange energy readings himself. At the moment he was looking for similar readings, any clue that might help him find another hidden location that commander Tucker might have been taken to. This wasn't the first time he'd tried this--in fact, he was on his third attempt.

"Come on," he said out loud, frustrated. He was actually sweating under the self-inflicted pressure. He continued to scroll up and down the schematic. The computer didn't find anything, so he had to scan each

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conduit and relay, looking for abnormal energy signatures. Tucker could have helped him find it faster but he wasn't there--another thought to increase Reed's frustration.

His comm unit beeped. "Archer to Reed."

Reed got up and pressed the button on his comm. "Go ahead, Captain."

To Reed's ears, Archer sounded just as frustrated. He had been played, and he didn't like it. "We're 2.5 days away from Starbase 1. I want you to begin scheduling more battle drills and prepare the MACOs for a boarding operation. I want to be ready for anything."

Reed sighed. It meant he wasn't going to be able to continue his vain search for Tucker. "Aye, sir. I'll get right on it."

Reed tapped the button and went back to his console. He opened his schedule and began planning drills and training exercises. But guilt gnawed at him, and he knew the longer it took them to get back to Starbase 1, the greater the chance that Tucker was in jeopardy.

CHAPTER

2

It was cold, quiet, and dark. He put his hand in front of his face and couldn't see anything. He wasn't even sure who he was. He tried to move but felt only pain concentrated in his head. Somewhere deep inside, it throbbed. Whenever he moved, he felt disoriented and sick.

"Wha...what's going on?" he tried to say. It came out a harsh whisper.

The pain was nothing compared to the fact that he couldn't remember who he was. It was uncomfortable not knowing anything about his current situation. He felt his strength slowly returning with each attempt to move. Although his muscles felt like jelly, he could make small movements. He looked around the room. It was dark wherever he looked. Despite this, he kept turning his head, straining his eyes, looking for any clue as to where he was. His head jerked around when

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something in his peripheral vision flashed green a few meters away. It disappeared quickly, but after a second or two, it reappeared again. He stared at the spot, hoping he hadn't imagined it, and it happened again. A green light was slowly and regularly flashing.

He headed toward it slowly, crawling slowly. When he got close enough, he reached up and touched it. It was slightly warm. He felt around it and found buttons.

"This is a console," he said, hearing the rasp in his voice. His determination to figure what was going on drove him to persist with his investigation. A console--that was good. He knew how to use a console, knew how to turn it on. He dragged himself onto his knees, squinting at the dark shape. More by luck than skill, he somehow activated the board, so it lit up in front of him.

The various lights on the board hurt his eyes as they activated. He lay back down on the floor until the pain in his eyes subsided. When his eyes adjusted again, he got to his knees again slowly to look at the display on the console. There was enough light that he could see his reflection on the screen. He saw the whiteness of his skin, his light brown hair, his blue uniform. It stirred recognition. He knew that face, but more importantly, he knew that uniform: Starfleet.

He wasn't sure which was more important right now--the console, which might explain where he was, or the fact that he was slowly starting to remember. He looked once more at console and smiled at himself.

"I'm Charles Tucker the Third."

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And he knew just what to do. His fingers flew over the console as he tried to figure out what was going on.

CHAPTER

3

Archer had been pacing around on the bridge for quite some time now. "How long before we're in weapons range?" he asked Reed.

Reed looked up at the captain. "Fifteen seconds, sir. They're locking onto us."

Archer sat in his chair and prepared to give the necessary orders. "Malcolm, disable their engines as soon as they're in range." He could hear Reed programming the weapons locks as the ship on the viewscreen became closer and closer.

T'Pol called from her station "They are firing their weapons." A yellow light burst out from the ship on the screen and headed toward the Enterprise. It hit, but it barely rocked the ship.

Reed reported the damage readings to Archer, "Hull plating is holding. Minor damage only, sir."

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Archer looked to Reed. "Return fire--slow them down for us."

Reed obeyed, and the bridge crew watched as red lines arced out from their own ship and knocked out the aggressor's engines. It leaked plasma and came to a stop.

Archer stood up. "Travis, deploy the grapples."

Mayweather punched in the commands as he acknowledged Archer's order. He reported back, "Sir, the grapples have a firm hold. They're not going anywhere."

Archer turned to Reed. "Report."

Reed typed in some commands and relayed the results to Archer. "Much better, sir. We completed the operation seventeen seconds faster."

Archer nodded, satisfied that the crew was ready. Now if only they could get to Starbase 1 faster. "Malcolm, stand down from battle drills." He turned to Sato. "Hoshi, any luck yet?"

Sato pulled the small communications device from her ear and responded to Archer's question. "Captain, I'm fairly sure they're under a communications black-out. No one is answering our hails--not even Columbia."

Archer looked to T'Pol, "For all we know, there may not be anyone left there to respond."

T'Pol, as always, sounded calm and collected. "Captain, we won't be in sensor range of the area for at least a day and a half. It is too early to draw logical conclusions from the data."

Archer nodded quietly in agreement but was still very angry deep inside for being fooled the way he

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was. He walked to the turbolift and spoke to Sato when he reached the door. "Keep trying to raise the station." The doors closed, and he disappeared.

CHAPTER

4

The sickbay doors opened and Archer walked in and straight to Shran's side, joining Phlox, who was treating him with a medical device. "How is he, Doc?"

Phlox looked up. "He suffered a lot of trauma. He's been in and out of consciousness. I'm afraid he hasn't been oriented to his surroundings."

Archer looked at the sleeping Shran. He told Phlox, "Let me know the next time he wakes up." Just as he reached the door, he heard a weak voice call for him: "Arch...er." He turned back immediately and saw Shran reaching out for him.

"It looks like my patient is conscious," Phlox said cheerfully, setting his medical instrument down. "Easy, now, Commander." He looked up at Archer, a faint crease between his eyes belying his cheerful tone. "It won't last long."

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Archer nodded and clasped Shran's forearm, which Shran had weakly extended to him. He watched Shran fight to stay conscious. "Shran, it's me, Jonathan Archer. We found you in a bunker light-years away from Starbase 1, tied to a chair--tortured. What the hell happened to you? Who kidnapped you? The bunker was empty--abandoned."

Shran turned his face to Archer. The full extent of broken bones in his face became apparent. His dim eyes also revealed his pain. Shran's tone was rough, defeated. "Yes--he tortured me. I remember that. I couldn't see him, but it was a man. I could tell from his voice. They used machines." He coughed, a low, hacking sound. "They didn't have the decency to torture me themselves. A machine."

Phlox spoke up. "Captain, I've been in touch with Andorian doctors. They've reviewed his medical files--they've been very helpful. He will recover. Fortunately, there was no permanent damage. It seems the process was designed to induce severe pain."

Archer's anger levels began to rise again--even Shran noticed Archer's grip become more tense, because he looked down at Archer's hand. "He kept asking about the station's weapons. He knew that I was the one overseeing their installation." Shran's voice sounded stronger when he spoke his next sentence: "I told him nothing. Nothing."

Archer smiled. Shran might be half-dead, but he was still an Andorian--and a former member of the Imperial Guard, trained as a soldier, and conditioned to resist torture.

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Shran seemed to fight to stay conscious. He obviously wanted to say more. "Your admiral was on that planet long before I was--weeks, perhaps months. He had been held in isolation. Whoever did this has fooled us all!"

With that, Shran collapsed again. Archer released his arm and turned to Phlox. "I know you'll do what you can for him."

Phlox nodded. "And what are you going to do, Captain?"

Archer stood up straight and tightened his jaw. "Someone on Starbase 1 is pretending to be a Starfleet admiral. Your genetic scans of the body prove that the man we found dead was Admiral Gardner. The man on Starbase 1, whoever he is, could destabilize everything we've been doing to build this alliance. We've got to get back there. The alliance has to go forward."

CHAPTER

5

Tucker lifted his head from his arms. He'd nodded off. That wouldn't do. He was in a sticky situation, and falling asleep wouldn't help him if his captors, whoever they were, decided to come back to check on him. At first he thought they'd been foolish to leave him alone in a room with a console that worked, but he'd quickly discovered that although it was plugged in, that was about it. He had no access to data, but he'd been hacking at it for what felt like hours, trying to find out where he was and how to get out.

The data were all protected by firewalls and passwords, and Tucker knew better than to try any, because he'd likely set off alarm bells. He stuck to initiating and then aborting diagnostics, to see how much access the console had. He'd backed out of menu after menu and found success in the most unlikely way: "Welcome to Starbase 1!" a welcome screen said, and

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it dissolved into pixellated, bouncing balls that coalesced into the words, "Enter to begin your tour."

