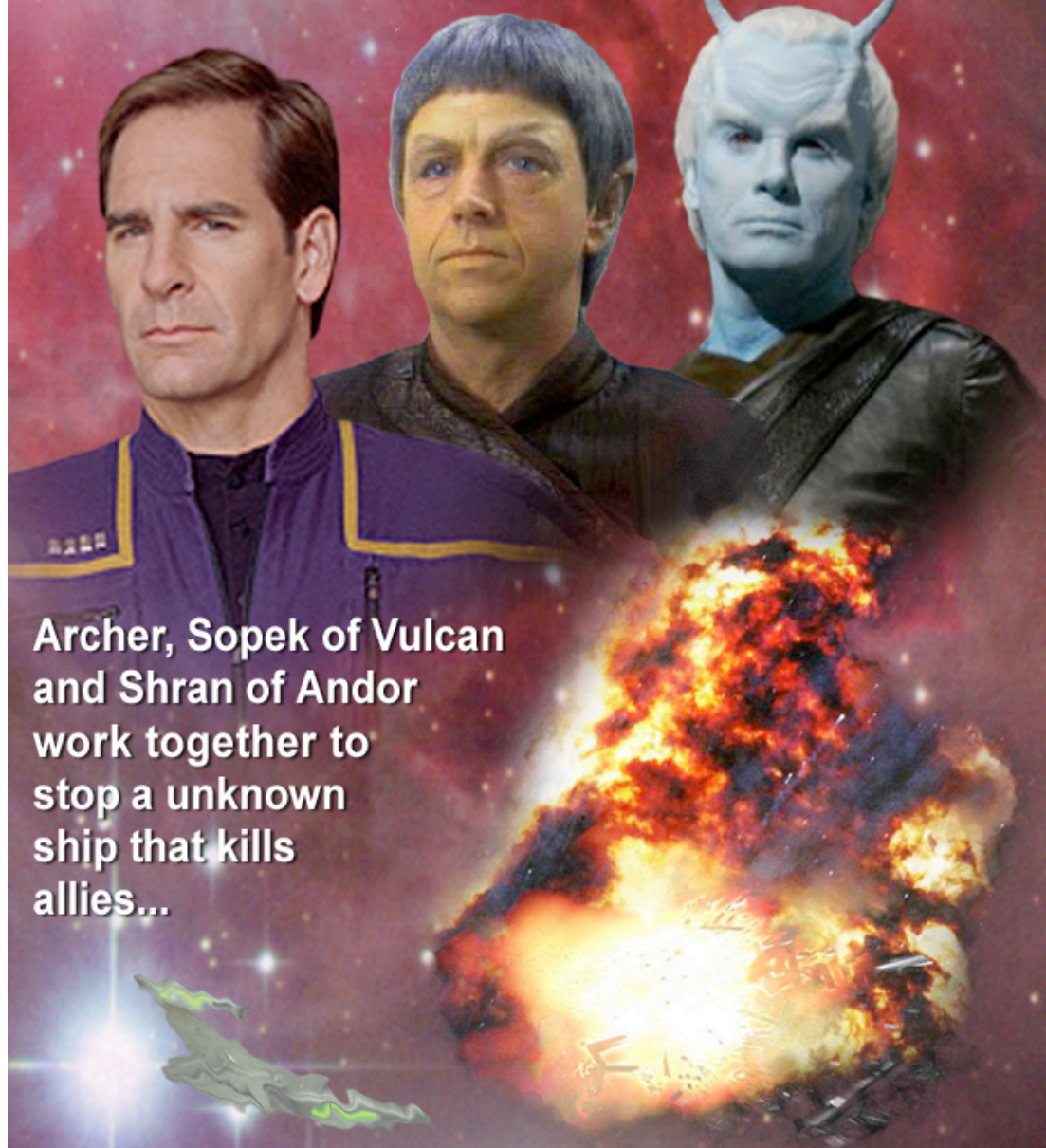


— STAR TREK — ENTERPRISE

Amalgam



Archer, Sopek of Vulcan
and Shran of Andor
work together to
stop a unknown
ship that kills
allies...



KATHY ROSE

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Revision 1

Kathy Rose

Amalgam

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CHAPTER

1

The door of Captain Jonathan Archer's ready room was still closed. As Ensign Hoshi Sato turned back to her console from looking at it for the tenth time or so, she caught Ensign Travis Mayweather staring curiously at her from his helm station.

"He's been in there for a half hour," Mayweather said in a low voice that nevertheless carried to her sensitive ears. "Is he still talking to the admiral?"

A quick glance at her communications console confirmed the channel was indeed open and active. She nodded.

"Must be important," Mayweather said.

"Must be," she said, pitching her voice loud enough for Mayweather to hear.

Someone else had heard their conversation as well. "I'm sure the captain will inform us about his 'private' conversation with the admiral - when and if it is nec-

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essary," said Lieutenant Malcolm Reed, looking back and forth between the two ensigns, the twinkle in his eyes taking the sting out of his reprimand.

Reed's supposed disapproval of the subordinate officers' topic of discussion didn't discourage Mayweather. "Aren't you the least curious what the admiral's call is about?" he asked.

The captain's voice startled them all.

"You'll find out in a few minutes," Archer said as he stepped onto the bridge through the now-open door of his ready room. "I'm calling a staff meeting in ten minutes. Hoshi, tell T'Pol and Trip to get up here."

CHAPTER

2

"A number of ships have been attacked in this area," Archer said, indicating a portion on the map displayed on the situation table around which his senior officers were gathered. "According to Starfleet, it's not just ships with Earth registry that are targets. Vulcan, Andorian, and other ships are being harassed, damaged, and destroyed. In particular, attacks have taken place in a space lane..." He pointed to a bright line on the map. "...that skirts the outer edge of this nebula. Most of the ships that have been attacked have been freighters, lightly armed if they even have weapons, and not able to fight back. There's been considerable loss of life."

"Pirates?" Reed asked, rubbing his chin as he studied the chart. "A nebula would make a good hiding place from which to launch attacks."

Archer shook his head. "Starfleet doesn't think so."

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For one thing, even though ships have been damaged or destroyed, nothing appears to have been taken."

"A territorial dispute, perhaps?" Commander T'Pol ventured. "The attacks could be a warning to stay away, or a punitive action against perceived intruders."

"As far as we know, this area of space is unclaimed by any known race," Archer replied. "There's not much there."

Mayweather spoke up. "We used to call places like that 'get-throughs.' There's nothing there; you just have to 'get through' it on your way to somewhere else."

"So," Commander "Trip" Tucker said, "if there's nothing there, and nothing's being stolen, what's the purpose of the attacks?"

"That's what Starfleet wants us to find out," Archer said. Turning to Mayweather, he ordered, "Travis, lay in a course for the nebula."

The officers scattered to their duties except for T'Pol, who asked, "Did Starfleet issue any directives if we encounter the attackers?"

"Find out who they are, and stop them if possible," Archer said, looking down at her from his greater height. With a rueful grin, he added, "Starfleet didn't offer any advice on how to go about that, other than to avoid causing an interstellar incident."

It took two days to reach their destination where Enterprise would begin patrolling the space lane. Although their main goal was to seek out the perpetrators of the attacks, Archer also realized the presence of the Starfleet ship might be a deterrent to more such inci-

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dents. It was a frustrating predicament - they didn't want any more loss of life, yet without catching the attackers in the act, so to speak, the situation might never be resolved.

During the journey there, Archer did some digging in the Vulcan database as well as catching up on information from other space-faring species that had been made available since the opening of Starbase 1. What he found jived with what Starfleet had told him. There were no known resources in the area. The area was isolated and uninhabited. There weren't even any particularly attractive planets to colonize. No one was interested in claiming the area, and yet these attacks were taking place.

An image of the Romulan ship appearing out of nowhere at the end of Enterprise's recent mediation mission between the Cytunons and Deallans rose in Archer's mind. A transmission from that ship had warned that the Romulan Star Empire would not tolerate expansionist activities, which was clearly how the Romulans perceived the successful talks and subsequent agreement.

But to attack unarmed shipping of various races? What would the Romulans gain by that? This particular space lane had been used for many decades, and it was only recently that attacks had taken place.

He was wondering yet again what had prompted the attacks when Sato comm'd him in his ready room.

"Sir, we're picking up an Andorian cruiser on an intercept course with us," she informed him.

"I'll be right out."

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He glanced out the window before heading for the bridge. He wasn't sure whether Enterprise's task had gotten easier or more difficult with the arrival of an Andorian ship, but he was sure he'd find out in the next few minutes.

As Archer stepped onto the bridge and headed toward his command chair, Reed commented, "That vessel is armed to the teeth."

"Sounds like the Andorians," Archer said, sitting down.

"They are moving into a parallel course and matching our speed," Reed reported.

From the other side of the bridge, Sato said, "We're being hailed by the Jhamel."

The name rang a bell, but Archer couldn't place it at first. After a few moments, a grin lit his face. "Shran must have a new ship. Put him on."

The picture on the viewscreen at the front of the bridge switched from a scene of stars streaking by to a close-up of Shran's antennae head.

"Captain Archer!" the blue-skinned alien said enthusiastically. "Good to see you again."

"Commander," Archer responded. "What can we do for you?"

A sly expression crossed Shran's face. "It's more what we can do for you. We are here to help you uncover the reason for the mysterious attacks that are taking place in this sector." The Andorian's face abruptly hardened into the stubborn expression with which Archer was most familiar. "You're not the only ones who have suffered shipping losses here."

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Archer stood and took a step closer to the screen. "Why don't you come over, and we'll discuss the situation over dinner?"

"Just what I was about to suggest," Shran said smoothly, his antenna flexing in approval.

CHAPTER

3

Archer and T'Pol were waiting in the captain's mess when Shran was shown in. In the past, the Andorian had made no effort to hide his disdain for Vulcans - or any other species, for that matter. But Archer valued T'Pol's counsel, and she often had insights he wouldn't have thought of. At the very least, his first officer's presence might provoke Shran into revealing some information he might not otherwise divulge.

"Really, Archer," Shran said, looking back over his shoulder at his escort of two Enterprise security officers who had stopped short of entering the private dining area. "I've been on your ship enough times to know my way around. I'd almost think you didn't trust me."

As Archer moved over to greet his guest, he made sure he had a smile on his face. "Of course I trust you, Shran. Just think of them as an honor guard."

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Shran stared at him for a long moment, then burst out laughing. "Ah, Archer! I've missed trading barbs with you." Shifting his gaze to the other person in the room, he said guilelessly, "Commander T'Pol. You are looking well."

T'Pol inclined her head, but not before Archer caught the flash of surprise in her eyes at the Andorian's unexpected politeness. "I might say the same of you, Commander," she said.