"Huh," Tucker said in disbelief, touching the screen to enter. Starbase 1. So he was still on board. But which area? He had no idea. He was probably still in the science area. The cheerful font of the welcome screen, the friendly female voice, the colorful balls--Tucker suspected he was in the part of the science area dedicated to children. "I want to see the power core," he said, studying the menu. He had to cycle through a few more screens to find it. "An overview of power consumption," he muttered, hitting a combination of buttons to delve under the children's menu and then entering the power signature of the core. His simple query would go undetected. "And...it's off by 0.3%."

Some more delving and targeted queries revealed that an overload was slowly building in the core. The buildup was slow and had been occurring over many days. Tucker estimated it would take another week before it would be noticed by the computers as out of line with the margin of error--but he suspected the computers wouldn't notice. There was definitely a saboteur on board. And although Tucker was a little confused about what day it was, he was pretty sure that when the core did begin its uncontrollable cascade, delegates, important dignitaries, and heads of state would be on board the station. It would be a massacre.

Tucker didn't think that the cache of food and drink he'd literally stumbled across would last more than a few days. He laid his head back down on his

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arms. "Cap'n, any time now," he mumbled. "You can come get me at any time."

So. They hadn't found him yet. Enterprise just needed a little help, that was all. What did he have? He had a console geared to children, with no real access to anything other than query data. He could work with that. Couldn't he?

He rubbed his temples. His head hurt, and he was getting hungry and thirsty. It was almost time for another break. In a minute, he would shut down the console and take a nap. But first--how to signal Enterprise?

He hit a button and read the menu. "Communications," he read. That sounded good. At that moment, he decided to put all his faith in Sato. He had to risk a transmission. And there was no way to encrypt it from this console.

He activated the transmitter, hit the keys to access the engineering menu under the colorful children's menu, and specified a subspace frequency and a message. It was discreet--so discreet that Sato may not find it, but then again, so discreet that his captors would mistake it for minor interference. The big difference was that Sato would be looking for him.

Unless she thought he was dead.

Tucker set the message to repeat, sighed, and powered down the console. The transmitter would continue transmitting its simple message on repeat until he--or someone else--shut it down. In the sudden dark, he stumbled away from the console and laid down.

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CHAPTER

6

On the bridge, Archer thought Sato looked frustrated--she still couldn't raise the station, and she'd tried every trick in the book to extend her range. They had one more day of transit, and they were still too far away to scan for any information that would give them any indication as to the conditions at Starbase 1. Now, on top of his fear for Tucker's life and safety, Archer had to add fear for the safety of Starbase 1 and everyone on it.

Archer had been feeling defeated after making that mad dash to nowhere. He'd taken orders from an impostor who was doing whatever he pleased right now. It was clear that he and Enterprise had been sent away. But why?

The rest of the crew seemed focused--the battle drills and emergency exercises had taken care of that. He sat down in his captain's chair and began to con-

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sider all that was going on. A secret enemy was trying everything to destabilize the alliance. They had built ships that could change appearance. They had been involved in Earth's Terra Prime terrorist organization indirectly, and had even placed a spy under the guise of a Vulcan scientist on his ship. Every time, he had barely managed to stop the threat, but he had never been able to take a prisoner--or find anyone else who had any answers.

The only clue anyone in Starfleet had was Romulans. The Romulans had gone out of their way to damage and prevent any alliance among the races. What were they afraid of? Archer was certain that they were behind this plot, but he couldn't prove it. He didn't even know what a Romulan looked like--in fact, nobody knew what a Romulan looked like, not even the Vulcans, with their years of space exploration and their comprehensive database.

Archer's thoughts were interrupted by Sato, who spoke urgently "Captain, I'm picking up a signal."

Archer stood up. "From Starbase 1?"

Sato shook her head and frowned, clearly confused. "Yes and no. Telemetry indicates it probably originates from there, or from close by. It's like...static. I just ran it through an algorithm I'm testing. Here."

As she pressed the button so everyone on the bridge could hear, she removed her earpiece. Archer frowned as he listened intently. He heard a faint hissing--like static, just as Sato had said.

"Did you hear that?" Mayweather asked excitedly, turning around in his chair.

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"What?" Archer asked.

"There. Right there."

That time, Archer heard it: a faint popping in the static, short and long pulses. "SOS," he said, his heart lifting with hope.

"SOS," Sato agreed. "The signal is nondirectional. It's just being squirted out. It's not pointed anywhere."

"Commander Tucker," Archer said with satisfaction. "It's got to be him." He ran across the bridge and clapped Sato on the shoulder. "Good work, Ensign."

Everyone on the bridge was laughing with relief. "This means that enough of Starbase 1 is intact to send a covert call for help," Reed said.

Sato's voice cut in. "Wait--there's more."

Archer watched as Sato, her face reflecting her total concentration, listened intently and then tapped at her console. "Morse code," she explained, looking up. "After six sequences of SOS, the message says, 'Core overload.' Then it repeats."

"Core overload," Reed repeated. "That can't be good."

"I was thinking the same thing," Archer said grimly, just as Sato said, "I have a hail."

"On screen."

To Archer's surprise, a humanoid Xindi face looked at them from the viewscreen. Behind him were some arboreals, looking with interest at Enterprise. "This is Commander Segrad of the Xindi ship Fengara. You seem to be in a hurry. I assume you're heading to Starbase 1 for the opening ceremonies?"

Archer sat in his chair and tried to look relaxed

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and in control. "Commander Segrad, this is Jonathan Archer on the starship Enterprise. Yes, we're heading to Starbase 1, and we're running a little late. We ran into some...er...problems, and speed is of the essence."

Segrad shrugged. "The opening ceremonies are in two days' time. You should arrive at the dramatic moment. What is it you say? Fashionably late."

Archer cleared his throat. "Actually, I need to be on time. I'm the new commander of Starbase 1. I'm to be presented at the opening ceremonies."

The Xindi laughed. "Your ship is too slow," he said dismissively. "Warp five?"

Archer watched as Mayweather bit back a retort, but the way he swung around and looked at his captain spoke volumes.

"Ah, yes, warp five," Archer said. "And the finest ship in the fleet."

"Of course," Segrad said.

"There is a little...problem," Archer admitted. He had no choice but to tell the truth. "I've just received evidence that the station's core is on overload, and it needs to be stopped as soon as possible. We have evidence of sabotage, which I would be more than happy to go over with you if you want to come aboard. Needless to say, that the entire alliance will suffer if we can't stop the overload--and the destruction of Starbase 1. I could use your help."

Segrad began to nod. "Good thing I ran into you. Strange things have been going on, Captain. A Xindi ship that has already arrived at Starbase 1 reports that personnel arriving early have not been permitted to en-

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ter the station--even work teams that had been scheduled to help prepare the starbase for opening. All ships are required to stay in orbit or in dock. And all communications have been stopped until further notice. Admiral Gardner has tightened security." He stood up. "I'll come aboard immediately and review your evidence."

Archer chose this moment to make his request. "We need some Xindi technology to get us there faster. Can you help us?"

Segrad knew what Archer wanted right away. "You want a vortex? Your ships are not structurally capable of handling such a journey. We could take you with us if you like."

Archer pondered the offer. "I'd need at least fifteen people on your ship, including several armed parties to board Starbase 1--and a severely injured Andorian."

Segrad looked up sharply. "You've found Commander Shran?"

"Tortured and half-dead," Archer said grimly. "He's part of my evidence of sabotage. Some other evidence is in the morgue: Admiral Gardner. The real Admiral Gardner--genetic scans prove it." He shook his head. "I'd rather take Enterprise. Is there any way we could make some structural modifications so we could make it through a vortex?"

Segrad sighed. "Yes, but it will take quite a bit of time, effort, and power. I can send an engineering team to help you," he said.

"Whatever you can do to help," Archer said.

Segrad nodded formally. "The Xindi owe you a

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debt, Captain Archer," he said. "We'll do what we can."

Archer saw him turn and indicate something to an arboreal behind him. T'Pol spoke up next. "Captain I'm receiving the modifications. The ship will not have an easy journey, but it can be done."

Archer responded, "How long?"

T'Pol made some calculations on her console and looked at him again. "If we don't use the warp engines and the entire engineering team is made available, the modifications can be ready in about twelve hours. The journey itself will take another three hours."

A day, and Archer had no idea how far along the core overload was. He looked at T'Pol and nodded. "Get to engineering and assist Mr. Kelby in making the modifications. You're the liaison with the Xindi teams. Take all the help you need."

T'Pol got up and walked to the turbolift. "Ensign Mayweather, I could use your assistance modifying the navigational array."

Mayweather rushed to the lift. "Yes, ma'am," he said as the turbolift doors closed.

Archer turned back to the viewscreen. "Thanks for the help. Please come on board at your convenience. We have a lot to talk about."

Segrad acknowledged him with a nod. "I'll be over at once. It seems that once again our fate lies in the hands of humans."

CHAPTER

7

Time had passed quickly in engineering, T'Pol had been conscious of that. She had already assured the captain four times that the modifications to the engines were on schedule. She had explained to Archer that the damage to Enterprise would be considerable despite the engineering crew's attempts to shield vulnerable systems before they attempted their plan. And although Segrad had once again volunteered to ferry over whoever Archer wished, Archer was adamant that Enterprise itself was at the opening ceremonies, not just its captain. T'Pol found the captain's stubbornness illogical: of course it made more sense to accept Segrad's invitation. But she also understood, intellectually if not viscerally, the importance of symbolism.

"Mr. Mayweather, have you completed your modifications to the navigational systems?"

Mayweather looked up. "Almost. I'm having trou-

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ble modifying these thruster guides. We need those to make a smooth entry in and out of the vortex."

T'Pol descended the stairs from the main engine console and looked to see what was troubling him. Some investigation found the problem. "It seems the power flow to the thruster guides are going to receive interference from the proximity to the vortex. Mr. Kelby is due to finish shielding the power systems on deck C in ten minutes. Have him shield these areas as well." She pointed to areas of the thruster assembly on the display. "It should not take him too long to complete the task."

Mayweather nodded. He was about to walk away when a red light flashed on a console a meter or so away. "What now?" he wondered. He walked over to it, lines of concern beginning to mark his face. He hit the console, maybe a little harder than he should have. "Dammit."

T'Pol quirked an eyebrow. "Ensign?"

Mayweather shouted, "I just modified these an our ago, and the system reset." He kicked it again, the loud clattering catching the attention of a few of the engineers working close by, one of whom said, "Easy, now, Ensign."

His actions were out of proportion to the event, but T'Pol reminded herself that tired humans often grew angry. Still, she sensed something else was bothering him. She decided to spend the precious time they needed talking to him. "Ensign, what is bothering you?"

He turned around and leaned on the console.

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"Nothing. I'm just frustrated."

T'Pol didn't have time to spend extracting the truth from Mayweather, so she applied a little force. "Mr. Mayweather, we are short on time and I need you to perform your duty. You can either talk to me now or go back to the bridge."

Mayweather put his hands on his hips and hung his head, gathering himself. Then he looked up. "Do you remember when we were back at Earth and we'd discovered some Romulan connection to Terra Prime?"

"Of course," T'Pol replied.

Mayweather looked her in the eye. "Commander, I'm getting tired of all of this. We try hard to bring worlds together, and we get knocked back. We fight and beat back one bad guy, and another comes along. We--we realize we love someone..." His eyes became glossy; he was clearly fighting back tears. "...and she gets taken away from me."

T'Pol looked into his eyes. This was the center of his anger. "Whom are you referring to?"

He looked down to the ground, unable to hold her gaze. "Gannet," he said softly. T'Pol recognized the human female reporter's name and remembered hearing that he had been romantically involved with her. "Commander, I realized after she died that she meant more to me than I'd told her. I can never fix things between us because she's gone now. Apparently she's dead because of Starfleet or Romulans or some other bastards who I can't--I can't get to."

T'Pol knew that he would not finish his task unless

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he focused. "Do you believe that vengeance will help you gain satisfaction?" she asked. Mayweather remained silent. T'Pol continued, "Ensign, the galaxy is full of mystery. It treats us however it pleases, and we must accept it. However fair or unfair it may seem, the best way to fight the harshness of the galaxy is to be the opposite of those things that anger you." It was a gross simplification of the studies of T'rak, but it would do.

"Are you saying that I should--should just accept that she's dead and be happy about it?"

"Not at all," she said. "In fact, you should be angry for what has happened, but you should honor her by fighting for what you know is right. Our mission right now is one of those fights."

Mayweather grew quiet. "Yes, ma'am," he said quietly. "I think I understand."

"Perhaps you could bring me a cup of chamomile tea from the mess," T'Pol requested. A little break would do Mayweather good.

"Yes, ma'am." Mayweather headed for the door. "Thank you, ma'am," he called over his shoulder.

CHAPTER

8

Enterprise stood still. Its engines seemed to glow brighter than usual--Archer didn't know if it was his imagination or if the modifications they'd hurriedly made to the ship. He sat in the captain's chair. The entire bridge crew seemed tense; this attempt to replicate Xindi vortex travel was dangerous. But with Segrad's help, and with the instructions he'd left right before he'd left for Starbase 1 a few hours ago, it seemed that Enterprise could make the journey.

"T'Pol, let's get going," Archer ordered.

He watched as T'Pol opened a channel to engineering. "Mr. Kelby, begin energy flow into the engines. Raise the levels by 20 percent at fifteen-second intervals."

Kelby's voice came back over the comm. "Yes sir."

At first the ship began to vibrate, but after a few

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seconds, the ship began to shake more violently. The crew had to hang onto their consoles so as not to get thrown out of their seats. The noise from the ship's vibration became louder until it was hard to hear anything.

"T'Pol, is it working?" Archer demanded.

T'Pol shouted back. "We shall know in a moment."

Archer looked at the viewscreen and saw normal space--but it was vibrating. After a moment, a point of light began to grow in the center of the screen. It expanded slowly, until it took up the space on the viewscreen.

T'Pol shouted to him, "Captain, we must enter now."

Archer yelled to Mayweather over the creaking. "Travis, full thrusters."

Mayweather's hands danced on the controls. "Powering up thrusters." A console on the bridge exploded, sparks showered everywhere. "We're approaching the threshold of the vortex. Five seconds to entry."

Archer was finding it hard to stay calm. He needed a ship that worked when they reached the other side. But he couldn't regret rejecting the Xindi's offer of a ride. "T'Pol, are we going to hold together?"

T'Pol didn't try to speak; she just nodded. Archer, satisfied, turned back to the viewscreen. Mayweather slid the ship neatly into the center of the vortex, and space disappeared. Although things began to calm down, the engine output remained the same, and the ship continued to vibrate, although not as intensely as

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when they had first opened the conduit. After a few minutes, it was possible to speak without yelling. Archer relaxed fractionally. It seemed the ship wasn't going to shiver apart.

"All stations report status," Archer ordered, hoping he had a ship that could defend itself if necessary.

Mayweather reported in first. "The helm is fine. The thrusters took a beating, but we'll be able to get out again when we reach the end."

T'Pol spoke up next. "Sensor efficiency at 73 percent."

Archer looked to Sato next. She reported, "The comm system is off line. I can restore audio once we stop, but visual will take a little longer."

Archer looked to Reed, who reported next. "One of the aft phase cannons is down. It needs a day's work to be repaired, but all other weapons are fully functional."

Archer walked over to Mayweather's station and slowly ran his hand across the top of it. He turned back to his bridge officers and addressed them all solemnly. "She's been through worse." He sat down in the command chair and spoke as they continued on course. "Maintain tactical alert."

He sat down. All he could do was wait--and hope.

CHAPTER

9

The bridge continued to rattle as the ship struggled through the vortex. On the bridge, the turbolift doors parted, and Phlox stepped out. Archer turned. Phlox could see that his facial expression was querying the doctor's presence on the bridge. "Captain, I need to scan the crew to check the effects of traveling through the vortex--it seems the engines are emitting more radiation than usual."

Archer looked to T'Pol, who assured him instantly, "The levels of exposure are within acceptable limits."

Phlox shrugged. He'd been curious to see the vortex through the viewscreen on the bridge. "Doesn't hurt to be cautious," he said. He smiled and began walking around the bridge to scan everyone. He listened as Mayweather reported to Archer: "Sir, we'll be clear in five minutes. Our trajectory will take us to a distance well clear of the station, as requested."

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Archer nodded. "Thank you, Ensign. Are you ready to steer us out?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, sir."

Phlox came up to Archer and spoke to him quietly. "Captain, I had seven injuries to treat as a result of entering the vortex. The trip out could be just as bad."

Archer looked to him. "If sickbay is going to fill up, you can use one of the cargo bays to handle more patients."