Archer indicated with a wave of his hand that Shran should be seated, and the group settled into their chairs. Archer uncorked a bottle of red wine and filled three glasses.

"So," the Andorian said as he leaned back in his chair, glass of wine in hand, "have you found any of these spineless marauders yet?"

Archer frowned at Shran's directness. "No, we haven't found anything yet."

Shran took a sip from his glass, made an appreciate sound, and said, "This is quite good."

"I'll see that you get a bottle to take back to your ship with you."

"That would be much appreciated," Shran murmured. "But back to business. The Andorian government is very concerned about the unprovoked attacks in this region. We've lost a number of cargo ships, as well as a passenger liner, in the last few months."

"So they sent you to investigate," Archer said.

Shran nodded. "As you are aware, more than Andorian ships are being attacked. Of all the commanders in the Imperial Guard, I have had the most experience

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dealing with other species. I was the perfect choice for this assignment. But I'm not the only one."

"Other Andorian ships will be arriving?" T'Pol asked.

Shran glanced mischievously at her. "You misunderstand. I meant that we Andorians aren't the only ones who will be investigating this situation. Obviously Earth is concerned, or else Starfleet wouldn't have sent you here." He paused for effect. "And there is at least one Vulcan ship en route as we speak."

"The Vulcans?" Archer said. "We weren't aware of that." He shot T'Pol a glance that spoke volumes but kept his thoughts to himself as Shran, oblivious of the byplay, continued speaking.

"My government didn't tell your government about the Jhamel coming to investigate, did it? But then, did Starfleet see fit to inform either Andoria or Vulcan about you being here? I didn't think so. It seems there is still some work to be done on sharing information of this sort. What matters is that all of us - Andorians, Vulcans, humans - are concerned by the recent unexplained attacks upon vessels traversing this area of space. There appears to be nothing to be gained by such attacks, except the enmity and perhaps the retaliation of those being attacked."

"That has been our conclusion as well," T'Pol said.

Shran tilted his head in acknowledgment of her statement, but his gaze remained focused on Archer. "An Andorian, a Vulcan, and a human in accord without even a hint of a disagreement? This is indeed an historic event," he said with a touch of his old sar-

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casm. "But it only serves to emphasize the need for change, especially when you consider events of the last year or so."

Archer leaned forward. "What do you mean, Shran?" he asked, playing dumb but having an inkling of what Shran was getting at. He just needed to hear it from Shran himself.

Shran put down his wine-glass. "We need to overcome our prejudices and work together," he said.

Archer almost snorted. "I've been pretty much telling you that since we first met," he said dryly.

"Only recently has Andoria wanted to work with others," Shran shot back.

"Why?" T'Pol asked.

"We need each other," he said simply. "Space is vast, and allies are few. Recent events have proven we need to help each other. Without working together, we never would have defeated the Romulans when they tried to prevent my people's peace treaty with the Tellarites. Instead, we would be more set against each other than we had ever been."

"Just the Tellarites?" Archer asked with a carefully straight face.

"We have always been able to work with humans," Shran said grudgingly. He turned toward T'Pol. "And we've learned that working together is often more beneficial than fighting, so we're open to working with the Vulcans. Starbase 1 should be evidence of that."

Shran finished his wine in one gulp and set the glass down with a loud clunk on the table. "That doesn't mean we won't fight if necessary," he said omi-

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nously.

CHAPTER

4

Shortly after the meal was finished, T'Pol excused herself to contact Shran's first officer and begin working on a joint patrol schedule for the two ships. Shran lingered, sharing another glass of wine with Archer as the steward cleared the table.

"Did you always trust her?" Shran asked after T'Pol left.

Archer looked at Shran over the rim of his glass. "No," he replied. "Not at first. But we've been together long enough that I know T'Pol pretty well. I'd trust her with my life."

"I suppose," Shran mused, "that everything comes down to trust. What species you are shouldn't enter into it."

Archer looked askance at his onetime adversary. He'd never heard Shran talk like this before. Yes, Shran was now his ally, but whether he could truly

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consider Shran a friend he hadn't decided yet. Still, the Andorian was sitting at his table, sharing wine with him and talking about trust.

"That's rather philosophical of you, isn't it?" Archer asked.

"We're getting older, Archer," Shran said with a theatrical sigh. "When that happens, you start thinking about how you might have done things differently. A lot of ice has been chipped with the ushaan-tor since I first joined the Imperial Guard."

It took a moment for Archer to realize Shran was using what had to be an adage describing the hand tool used by Andorian miners, but it also reminded him of something else. "Speaking of ushaan-tors," Archer couldn't resist saying, "how's the antenna?"

Shran narrowed his eyes. "It's grown back with no problems. Thank you for asking," he said evenly.

"I didn't have to stop with just one antenna, you know," Archer said.

When Shran only snorted derisively and took another sip of his wine, Archer changed the subject. "I noticed you have a new ship. The Jhamel, is it?"

Shran favored Archer with a deadpan stare. "Yes, the Jhamel."

"Wasn't that the name...?"

"Yes," Shran said, his demeanor softening. "It is the name of the courageous young Aenar who risked her life to save us all. As commander, I am entitled to name my ship. I did it to honor her."

"How is she?" Archer asked, and they both knew he wasn't asking about the ship.

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Shran looked away for a moment, then glanced at Archer from the corner of his eye. "Let's just say that someday my ship's name might also be the name of my life mate."