Phlox was unnerved by the fact that he may have to deal with even more injuries. He didn't like that they were taking such a reckless action, but he knew that Archer was ready to take any risk to save the lives on the station--and to save the alliance that they were trying so hard to build. "Captain, I just need to warn you that with the further strain that a coming conflict may have on medical resources, I anticipate a depletion. There may be deaths. Avoidable deaths."

Archer placed his hand in Phlox's arm. "Doctor, I know how hard it is going to be for you. I have full confidence in your ability."

Phlox nodded. "I'll do my best, Captain."

Phlox headed for the turbolift. Just as he entered, Archer turned and called, "Hey, Doc!" Phlox held the door open and looked at Archer questioningly. "Look after my crew."

Phlox smiled. "You too." As the doors closed, Phlox hoped he could fulfill the captain's wishes.

CHAPTER

10

"Captain, two minutes to Starbase 1."

Archer rubbed his hands together as he rose and moved to stand behind Mayweather. The sweat on his palms reminded him of how much pressure he was feeling at the moment. "How far from Starbase 1 will we be when we come out?"

Mayweather made the calculations. "At our latest trajectory, and at full impulse, we'll be approximately seven minutes from the station. It's hard to be exact while we're inside the vortex."

Archer put his hand on Mayweather's shoulder. "Good work, Travis. I'm afraid we may not be finished once we reach the base. I'll need some fancy flying."

Mayweather looked up at Archer. "Sir, I'm ready for anything."

Archer squeezed Mayweather's shoulder, a gesture of thanks and support, just as a voice came over the

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comm. "Kelby to the captain."

Any other day, Archer thought, he would have said, "Go ahead, Trip." Instead, he said, "Go ahead, Mr. Kelby."

"Sir, we're ready to power down the engines and return to normal space. I've gone over the preparations. It's going to be just as rough as when we entered the vortex."

Archer nodded his understanding--not that Kelby could see it. "We're ready up here. What's the status of the ship?"

There was a pause. Archer assumed Kelby was looking for the easiest way to say it. "I hope the Starbase has a good repair crew."

Archer sighed. The damage to Enterprise couldn't be avoided. If they'd arrived using warp speed, Archer would be coordinating the evacuation of the station, not trying to save it. "Thank you, Mr. Kelby. Do your best to keep my ship in one piece."

"Aye, sir. Kelby out."

Archer spoke to Reed next. "Malcolm, are the teams ready?"

Reed looked up, almost smiling. "All ready, sir. Subcommander T'Pol will lead the team to stop the feedback at the station's power core. I'll locate Commander Tucker with another team, and I've assigned two MACOs to accompany you to arrest the admiral."

Archer grinned back at Reed. "It looks like you've planned a small invasion there."

Reed nodded. "Sir, when we've barged through the station's doors, whoever's behind this mess is going to

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think they're seeing the allies storm Normandy beach."

Archer faced the viewscreen. "Looks like we're ready, then."

At that moment T'Pol called for Archer's attention. "Captain, our arrival in the Marianis sector is imminent."

Archer began giving the necessary orders. "Hoshi, alert the crew to hang onto something. Travis, take her out as gently as you can."

Mayweather spoke from his console. "Aye, sir, but I don't know if Xindi vortexes know how to be gentle." The ship shook violently. Archer braced himself and noticed the rest of the bridge crew doing the same. Mayweather reported from his station. "Captain, there are going to be a few more of those."

The ship shook again, this time worse. Sparks cascaded to the floor from the console that had previously exploded. "You don't bloody say," Reed called out to Mayweather.

The image on the viewscreen began to melt. It then slowly began to spin. Archer thought of it as seeing the light at the end of the proverbial tunnel. The ship sped toward the end of the tunnel, which slowly formed into the blackness of space. The vibrating that the crew had become accustomed to during their voyage began to intensify and became a violent rumbling that lasted all of the way through to the exit of the vortex.

T'Pol stated the obvious from her station, although she had to raise her voice to be heard over the rumbling of the ship. "We are exiting the vortex."

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A shower of sparks exploded through various areas on the bridge. Lights flickered on and off, and then the vibrations stopped. So did the ship. There was silence.

Archer did a quick assessment of his bridge crew. Everyone looked severely shaken but in one piece. The main consoles were working, although some of the screens around the bridge were blank. The viewscreen displayed the blackness of space with white pinpricks of stars. He watched as a shape rose from the bottom of the viewscreen. It was so close, it almost seemed to be in front of him on the bridge. The shape rose higher and higher until he recognized the familiar saucer shape. The red glow from its nacelle's lit up its registration as it hung sharply in front of them.

"It's the Columbia," Archer said in excitement, just as a phase cannon beam lanced out and struck his ship.

CHAPTER

11

"Full impulse, Travis--get us underneath her. Hoshi, hail Captain Hernandez."

The bridge crew all reacted to the ship's steep descent. T'Pol reported from her console. "Captain, our power systems are fluctuating because of exit from the vortex. Any of our systems could go on- and offline randomly."

Archer stored it in the back of his head and began devising a strategy to prevent Columbia from damaging his ship too severely. "Mr. Reed, target nonessential areas. Fire phase cannons only."

The ship rocked from another of Columbia's blasts. Reed wiped the sweat from his brow. "Aye, sir, but avoiding casualties will be difficult no matter where we hit them."

The ship rocked again. "Hoshi, any luck hailing them?"

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Sato responded, "Captain, they're ignoring us."

"Communications blackout." Sato's suspicions clearly had been right. Archer got up and headed for Sato's station. "Travis, evasive maneuvers. Try and avoid their weapons."

Mayweather manipulated the controls. His hands danced over the console like an artist painting on a canvas. Archer spoke to Sato next as the ship rocked from another hit from Columbia. "Hoshi, I need to speak to Captain Hernandez. There has to be some way you can get through to her. Is the comm still off-line?"

"Yes. And I can't get it back up." Sato thought for a moment. "I have an idea, but I'll need a few minutes."

Archer patted her shoulder. "Work fast. We can't hold them off for long."

The ship was rocked by yet another hit, this one a lot harder than the previous one. "Captain," Reed called out from his station. "They managed to fire off a torpedo."

As Archer lowered himself into the captain's chair, he saw the small red dot speed toward the ship. When it hit, the ship shuddered and a rain of sparks shot out onto the bridge from the briefing area behind Archer. The crew had to duck to avoid debris. A raging fire grew out of the explosion. Archer shouted to an ensign, "Put that fire out!"

As the ensign ran for the fire extinguishers, Reed reported next. "Captain, our hull plating can't hold off another direct hit like that one."

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Archer pointed to Mayweather and gave him specific orders. "Travis, we need to stay close so they can't use their torpedoes. Malcolm, keep them busy--do what you can to throw them off. Fire at will."

Reed fired the phase canons and then replied, "I've got a few tricks, sir, but they'll best us soon if we don't do something."

Archer swiveled his chair in Sato's direction. "Hoshi, it's up to you now."

CHAPTER

12

Captain Hernandez felt a slight bump as Columbia was hit by another of Enterprise's phase cannon blasts. Her tactical officer sounded puzzled. "Captain, either the reptilians don't know how to shoot Starfleet weapons, or they're deliberately hitting us in nonessential areas."

Hernandez had noticed that every time she felt the impact of any of Enterprise's shots. She had expected to see the Xindi terrorists on sensors coming at them at warp speed, but somehow they had adapted the engines to create a vortex--a mode of travel that implied that the Xindi had indeed taken over Enterprise. She immediately ordered her tactical officer to fire, just in case the ship tried to speed out of weapons range and ram the station.

Something didn't add up. Somewhere in the back of her mind, despite the evidence of Xindi technology,

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she was becoming more and more doubtful about the whole situation. She had to follow orders, but for now, she was content to take matters into her own hands. She ordered, "Lieutenant Jordans, lock onto their engines. I want Enterprise disabled. As soon as that's done, prepare a heavily armed boarding party."

Jordans replied, "Understood, Captain. I'm having trouble disabling Enterprise. They're too close for another torpedo, and their weapons are being directed at areas that are confusing our targeting sensors."

Hernandez stood up. "That's a Starfleet tactic. They're trying to hold us off. Lieutenant," she called her science officer, "are the scanners functioning yet?"

The lieutenant looked up. "No, Captain. Our earlier proximity to the vortex when Enterprise came out is still causing interference. I can't do a scan for life signs yet. I'll need a few minutes to purge and reset the sensors."