Before Archer could respond, the comm panel in the captain's mess beeped. Swiveling in his chair, Archer leaned back and thumbed the button on the panel. "Go ahead," he said.

"We're picking up a distress call from a Kreetassan freighter. It is under attack," came T'Pol's voice.

"I'm on my way to the bridge," Archer said. With a glance at his guest who had gotten to his feet at T'Pol's announcement, he added, "Inform the Jhamel that Commander Shran will be returning."

Archer cut the connection and turned toward the door where Shran was already waiting for him.

"This is the perfect opportunity to avenge those who have been lost to these cowards," the Andorian said fiercely.

"Saving the people on board that freighter should be our first priority," Archer said as he led the way out into the corridor.

"You're right," Shran said, and Archer could hear an undercurrent of both amusement and anticipation in his voice. "You assist the freighter. Leave the attacker to me."

CHAPTER

5

An air of frustrated tension hung over the bridge as Archer sat in his command chair. Enterprise and the Jhamel were racing toward the beleaguered freighter, but Shran's new ship was outstripping the best ship in Starfleet.

"How much longer?" Archer asked T'Pol.

"We will reach the freighter in twelve minutes," she replied from her science station, "approximately five minutes after the Jhamel."

"Hail Shran," Archer ordered.

Sato pushed some buttons on her console and, looking over at Archer, nodded to indicate a channel was open.

"Shran!" Archer said. "We can't keep up with you."

"Do the best you can, Archer," Shran's irritatingly condescending response came over the bridge speak-

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ers. "I'll try to leave a few pieces for you to pick up when you get there."

Static hissed from the speakers.

"I'm sorry, sir," Sato said. "He cut the channel on his end."

Archer pounded his fist once on the arm of his chair. Knowing the Andorian's reckless tendencies, especially when angered, he hoped Shran didn't destroy the attacker and eradicate any indication of who it was. As the minutes continued to tick by, he also admitted to himself that he hoped Shran's ship wouldn't be the latest casualty of the unknown attacker.

Straightening up from where she'd been hunched over the panel behind her console, T'Pol reported, "Now in scanning range. Picking up indications of weapons' discharge at the freighter's location."

"Multiple weapons," Reed put in from his seat at the tactical station. "A phased energy beam, as well as at least one torpedo of some sort. None of them match Andorian weapon signatures."

"Shran hasn't gotten there yet, despite his better speed," Archer said as he stood and strode to the upper bridge level to peer over Reed's shoulder at the readouts. He gazed at the display for a few moments, then said, "Doesn't something strike you as odd about this attack?"

Reed, also looking at what the readouts on his console were showing him, considered for a moment. "It does seem a bit like overkill, using several different types of weapons. An unarmed freighter isn't that hard to disable or destroy. A few well-placed hits would do

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the trick."

"And yet it's been close to twenty minutes since we received the distress call," Archer said.

"More than enough time to finish it off," Reed said, looking up at Archer. "It could be a trap. They could be trying to lure in something more important than a freighter."

Archer shook his head. "I don't think so. There's something else going on that we don't know about."

"Captain!" Sato called from across the bridge. "Shran's hailing us. They've engaged the attacker."

Stepping back down to the command well, Archer asked, "Does he know who it is?"

"That's all I got before the transmission was cut off again," she said, continuing to push buttons on her console, trying to reestablish the channel. "The Jhamel's not responding."

On the upper level to Archer's left, T'Pol once again was focused on what she was seeing in her scanner. She adjusted a control and turned to look at the captain.

"We're close enough now to pick up details of the battle," she said somberly. "Shran's vessel has taken several hits."

"How much longer until we get there?" Archer asked Mayweather at the helm.

Checking something on his console, he answered, "Two minutes."

"No doubt the attackers are also aware of our imminent arrival," T'Pol said. "If they disable Shran's ship, we will be facing them alone."

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Seating himself, Archer ordered, "Bring the weapons on-line."

Slightly less than two minutes later, Enterprise dropped out of warp to find a battered freighter hanging listlessly in space. Off to one side, the Jhamel was struggling valiantly, the blue energy beams shooting from the Andorian ship having little effect on the mystery ship.

"Target their weapons and fire," Archer ordered, taking in the dark hull, the multiple weapon ports, and the overall intimidating appearance of the aggressor. The ship was half again as big as Enterprise.

"Aye, sir," Reed acknowledged, keying in commands rapidly.

Before he could fire, however, the attacking ship broke off and left at warp speed.

At Archer's inquiring glance, T'Pol said, "There are life signs on the Kreetassan freighter, but life support is down."

"At least I'm not the one who will have to apologize for their current circumstances," Archer muttered, remembering the misunderstanding that had led to his donning dreadlocks and dermal art for a ritual involving a chainsaw. In a louder voice, he asked, "What about Shran's ship?"

"It has sustained damage. Repairs will take quite some time," T'Pol replied.

Sato interrupted their assessment of the situation. "Shran's hailing us, sir."

Archer turned to face the viewscreen, where the scene shifted from the aftermath of the one-sided fight

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to a shot of the Jhamel's bridge. The lighting on the Andorian bridge was dim, but Archer could make out smoke hanging under the overhead bulkhead.

Shran stepped into view, one arm limp against his side and blue blood trickling from a cut on his cheek. "What are you waiting for? Go after them!" he said.

"You don't need assistance?" Archer asked, torn between the need to help both disabled ships and the desire to chase the attacker.

"We're fine," Shran said, obviously lying but too proud to admit otherwise. "Our propulsion is offline for the time being, but our weapons are still working. We're not badly off enough that we can't help the Kreetassans."

When Archer didn't say anything, Shran bellowed, "Go!"

"All right," Archer said. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

He motioned for the transmission to be cut and said to Mayweather at the helm, "Set a pursuit course, Travis. All available speed."

CHAPTER

6

Enterprise was flying at an incredible pace. What with recent upgrades and various tweaks Tucker had performed on the warp engine, the ship was close to setting its own personal best speed record.

They followed the same heading the other ship had taken. Nothing was registering on sensors - the attacker had too much of a lead on them - but Archer hoped whoever was in charge of that ship was operating on the assumption that they wouldn't be pursued.

Finally, after several hours, T'Pol picked up its warp signature. Within minutes, however, the ship vanished from Enterprise's long-range scanners.

"The readings are consistent with a vessel using cloaking technology," T'Pol said. "They may have detected our pursuit."

Archer hesitated, adding another piece of circumstantial evidence - cloaking technology - to his grow-

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ing conviction that the Romulans were responsible. He internally debated whether to begin a search pattern in hopes of detecting the other ship somehow, or giving up and going back to assist Shran and the freighter.

Enterprise made the decision for him.

"Cap'n!" came Tucker's concerned voice over the comm. "We're gonna have to back it down. We're startin' to get indications of overloads buildin' up in some of the relays."

One ship alone wasn't going to catch the attacker, Archer reluctantly concluded. It was time to break off pursuit.

"Drop us down to warp four, Travis," he said. "Set a course back to Shran and the freighter."

CHAPTER

7

"The readings are consistent with Romulan cloaking technology," T'Pol said. "I ran correlations between the attacker's sudden disappearance and similar incidents near Starbase 1, the Romulan minefield, and the encounter we had with the Romulan ship at the end of the Cytuno-Deall negotiations."

"The ship didn't look Romulan," Archer said, pacing back and forth in his ready room. "It didn't look like the ship they used to disrupt the Andorian-Tellarite peace negotiations or the ships that chased us out of the Romulan minefield. And it definitely didn't look like the last one we saw."

"We have no idea what a typical Romulan ship looks like," T'Pol said. "The Aenar-assisted vessel that could change its appearance may have been some sort of experiment. The ship in this case may be a prototype as well."

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"But you're certain about the cloaking technology?"

"Yes. The readings are so close as to be identical."

Archer sat down at his desk. "Romulans," he muttered. "We know they want to disrupt any attempts at alliances by species in this sector. But why are they attacking unarmed cargo ships?"

T'Pol remained mute, unable to offer any answers.

"If there's one thing we've learned from this most recent attack," Archer said after a while, "it's that we can't just chase down that ship - not if it's using a cloak of some sort. We're going to have to come up with a plan to catch it."

T'Pol raised one eyebrow and said evenly, "I'm sure Commander Shran will have some ideas how to go about that."

Archer did a double-take at her words, and smiled for the first time since they'd received the freighter's distress call.

CHAPTER

8

Archer ducked to avoid a dislodged overhead bulkhead beam as he walked through the Jhamel. Rather than take Shran away from the repairs to his ship, Archer had asked and been granted permission to come over to the Andorian cruiser. One of Shran's arms was in a sling, an apparent injury of his ship's run-in with the Romulans.

"Another four hours and we will have our engine back in working order," Shran told Archer as they stepped around some crew members working at an open panel. "The Kreetassan freighter is another matter."

"We checked on their status when we got back," Archer said as they resumed walking. "Nothing short of a major overhaul is going to get that ship back into warp."

"That is our evaluation as well. We've restored

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their life support, but other systems are so badly damaged that they can't be repaired."

They walked on in companionable silence until they came to Shran's quarters.

"I've transferred my command protocols here," Shran said as they entered. "My private office on the bridge deck has a slight decompression problem right now. One of the attacker's shots grazed our bridge shielding. Unfortunately, enough of it got through to punch a hole the size of my fist in a bulkhead. I've never seen that happen before."

"We believe we know who the attacker is," Archer said, glancing around at Shran's quarters. They had stepped into what appeared to be a small anteroom with a desk and a couple of chairs. Through a doorway, he could see a sleeping area with a bunk and cabinets.

"You actually found something during your chase?" Shran asked, seating himself behind the desk and motioning for Archer to take the only other chair available.

"It was Romulan," Archer said as he sat down.

Shran's antennae quivered. No doubt he was remembering his torture when he'd been kidnapped from Starbase 1 where he'd been overseeing the installation of weapons. He didn't mention it, however. What he said was, "The Romulans were responsible for the near destruction of Starbase 1. But do you have proof they are the culprits here?"

Archer nodded. "The readings we picked up when they disappeared match other Romulan cloaking tech-

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nology we've encountered."

"Other species may utilize such technology," Shran said. "We may just be unaware of their existence."

"Oh, come on, Shran!" Archer said, his patience with the situation wearing thin. "It's too much of a coincidence. No, we don't have definite proof it's the Romulans, but the odds are that it is them. We know they want to disrupt the alliance. We have to stop them."

Shran stared curiously at Archer, then looked away, toying with a decorative knife that lay on his desk - at least, Archer thought it was decorative. Given the Andorian proclivity toward violence, it was probably sharp as well as pretty.