Hernandez sat back down. "We don't have time to fool around. Joseph, boost the impulse engines to 110 percent and get us some distance. Kathleen, you've got one shot to disable them."

Jordans smiled from tactical. "I only need one, ma'am."

Hernandez knew something wasn't right. The shooting at nonessential areas--the typical, textbook Starfleet tactics--it didn't add up. It was seeming more and more likely that there weren't Xindi on board--and if that were true, then Admiral Gardner had lied to her. But he was monitoring the battle. She couldn't risk opening communications because it would tip him off,

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and she couldn't refuse a direct order on the basis of her gut. She was truly in a bind.

"Captain," Ensign Joseph called out. "On the viewscreen."

Hernandez looked up and then rose from her chair. She couldn't believe what she was seeing. The viewscreen had gone black, and letters came up, one by one, as if someone were typing them on an old-fashioned keyboard. When Hernandez saw the complete message, she almost shouted her next order: "Hold your fire. Open a channel to Enterprise."

She smiled as the message began to flash on the viewscreen. 'Archer here. Erika, stop shooting at us.'

CHAPTER

13

"Captain, they're holding fire," Reed reported from his station.

Sato smiled. "Captain, they're hailing us."

"Let's hear it," Archer ordered.

Hernandez's voice filled the bridge. "Jon, what the hell is going on? We were told that Xindi reptilians had taken control of your ship."

Archer blinked in surprise. Reptilians? "Trust me--I don't have an appetite for mice. There's no time to explain, but I can tell you that no reptilians are aboard. The whole alliance is going to come apart if we don't get to the station."

Hernandez nodded. "I assume you have a plan. You always have a plan. How can we help?"

Archer explained, concluding with, "We took a some damage, but we need to get within transporter range. Can you guide us in?"

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"Acknowledged. Ensign, come alongside the Enterprise in escort formation. Jordans, if the station thinks there's a Xindi plot in progress, they'll fire their weapons. We'll have to draw the station's fire."

Archer could hear the weapons officer respond. "I'll make it happen, Captain."

Archer looked at Mayweather. "Travis, let's go. Full impulse." Enterprise and Columbia sped toward the station. Archer stood beside Reed and watched the sensor information. "Mr. Reed, fire at the weapons only. Coordinate with Columbia's tactical officer and take out the ones that lock onto us."

Reed began programming a firing sequence. "Aye, sir, but we don't have much left in the way of weapons, and there are far too many weapons to take out on the station itself--it's armed to the teeth."

Archer turned his head to the take in the large station now filling the viewscreen. "I know, Malcolm."

He watched the tactical display showing two Starfleet signatures heading at high impulse toward a much larger one. Little red flashes and small alarms showed weapons fire from all three Starfleet signatures as they exchanged fire. The two Starfleet ships swerved left and right to avoid being hit, but that couldn't stop all of the station's powerful Andorian weapons from hitting them. Archer had to sit down because he couldn't keep his feet in the buffeting. Alarms sounded, and the chatter of calls for assistance, hits, and decompression of decks filled the air. Archer and Reed called out orders, and Mayweather's expert

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piloting skills saved them from a direct hit more than once. True to her word, Hernandez flew interference, flying between Enterprise and Starbase 1, saving them from the worst of the damage.

T'Pol spoke up to give a damage report. "Captain, we've lost sensors. Power fluctuations on E deck are preventing repairs."

This prompted Reed to report as well. "Sir, without sensors, I can't aim."

Archer nodded. It was up to Columbia now. "Travis, how long?"

Mayweather checked his console. "We won't be in transporter range for at least two minutes." He continued to watch the tactical data pour in. At the rate they were being shot at, they weren't going to make it. Columbia's damage was increasing too--they would be worse off than Enterprise because they were taking so much damage. As if knowing what Archer was thinking, Columbia hailed them. "Captain, we won't make it in--the fire is too intense."

Archer weighed his options. Hernandez had done all she could. It wouldn't help if Columbia was destroyed. "Columbia, withdraw to a safe distance."

Hernandez nodded and turned to her bridge crew. "Ensign, plot a course away from Enterprise. Fire all weapons simultaneously--that should draw their attention."

Archer looked to Sato. "End transmission."

"Aye, Captain," Sato said, just as Reed exclaimed, "Sir! The Fengara!"

Archer glanced at the viewscreen. Their Xindi

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friends had broken their orbit and were maneuvering between Starbase 1 and Enterprise. "Commander Segrad," Archer said. "He's buying us time. Let's use it. T'Pol, can you create another vortex?"

T'Pol's surprise couldn't be hidden from him. "Yes, Captain, but our damage and the power fluctuations mean we can only travel a very short distance. If you are trying to escape using a vortex..."

Archer cut her off. "I'm not. Plot in the coordinates of the space dock."

The bridge crew all looked surprised this time. T'Pol said, "Captain, the potential disaster we could create if that doesn't work--"

Archer interrupted by shouting, "We don't have time! Just don't make any mistakes. It's the only way to get us close enough, fast enough. The Fengara is taking fire. Travis, go in at full impulse this time, and come to an emergency stop when we're inside."

Mayweather began to program the helm. "Aye, sir." He took a deep breath. "Everyone hang onto something. This is going to hurt."

T'Pol reported, "Engineering reports ready. Warp engines powering up."

Mayweather maneuvered Enterprise into position to enter a new vortex. This time he'd have to decelerate from full to one-quarter impulse. "The vortex is forming. We're going in."

Enterprise disappeared into the vortex.

CHAPTER

14

The Enterprise burst through the other side. This time, she was clearly scarred by the short jump through the vortex. Plasma streamed from the nacelles. Inside, the bridge crew were all on the floor or hanging onto their consoles for dear life. Mayweather scrambled to his console and began the emergency stop. Consoles exploded and sparks flew out of terminals around the bridge. The bridge went dark, and the emergency lights kicked in. As the crew got back to their stations, they tried to piece together what had just happened. Mayweather reported in first. "Sir, we're in and we've stopped. Don't ask how close we were to crashing, though."

Archer looked at T'Pol next. "Our damage is considerable. There is structural damage to the station's internal dock, but the station itself is not in jeopardy. Auxiliary power is fluctuating."

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Archer looked to Reed. Reed's face was one of complete understanding. Reed flipped his console's comm. "Reed to Security. Teams one, two, and three report to the transporter on the double."

CHAPTER

15

Archer stood at the transporter pad with T'Pol, Reed, and the security personnel, which included several MACOs. "Beam everyone to their destinations," he ordered. Each team knew its mission. "T'Pol, you go first and stop the overload--you don't have much time left."

She nodded, and her team stepped onto the transporter pad. T'Pol gave the order: "Energize."

Kelby beamed them to the station's power core. As they shimmered and disappeared, Archer looked to Reed. "You go next." Reed jumped onto the pad with two other MACOs. They were beamed away as well. Finally, Archer signaled his two MACO escorts. "Let's go."

They stood on the pad. He motioned to Kelby, who said, "Admiral's office locked in, sir," and looked at him expectantly.

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"Energize."

Kelby began the transport process a split second before Sato's urgent voice came over the comm. "Sato here. Mr. Kelby, cancel the transport. There's a power fluctuation in your area."

Kelby responded, "It's too late--I've already initialized it." He checked the problem: a power drain in the transporter system, the result of the damage they'd taken. He quickly suspended the transport, then reversed it. Two figures glittered on the transporter pads and solidified. It only took another second to get the confirmation of a successful transport. He breathed a sigh of relief. He reported, "Ensign, the transport began, but because of the power drain, only one person got through."

He looked up to see two MACOs standing on the transporter pad. The captain, who had been standing in between them, was gone.

CHAPTER

16

T'Pol and the two engineers that had accompanied her materialized at the station's power core. As she looked around, she saw several technicians drop their work and stare at them in surprise. A Tellarite engineer, who was closest to her, challenged her first. "What are you doing here?"

T'Pol didn't really have time to explain their presence, but she knew she wouldn't be allowed to try and stop the overload unless she convinced the engineers first that she was here for a reason other than sabotage. "I'm Commander T'Pol of the starship Enterprise. There's an overload in your station's core, and we need to stop it now."

The Tellarite laughed at her. "That's impossible--if there is an overload, we'd know about it. Where's your authorization to be here?"

T'Pol never really knew panic, but she knew that if

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she was a human, now would be a good time to start. "I do not have authorization. We beamed in because of this emergency."

The Tellarite engineer looked at his coworkers, who were watching him to see what he would do next. "I'll need to check this over with the admiral first. He would know if you were coming down here."

T'Pol knew it was time to speed things up a little. They couldn't go to the admiral--he couldn't be tipped off about their presence. She drew out her phase pistol and pointed it at the Tellarite. "I do not have time to explain. Stand aside, or the explosion will kill us all." The engineer reflexively put up his hands, and his colleagues nervously followed suit. "Secure them," T'Pol ordered, and one of the engineers from Enterprise bound everyone's hands. "Not him," T'Pol said, indicating the leader. "If you require evidence of the cascade, I will provide it to you. I trust that your cooperation will follow. Come here."

The engineer stepped forward unwillingly while his colleagues watched from the floor. He peered over her shoulder as T'Pol got to work at the nearest console. She brought up an image of the station's power grid and identified the overload's path. It was moving slowly. She estimated that explosion was a week away, but the cascade itself was approaching the irreversible stage.

T'Pol indicated the power surge. "I am not as familiar with the power grid on this station as you are. The overload is here, as you can see. How long before it becomes irreversible?"

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The Tellarite looked closely. T'Pol saw shock on his face. He began shaking his head in disbelief. "I can't believe I missed this. Here." T'Pol stepped back and let him check some data on the console. "Seventeen minutes. That's how much time we have left. It's a good thing you came when you did."

"Can you reverse it safely?"

The Tellarite began manipulating the controls. "It's easy enough--I just need to divert here--and here--and change the fuel ratio--" The panel controls flashed red as a security warning came up on the monitor: "Enter authorization code." The Tellarite looked at the panel in shock. "There is no authorization code for this kind of thing--it should just work."

T'Pol pressed a few buttons to track down the source of the code. She pulled out her communicator. "T'Pol to Captain Archer."

There was no response. T'Pol kept trying, keeping in mind that she had less than fifteen minutes to get help from the captain.

CHAPTER

17

The shimmering began to dissipate, and Archer realized that the transport cycle had completed. He was momentarily disoriented because it was dark. He also realized that he was alone. He was about to take out his phase pistol when a voice tore through the darkness. "Don't move, Jon."

Archer recognized the voice immediately. "I know you're not the admiral."

He heard a small laugh from the darkness. "Congratulations, Captain. Maybe you should become a spy too. Turn around slowly and drop your weapon on the floor."

Archer turned around slowly, but he didn't drop his weapon. He couldn't clearly see the face of the other man in the room. "Why are you trying to destroy this station?"

"I have my reasons, Captain--but I wouldn't be a

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good spy if I just gave them to you."

Archer continued, voicing his suspicions. "You're a Romulan, just like Trannon." Although Trannon had appeared to be Vulcan--even Phlox had mistaken him for a one--Archer remembered how sure Sato had been that Trannon's accent was Romulan. "Are you a surgically altered Romulan, or just their agent?"

"So many questions," the man said. "Does it matter?"

"Speaking of Trannon," Archer said. "Is that son of a bitch here too?"

"Mr. Trannon was meant to join me here. Unfortunately, that changed when he was discovered. So rather than merely assassinating some of the delegates, I decided to commence the destruction of this station."

Archer smiled grimly. "Well, that's not going to happen. I have people securing the station."

The man who wasn't Admiral Gardner didn't seem concerned. "They can't do anything without the security override. Drop your weapon on the floor."

Archer held out his phase pistol as though he were complying, then quickly fired at the ceiling. His wild shot was lucky: a shower of sparks flew out of a power conduit. Archer, his eyes momentarily dazzled, dove for the floor as the Romulan fired his weapon, the shot going completely wide. Archer crawled around the room quietly, trying not to knock into what seemed to be a desk, as the Romulan spoke.

"Captain, it doesn't matter what you do. This station is finished. But even if it weren't, we have many plans and many methods. It will only be a matter of

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time before your whole alliance crumbles." His voice changed. "Lights!" he called, and the lights came up.

Archer, who had taken shelter behind the desk he'd bumped into, lifted his phase pistol and fired. His shot missed, but the Romulan had to duck. The Romulan fired back, and Archer dodged it. More shots came from where the Romulan was firing, Archer had to end this soon. He threw his communicator to one side of the large office. When it clattered on the floor, the Romulan instinctively fired at the noise, giving Archer the opportunity to run toward him. He aimed and fired, hitting the Romulan on the shoulder. The Romulan yelled out in pain. When Archer reached him, he kicked him and then held him down. He pointed the phase pistol at his head. "This isn't set to stun, as you've noticed. This is the lowest setting. You'll have a nasty burn." He quickly adjusted the power setting. "I've upped the power. Keep that in mind. You're coming with me, and you're going to tell me everything that's going on."

The Romulan smiled one more time. "You don't seem to know how much danger you and your friends are in, Captain. You're a fool."

As Archer watched, the Romulan closed his eyes. He bit hard on something in his mouth and went limp.

"No!" Archer yelled, realizing that the Romulan was committing suicide. He reached for his communicator, only to find it was missing. He'd forgotten he'd thrown it. Where was it? Precious seconds ticked away as he quickly scanned the room with his eyes. It chirped as he picked it up: someone was trying to con-

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tact him. "Archer here," he gasped, running for the Romulan's body. He felt for a pulse. Nothing.

He recognized T'Pol 's voice. "Captain, we are attempting to stop the overload, but there is a security lockout in place."

Archer looked down at the dead Romulan--or was it a Romulan agent? "I found our impostor," he told T'Pol. "He's unavailable for questioning. He just killed himself--some kind of suicide pill in a tooth, I think. I don't think I can help you with the lockout."

T'Pol said in acknowledgment, "Understood, but we only have five minutes before the overload is irreversible."

A voice Archer didn't recognize overlapped T'Pol's. "Captain, this is Engineer Fine of Starbase 1. Am I to understand you're in the admiral's office? Please check his console. It may be of help."

"Understood," Archer said, leaving the body to run to the desk. He needed to get the body to Phlox for analysis, but that could wait. He touched the console to power it on. "Good idea, Mr. Fine," he said into the communicator. "It says that the lockout has been activated."

"That means that the computer protocols the admiral set up have discovered the overload," the engineer said. "You may be able to shut it down."

Archer activated the menu command, and among the available options was what he was looking for: a "cancel lockout" command. He pressed it, but a new option came up: "Thumbprint authorization required." Well, that was easy enough. "Stand by," he said into

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his communicator.

"You have one minute," T'Pol said.

"No pressure," Archer muttered as he ran to the dead Romulan, hauled the inert body up, and dropped it on the desk. He then grabbed the dead man's hand and placed it on the screen. A faint chime sounded, and the screen readout changed to "authorization approved." "Tell me that did it," he said into his communicator.

There was a long pause. Archer braced himself against the desk as the seconds ticked away. Finally, T'Pol's voice said, "Well done, Captain. The overload has been averted."

Archer sighed in relief. "I'll get Admiral Gardner to Doctor Phlox. Please join Lieutenant Reed and prioritize finding Commander Tucker. Archer out." He pulled out his scanner and began waving it over the body. He knew that Phlox could do much more detailed scans with the sophisticated equipment in sick-bay, but he was curious. Was this really a Romulan, surgically altered to look human? Or was it a human agent, surgically altered to look like Admiral Gardner? The first step would be to find Romulan physiology.

"What--?" he muttered as the scanner spiked. A moment later, he heard a high-pitched whine coming from the body. It started out soft but grew louder and louder. "Damn," he breathed as he stared at the scanner. He activated his communicator again. "Archer to Enterprise. Emergency beam out. Now!"

"Stand by, Captain," a voice said. There was a three-second pause, and then Archer shimmered away.

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The body exploded, the huge windows shattered, and the room decompressed.

CHAPTER

18

Lieutenant Reed and his two MACOs escorts walked through the dark corridors of Starbase 1. Reed had swept each room of the science area in a grid pattern that he'd based on the blueprints. So far, they'd found nothing. T'Pol had just informed him that she'd be joining the search. The cascade had been averted.

"Lucky, that," Reed commented as he opened a door and scanned the room. "That would have forced us to stop the search after--how long after the cascade was irreversible was the station to blow?"

"A week, sir," one of the MACOs said just as his scanner chirped. "Biosigns in here," he said, pointing.

"Good," Reed said, heartened, as he joined the MACO. "Cover me," he ordered as he activated the door switch. It opened easily. Reed, weapon and flashlight pointed straight ahead, followed the MACOs in.

"Sir!" one of the MACOs yelled, shining his light

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on a blue uniform in the darkness. In that uniform was Trip Tucker.