He was startled when Shran put down the knife and laughed. "Listen to us, pinkskin!" he said, but Archer could hear no slur in the epithet. "Usually you are the one preaching caution, and I am the one who is ready to fight first and ask questions afterward. What's happening to us?"

Archer felt his temper cool, and he leaned back in his chair to consider the man sitting across from him. "Times have changed," he said. "You said so yourself."

"Your fight in the Expanse for the survival of your species has hardened you," Shran said. "Oh, not as much I had expected, but you've changed nevertheless. I saw that at Starbase 1."

"I've never wanted to be anything more than an explorer," Archer said softly, his thoughts turning in-

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ward. "I wanted to see all the wonders of the universe."

"It's a harsh place," Shran said. He turned, grunting as his arm in the sling hampered his movement, and reached for a bottle on a shelf behind him.

"I knew that," Archer said. "I just didn't realize how harsh."

"That's where humans and Andorians differ," Shran said as he poured some blue liquid into two glasses. "We've known all along how difficult it is to survive, and we've taken steps to ensure we will. That is why we are a race of warriors." He handed one of the glasses to Archer. Looking the human in the eye, he said with regret, "But, as we have agreed, times change. We must change with them. Now we must rely on diplomacy as well as strength."

Archer was raising his glass to his lips but stopped at Shran's words. "You don't like being a diplomat, do you?"

"Do you?" the Andorian countered.

"Times change," Archer said again, but with more conviction. "We do what we have to do."

Shran laughed softly and lifted his glass in a toast. "To the warrior and the explorer, who are now reluctant diplomats. We carry out our duties, no matter what they are."

CHAPTER

9

Tucker was looking over Reed's shoulder in the armory as the tactical officer ran the Kreetassan log of the attack one more time.

"The captain was right," Reed said. "There's something very odd about the attack."

Watching the information scroll by on the screen, Tucker remarked, "Did you notice that each subsequent shot from the phased energy weapon that hit the freighter had a higher energy level than the one before?"

"Yes, I did," said Reed. "Normally, you don't use more energy than is required to get the job done when you have variable-yield weapons. There's no sense in wasting your ship's power. But the increases shown here are so small as to be wasteful in the long run, since they took many more shots than necessary to significantly damage the freighter."

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As both men watched the information crossing the screen, Tucker said, "Could be cats."

At Reed's puzzled expression, the engineer remarked, "Well, cats toy with their prey, don't they?"

Reed rolled his eyes. "If that's the best you can come up with..."

"Naw," Tucker said. "T'Pol's certain it was Romulans. Then again, we don't know much about Romulans. Maybe they have catlike mentalities."

At Reed's disgusted look, Tucker raised a hand. "Sorry. Must be gettin' a bit loopy. We pulled all those relays that were overloadin'." Rubbing the small of his back with one hand, he added, "I haven't crawled around in the engineering accessways that much since we were runnin' trials on the Warp 5 engine."

Reed suddenly halted the progression of data scrolling on the screen and looked at Tucker in amazement. "In your round-about way, I do believe you've come up with a viable explanation for these attacks," Reed said.

CHAPTER

10

Archer and Shran were in the command center on Enterprise when two Vulcan captains were shown in. Their ships had arrived at the nebula a short time ago.

Archer was glad Shran had warned him the Vulcans were sending someone. Instead of being thrown off balance by their arrival, he'd been counting on them showing up. He was going to need their help, as well as Shran's, to catch the Romulan ship.

At Archer's insistence, the Vulcan captains had come over to Enterprise to discuss the situation. Whether he liked being a diplomat or not, Archer had learned one thing - face-to-face meetings were more productive than talking over a viewscreen. The Vulcans could terminate the discussion, but walking out of the command center would take more effort than simply pressing a button to cut off a transmission.

That he was acquainted with one of the Vulcan

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captains had surprised Archer at first. But upon reflection, it made sense that Captain Sopek had been assigned to the area. Sopek had had prior interactions with other species, including humans and Andorians, and from Archer's brief acquaintance with him, he seemed open to others' points of view. Sopek was supposed to have taken T'Pol back to Vulcan when she'd been recalled by the Vulcan High Command after the P'Jem monastery incident, but he'd let Archer talk him into allowing her to remain on Enterprise. The fact that she'd deliberately stepped into a line of fire meant for Sopek may have had something to do with his decision.

"Gentlemen," Archer said as Sopek and the other Vulcan captain, V'marn, joined them in front of the largest screen where a chart of the sector was displayed. "My tactical officer has a theory about the attacks on unarmed ships in this area."

He pushed a key on the panel, changing the screen to a display of energy outputs from the attack on the Kreetassan freighter. "As you can see, the increasing power levels during the attack are similar to what you would expect to see in a trial. We believe the attacker was using the freighter as a target to carry out a test of a new weapons system."

Sopek, the shorter of the two Vulcans and apparently the ranking officer, narrowed his eyes as he gazed at the screen. "It does seem to have been an inefficient attack. A trial of some sort could be an explanation for that."

"My crew and I recently uncovered a Romulan

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plot to try various forms of a bioweapon at a remote human colony," Archer said. "This appears to be another test, but of energy weapons."

"But it is not logical," V'marn stated, his dark eyes fixed on the information before them. "Why would such trials be carried out here, where potential adversaries may become aware of them?"