Tucker shielded his eyes and called out, "Malcolm, is that you?"

Reed smiled. "Trip, are you all right?"

Tucker smiled as Reed reached over to clap him on the shoulder. "You took your time getting here. I've been waiting for days."

Reed returned to his dry British self. "Well, while you were here sleeping, we were busy trying to save the station."

"Hoshi got my message?" Tucker said anxiously.

"Message received and understood," Reed said. "The cascade has just been averted."

Tucker sagged against the wall. "Thank god," he said. "Now--get me out of here. Get me to the mess. And then get me to a shower."

"How did you get here, anyway?" Reed asked.

Tucker had thought about that. "Beam out," he said. "Admiral Gardner gave me a padd--the padd Shran dropped. He figured maybe I could scan it, find something out. So I had it in my pocket when T'Pol and I were in the science area. When I woke up here--" He indicated the room. "--it was gone. I think it had a locator in it--you know, for the transporter to get a lock."

"First Shran, then you," Reed said slowly. "Makes sense."

Tucker shook his head. "It sure beats me why they took me--and why they kept me alive. They left me ration bars and water. Nobody ever came to check on

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me."

Reed took out his communicator. "More mysteries. Why am I not surprised? In any case, let's get you home." He flipped it open. "Reed to Enterprise. We've found Commander Tucker."

CHAPTER

19

Archer sat in his ready room on Enterprise. He was speaking to Admiral Novotny via subspace; she was en route to the opening ceremonies of Starbase 1. "We've averted the threat to the station, but we're no closer to figuring out how the Romulans managed to plant a fake admiral aboard the station."

Novotny shook her head. "Captain, it seems we've all been fooled. Starfleet Intelligence had no word of this plot. Only in retrospect have we been able to begin deciphering what the impostor was doing. We have a forensic computer team going over all logs and transmissions, but the blast in the admiral's office destroyed most of the communications records specific to the admiral."

"I managed to take some scans of the body before it was destroyed," Archer said. "Doctor Phlox is reviewing them now."

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"I'll be interested to see them," Novotny said.

"Preliminary results indicate he was a Vulcan," Archer added.

Novotny looked thoughtful. "That concerns me," she admitted. "I'm thinking of Trannon, the Romulan spy aboard Enterprise. He too was disguised as a Vulcan. If the Vulcans, our closest allies, have some link to the Romulans--still, we have so little to go on. And of course there's the matter of the mysterious building on Philcon II, where you found Commander Shran and Admiral Gardner's--the real Admiral Gardner's--body. The building had just been abandoned hours before. Who kidnapped Shran? I think we know the why."

"All the security protocols were immediately changed," Archer reminded her. Shran's kidnapping had been a serious security leak. "And Shran swears he told them nothing. I believe him."

Novotny shrugged slightly, clearly not believing Archer. Well, she didn't know Shran like he did. "He could have said something while drugged," she pointed out. "He might not remember. Between Shran's kidnapping and the replacement of a high-ranking official with a ringer, we have to assume that the specs of the entire starbase, not just the weapons grid, are no longer secrets." She turned as an aide leaned down to whisper in her ear, then accepted a padd. "Captain, I have a meeting. But before I go, there's the matter of the opening ceremonies tomorrow. The protocol has just been approved, and we have the order of the ceremony. I'm transmitting it now, along with some announcements we'd like you to

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make in your opening remarks."

"Received," Archer said, his heart heavy. "Did you get my request, sir?" He'd put in one final, formal request to retain his captaincy of Enterprise. He didn't want to lead Starbase 1.

"Yes," Novotny said, her face betraying nothing. "It was taken under advisement. Good luck tomorrow, Jon. I'll see you there. Novotny out."

Archer sat back and reflected on what had happened over the last week. He was tired--in fact, he was sure the whole crew was. He knew a little leave would do them well. Now that the crisis was over, the starbase was once again accepting people for shore leave, although the numbers who could go aboard were limited because of the skeleton personnel and all the construction that remained to be done. But construction teams had begun their work. The Vulcans who were to get the science area up and running had finally been allowed aboard after waiting in orbit for three days. Everything was behind schedule, but morale was high. They were really going to do it--Starbase 1 would really open on its slightly delayed schedule.

He walked out of his ready room and onto the bridge. He looked around at them, the men and women who'd come through yet another crisis under his leadership. He hated to leave them.

He took a deep breath. "I want to thank you all for your efforts during this crisis. Again, you've proven why you're the best crew in the fleet. It's an honor serving with you. Hoshi, I want you to announce round one of shore leave for the crew. Trip, coordinate

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a repair schedule for Enterprise with the base's engineers--and then take some leave too. The opening ceremony will take place at 0800 hours tomorrow morning. Yes, it's formal uniforms. As an added bonus, I've been talking with Commander Taylor. She has made one of the entertainment complexes available to us for tonight--so I'm inviting the whole crew to have movie night there."

The bridge crew all began to smile. T'Pol looked to Tucker, who didn't look back but grinned at Archer's announcement. Mayweather spoke up. "Just don't let Lieutenant Reed pick the movie this time."

"Not a fan of explosions, Travis?" Reed asked dryly as the bridge crew laughed.

Archer spoke up again. "On a serious note, we have a new enemy to deal with. We are at a disadvantage because the Romulans seem to know more about us than we know about them. They are determined to halt this alliance. Well, I'm just as determined to make sure it sticks. I know as I take my new post tomorrow at Starbase 1 that I can count on you--on Enterprise--on every ship in Starfleet to make sure that this...this..." He sought for a word. "...that this federation of species remains intact." He looked around again at his crew--for the last time, he realized, as their captain. "Movie's at 2100 hours." He grinned. "T'Pol's in charge of the popcorn."

CHAPTER

20

The screen flashed with a text-only incoming message. As he read it, he became more and more disturbed. "Centurion!" he bellowed.

A Romulan officer on the bridge turned around and saluted him in the Romulan style. "Sir," he said, waiting for an order.

"Open a channel to Romulus on my personal channel and route it to my office."

The centurion complied as his commander strode into a small room and shut the door behind him. The face that came up on the viewscreen as he slid into his chair was that of a distinguished gray-haired man--his superior. "Report," his superior snapped, as usual dispensing with pleasantries.

"Sir, I received an automatic signal from the station. Our operative has failed his mission. Spies in orbit at Starbase 1 have sent information that proves

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without a doubt that the Tal'Shiar operative impersonating the Starfleet admiral is dead--a suicide blast."

There was a pause as his superior digested this information.

The commander said nervously, "There is of course no physical evidence of our being there."

His superior looked most unhappy. "This is yet more evidence that the Tal'Shiar should not be in charge of this operation. Your failed operative is dead. Maybe you should be held responsible for catastrophe that has resulted--the scheduled opening ceremonies of Starbase 1 in mere hours."

The commander fought back anger, although he appeared calm. "I did my duty. I kidnapped and interrogated the Andorian and left him for the humans to find. I set up our operative. His failure is clearly his own, and he has paid for it."

His superior didn't look convinced. "All of this fighting behind the scenes has been an expensive waste of time. Report back to Romulus for a full debriefing. With their alliance now being strengthened, we will surely have to rely on more...direct methods."

The superior cut the transmission and left Trannon, now out of his Vulcan disguise, sitting in his chair, gathering his thoughts.

He would make sure that the Enterprise crew paid for the humiliation he suffered.

CHAPTER

21

The Enterprise crew shuffled into the entertainment complex and made themselves at home. Reed and Mayweather walked in and found a seat next to T'Pol, who had already taken a seat. She was keeping the seat on her other side empty for Tucker. She'd saved it by putting her bag of popcorn on the seat. Reed and Mayweather were debating something--something about Reed's terrible taste in movies. Sato sat down next to them and joined in their conversation, only to take sides with Mayweather and tease Reed. T'Pol looked around to see if she had perhaps missed Tucker coming in just as Archer and Hernandez slid into the aisle.

"Are these seats taken, Subcommander?" Hernandez asked with a friendly smile, pointing to the seat the T'Pol was saving for Tucker.

T'Pol picked up the bag of popcorn and set it on

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her lap. "No, Captain. Please sit down."

Hernandez slid in text to T'Pol, Archer on her other side. Archer leaned over Hernandez to say to T'Pol, "Captain Hernandez was just saying that commanding a starbase is too big a responsibility for me."

T'Pol raised one eyebrow in curiosity. "Captain, you were the one who told me of your resistance to this assignment. Captain Hernandez may have a point."

Hernandez spoke up next. "You can always rely on the cool logic of a Vulcan," she told Archer with a smile.

Archer sighed. "Looks like I'm outnumbered, as usual. Erika, what's your next assignment? Where are you going after the opening ceremonies?"

Hernandez smiled. "We'll be here for at least another week, and then we're going back to our previous exploration mission. That's what we do whenever you're not interrupting us with another crisis--you know, saving your ass. Again."

Archer chuckled as the clink of glasses begin tapped together sounded. They looked up to see Commander Shran with a cluster of glasses held by their bases in one hand and his usual bottle of Andorian ale in the other. "Hello, pinkskin. It looks like you saved me a seat. How thoughtful." He sat down with the group. "I find your movies really very dull. But how could I refuse your invitation?"

Archer smiled. "It's good to see you're back to your usual self."

"Thank you," Shran responded. "You know, you

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should have told me about this sooner--I would have arranged a good Andorian film. One of my favorites--a true classic--is one entitled *Pride in Wartime*." He sighed happily. "It features a battle to the death similar to the one you and I engaged in." Shran leaned in. "Although neither character loses an antenna." He held out the glasses, and T'Pol, Archer, and Hernandez each took one. Shran poured a little ale in each. "A toast, Captains and Subcommander, to the alliance and the future it will bring for us." They all held up their glasses and then drank. "I hope human movies aren't all as dull as the ones I endured last time I was on board Enterprise."

Archer turned to him with a grin. "Just remember to keep your mouth shut when it starts."

The lights dimmed. T'Pol took one final look around for Tucker. She hadn't really had a chance to talk to him since he was rescued. It was strange seeing a movie without him around. He never missed a movie night.

CHAPTER

22

The cavernous semicircular room buzzed with noise and excitement. Over two thousand delegates and guests had arrived at the station for the ceremony, and there were hologram receivers placed along one gallery so those who could not be present physically, such as species that could not breathe air, could be represented. Although the station wouldn't be fully staffed and operational for another few months, it would begin powering up various areas and starting its main operations today. Up on the stage, the speakers, all dressed in their best, milled around, shaking hands with each other and smiling.

As Tucker looked around, it seemed as if the entire galaxy had turned out to be part of the official opening of Starbase 1. Although he and the other members of the bridge crew had good seats, not everyone was so fortunate, and large, flat two-dimensional hologram

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screens presented what was happening on the stage to the audience, so everyone could see. In addition, the proceedings were being broadcast, so everyone else on Enterprise could watch from viewscreens. Tucker could see oversized flags of the different alliance members decorating the walls. He recognized insignia for Andoria, Xindi, Earth, and Vulcan and pointed them out to Sato, who had finally settled down in her seat after practicing her Vulcan on some delegates seated nearby.

"Trust the Tellarites to be different," Sato said, pointing. "Their flag is round and puffy. It's not a flag, it's a pillow! And that one has--let's see. Eight sides. Do you recognize it?"

Tucker squinted. "Nope," he said. "And there's lots of people--species--here I don't recognize either."

"Isn't it great?" Mayweather grinned. "The Boomer Alliance leadership is supposed to be here. I can't find our insignia, though."

"I'm sure it's here somewhere," Sato said. "Did you notice what a good mood Captain Archer was in this morning?"

"I was surprised," Reed, seated on the other side of Tucker, said, leaning over to join the conversation. "His last hour as captain. I expected him to be more--I don't know, somber or something."

He looked at Tucker expectantly, and Tucker held up his hands and said, "He didn't tell me anything. But he did order me to the party tonight."

"Ah, he knows you," Reed said. "You'd rather be recalibrating the engines, or undergoing some kind of

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hideous torture."

"Oh, I'll be there, dressed in my Sunday best," Tucker said. "At least I won't have to wear this stupid dress uniform." He tugged on it. He rarely had occasion to wear it, and he had to admit that it fit badly. He'd never prioritized getting another one that fit better.

"Yes, black tie is far more comfortable," Reed said drily. Tucker had to grin--Reed was the only person he knew who actually owned a tuxedo. Tucker still had to find one. "Hoshi? Travis? Will you be there?"

"I'm just a lowly ensign," Sato said. "I'm not invited to the big dance." She dimpled. "I'm going to the little dance, the one in the Milky Way Ballroom. A very nice Xindi comm officer asked me."

"She makes friends wherever she goes," Mayweather said. "They all fall for that 'I want to practice your language' line. I got an invitation to a reception sponsored by the Boomer Alliance, so I'll go to that. There should be good food, anyway--and maybe some people I know who I haven't seen for a while."

"Shh," Sato said, patting Mayweather to shut him up. "Looks like they're getting started."

Commander Taylor, who had replaced Admiral Gardner as host, called the crowd to attention, and the talking subsided. As she made some opening remarks and announcements, Tucker could see Archer and T'Pol standing next to Shran and Hernandez. T'Pol looked unfamiliar in her Vulcan robes.

Tucker tuned back in when Taylor said, "It is my great pleasure to call on Starfleet's first captain of a

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warp 5 vessel, Jonathan Archer."

Tucker and the rest of the bridge crew leapt to their feet, and Mayweather put his fingers in his mouth and whistled as Tucker and Reed cheered. But they weren't the only ones: the room thundered with applause, which lasted a full two minutes, while Archer stood uncomfortably behind the floating podium and held his hands up vainly for silence.

"Thank you," Archer repeated until the crowd sat back down. "On the day I took Enterprise out on her first mission, I never imagined we would come this far. As you know, Earth's first contact was with the Vulcans, our friends who mentored and guided us, and who remain our staunchest allies. That first contact opened up a galaxy full of Andorians, Tellarites, Kreetassans, Klingons, Xindi, and so many others, many of whom are here with us today--too many to list now. Humanity has grown through its contact with the universe, just as humanity has touched many of you. Now, I'm proud to be a part of this day--a day when many of the races we have met come together under the banner of an interstellar alliance of planets."

The audience clapped, and Archer continued.

"There were some who opposed our alliance. Earth was deeply saddened by the rise of Terra Prime, whose views did not represent the sentiments of Earth. If anyone should challenge our this alliance, should anyone from within or without doubt the abilities of our species to accomplish great things together, we have only to show them this station and the people who live and work here. From today, and for the first

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time, crews from all of the alliance worlds will be working together side by side as living proof of how much better it is to coexist as not just allies, but also friends."

The audience clapped again.

"I now have the pleasure of presenting to you the first commander of this station." Archer paused as Tucker frowned and exchanged a look with Reed. "The new commander of Starbase 1 is an experienced diplomat and administrator whose negotiation of multispecies treaties is legendary. This person has worked closely with all the species during the station's construction and knows more than anyone about every aspect of the station, from its power consumption to its weapons capabilities. Please join me in welcoming Admiral Ekaterin Novotny as the first commander of Starbase 1."

His last few words were drowned out by shouts of approval and applause. Once again, Tucker leapt to his feet and cheered, but he wasn't cheering Novotny for her new job. He was cheering his captain, because his captain was going to remain his captain, on board Enterprise, where he belonged.

Novotny replaced Archer behind the podium, looking severe in her dress uniform although her smile was wide. When she could be heard, she said, "It is my great pleasure to announce that Starbase 1 is now officially open." Before the audience could react by clapping again, she immediately said, "Would the welcome delegates please rise or otherwise indicate themselves. You know who you are."

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There was a little stir at this surprise. Tucker watched as people stood, or floated, or flapped, or rolled into the aisles, including Archer, T'Pol, and Shran, who walked to the very front of the stage and stood at attention.

At Novotny's nod, Archer said, loudly and distinctly, "Earth."

"Vulcan," T'Pol said, almost overlapped by Shran's "Andoria." As Tucker watched, the roll call continued, words called out proudly. "Tellaria." "Kreetassa." "Boomer Alliance." One by one, around the room, each species or government named itself.

"Wow," Sato breathed as the voices continued, each place name given in its original language by a native.

Tucker knew how she felt. This was truly an historic occasion. And although he knew that things would inevitably be bumpy--with so many competing interests and personalities, how could it be otherwise?--right now, everyone was in accord.

End.

— STAR TREK — ENTERPRISE

Starbase One Part Two

At the eve of the opening ceremonies of Starbase One, the Enterprise is launched in a race against time to find Commander Tucker and to reveal the plot that intend to destroy the starbase and the diplomatic delegations.

At the eve of creating the interstellar alliance, a new adventure begins for the NX-01 Enterprise crew, by Lindsay.

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