"I believe - " Archer broke off and glanced at Shran, who was doing an admirable job of holding his tongue. "We believe the Romulans testing a new weapons system here serves another purpose - to cause discord among members of the recent alliance among our peoples. It seems to be a constant in the dealings we've had with the Romulans so far."

"Much like their attempt to disrupt the Andorian-Tellarite peace talks," Shran said.

Both Vulcans turned their gazes on the Andorian commander, and Archer held his breath. The next few moments would determine whether they would be able to work together.

"Another possibility comes to mind," Sopek said at last. "The space lane here is used by vessels of many species. They could be testing weapons to see how they perform on ships of various races."

There was silence again as everyone considered the implication of that statement. Then Shran spoke, giving voice to what they all were thinking.

"If that is the case, it could be a prelude to war."

CHAPTER

11

V'marn's ship used its tractor beam to take the Kreetassan freighter in tow to Starbase 1 for repairs. That left the others - Enterprise, the Jhamel, and Sopek's vessel, the NiVar - to patrol the space lane in a widespread, triangular formation.

Each ship would be at a point in the triangle, far enough apart so they didn't register on each other's sensors, yet keeping in formation and moving at a set speed so that each could be reasonably certain where the others were. If any of the ships encountered the Romulan vessel, the plan was to try to drive it toward the other two. At the least, the other two ships could come to the aid of the third ship if the confrontation went badly.

"Simplistic, but feasible," Sopek had announced after Archer had proposed the plan.

Archer hadn't known what to say to that. He'd ex-

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pected some kind of argument but had gotten none. He decided not to question his luck.

Shran did give him food for thought, however. As the Andorian was leaving the meeting to return to his ship, he said, "Be careful, Archer. If the Romulans decide to attack one of us, chances are it will be you."

"Why do you say that?" Archer asked.

The Andorian gave him a pitying look. "In this amalgam of forces, your ship is the most vulnerable of the three. Your speed is slower, your weapons not as powerful." With a lopsided grin emphasized by outstretched antenna, he added, "Besides, the Romulans don't seem to like you."

CHAPTER

12

The space lane remained depressingly empty. Three days of patrolling in designated formation had turned up no Romulan ship, or any other vessels for that matter. The news of attacks on unarmed cargo ships had apparently spread, and the area was being given a wide berth, even if it meant longer journeys.

Archer could only assume Shran and Sopek were experiencing the same lack of results, because he hadn't heard from them. They had agreed to maintain a communications blackout until something happened.

As the days passed and he became discouraged by the lack of success, Archer wondered whether those aboard the Romulan ship were toying with them, fully aware of three heavily armed ships in the vicinity. The Romulans had cloaking technology, after all, and could be out there keeping an eye on any one of them without them knowing it.

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Archer said as much to T'Pol at breakfast in the captain's mess one morning. "I can't help but think they're out there watching us," he said.

"Perhaps they do not wish to engage a ship that may have a chance of damaging them," T'Pol suggested.

Archer smiled faintly at the implied compliment. "Thanks."

"Although," T'Pol continued as if he hadn't spoken, "if they want to evaluate the effectiveness of their weapons, attacking a vessel that can fight back would be a truer test."

Archer's gaze went to the view outside the window where the edge of the purplish nebula could be seen. "I'm willing to bet that's where they're hiding. Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "they need a little encouragement to come out and play."

A few hours later, Enterprise was at tactical alert. A scan from outside would show the stability of the warp engine fluctuating and power outages throughout the ship.

On the bridge, Archer told Sato, "Send the distress call."

Sato keyed in the commands on her console, sending a general distress call. Piggybacked onto the transmission were coded messages to Shran and Sopek outlining Archer's revised strategy.

"Travis, drop us to half impulse but keep us moving," Archer ordered. "T'Pol, keep a close eye on the edge of the nebula."

As the minutes slowly dragged into an hour,

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Archer wondered if his ruse was going to work. He glanced at T'Pol at her station. She shook her head. Turning to look at Reed behind him at the tactical station, he got the same response.

Of all his command staff, Reed had been the least enamored of this idea. He didn't want to give the slightest appearance of a weakened state, much less actually power down vital systems. Tucker had come up with a way to keep Enterprise's weapons systems at full strength, however, while giving off false readings. In fact, the engineer had said it would help contribute to the illusion of erratic power levels.

When the waiting got to the point where it was grating on his nerves, Archer began pacing a circuit on the bridge, checking over Mayweather's shoulder, stepping up onto the upper level to glance at T'Pol's console, and walking over to tactical before stepping down into the command well to begin the circuit over again.

"Come on," Archer muttered under his breath, staring at the viewscreen from behind Mayweather after yet another circuit of the bridge.

"Captain," T'Pol said from her station. "This could take some time. You are assuming the cloaked vessel is within sensor range of us."

"It might be egotistical, but something Shran said made me think that - "

He broke off as a chirp came from T'Pol's console. She immediately spun in her chair and looked into her scanner's viewpiece.

"Something is happening at the edge of the neb-

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ula," she said, her attention focused on the scanner. "Particulate matter is being disturbed, but there is no apparent source of the disturbance."

Hastily moving to his chair and sitting down, Archer said over his shoulder, "You were right, Malcolm, when you said the nebula would be a good place to hide. They're coming out under cloak. Tie in to T'Pol's sensors and target the disturbance."

A brief flicker of alarm crossed T'Pol's normally impassive features as she spun back to face the captain. "We don't know for certain it is the attacker - "

"Getting readings consistent with weapons being charged!" Reed broke in.

"Sir!" called out Mayweather.

Quickly shifting his gaze to the viewscreen at the front of the bridge, Archer saw a portion of the nebula's edge wavering. Then the ship they'd been seeking for several long days suddenly coalesced into solidity and headed straight for them.

Before he could give the order to fire, twin bolts of energy shot from the Romulan vessel, striking hard blows on Enterprise's upper hull. The ship bucked sharply under the impact, sparks spewing from the helm and several auxiliary consoles.

Hanging tightly onto the armrests of his chair as Enterprise slowly righted itself, Archer shouted, "Return fire!"

But there was no indication on the viewscreen that Enterprise was firing in return. Archer whirled in his seat to see Reed slumped over his station.

Archer staggered to his feet as another blow from

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the Romulan vessel struck home. He rushed to the tactical station, pushing Reed and the chair in which he was slumped to the side, and took over the weapon controls.

"I can't maneuver!" Mayweather shouted, frantically working at his console. "Helm controls are down!"

As Archer checked the readings on the tactical console, he heard T'Pol in the background calling for medics. Then he put all distractions aside and concentrated on his task. Reed had polarized the hull plating before he was knocked out, and he had already locked Enterprise's weapons onto the other vessel. Archer had only to push the appropriate buttons. He quickly depressed them, and two lances of bright energy were discharged at the other ship.

"No damage to the Romulan vessel," T'Pol reported as the phase cannon beams glanced off the hull of the other ship.

"Hoshi!" Archer called across the bridge. "Open a channel to them!"

As Sato complied, T'Pol said in disbelief, "You can't believe they are going to talk to us while they are attempting to destroy us."

"We need to know who they are," Archer said, unleashing another barrage of phase cannon fire. "We've been assuming they're Romulans. We have to be sure."

"Even if it means our own destruction?" T'Pol asked, grasping the edge of her console as Enterprise rocked under another salvo.

"I don't intend for Enterprise to be destroyed.

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That's why the Jhamel and the Ni'Var are on their way here."

"No response," Sato said when Archer looked over at her. "I'm pretty sure they're receiving us; they're just not answering."

Archer's features hardened and he punched in the commands to launch a torpedo. He deliberately set it to explode in front of the other vessel. He ignored T'Pol's incredulous stare when, a few moments later, it did just that. Instead, he told Sato, "Open that channel and put me on."

Sato pushed a button and nodded at him.

"This is Captain Archer of the Starfleet starship Enterprise. I demand to know the reason for this unprovoked attack."

Abruptly, all fire from the other ship ceased. In the eerie calm that followed, the turbolift doors opened to admit a couple of medical technicians. Archer waved them over to Reed, then looked at T'Pol.

"They must have heard us," he said thoughtfully. "There's no other reason for them to stop shooting."

There was a beep from T'Pol's console. "They're powering up a different weapon," she said as she checked the readouts. "It appears to be a torpedo."

"Sir!" Sato said urgently. "They're hailing us. Audio only."

Archer nodded curtly. "Put it on."

"Captain Archer, we seem destined to keep running into each other," came a smooth voice over the bridge speakers, causing Sato to straighten abruptly in her seat and catch Archer's eye.

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Archer motioned for her to mute the channel.

"I recognize that voice," Sato said. "It's Trannon, the spy in the Vulcan delegation we had on board."

"The power level of their weapon is building," T'Pol interjected.

A glance from Archer indicated he'd heard T'Pol's comment, and he nodded at Sato to open the channel again.

"We know the Romulans are responsible for the attacks on unarmed shipping in this area, Trannon," Archer said.

A harsh laugh came over the channel. "So your communications officer did not perish in the catwalk. No matter. I know there are two other ships on the way to assist you. It just means I will have to rid myself of your constant interference more quickly than I had planned."

"Why are you doing this?" Archer demanded.

"That you need to ask is reason enough," came the cryptic response.

"Captain!" T'Pol called out. "They've fired."

Archer, launching two torpedos in an attempt to intercept the oncoming missile, fervently wished Reed hadn't been incapacitated. The tactical officer was much better at this sort of thing than he was. But even as those thoughts crossed his mind, Archer knew he was trying to deny what was about to happen.

Contrary to the other attacks, the Romulans weren't going to take their time and cut his ship up piece-meal. Enterprise was going to be destroyed quickly and most definitely without mercy.

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The forward viewscreen showed the two torpedoes streaking away, only to miss the oncoming torpedo when it veered to one side. For a moment, Archer thought the Romulan torpedo would pass by harmlessly, but then it swerved back to its previous course.

"Brace yourselves!" Archer yelled, grabbing for handholds at the tactical console.

He was drawing a deep breath in anticipation of the impact when the torpedo suddenly blossomed into a blinding explosion only a few thousand meters distant.

"What - ?" Archer started to say, only to have to grab for a hold again as the ship reeled from the shockwave of the explosion.

"The Jhamel destroyed the torpedo," T'Pol reported.

Without warning, the underside of Shran's ship filled the viewscreen as it flew dangerously close over Enterprise on a course directly for the Romulan vessel. The barrage of fire it unleashed was horrendous in its ferocity - and yet the Romulan ship seemed barely affected.

"The Romulans have enhanced shielding of some sort," T'Pol said, analyzing the data now coming through the sensors. "Conventional phase weapons are having no effect."

"Damn it, Shran. Get out of the way," Archer muttered as he realized he couldn't add Enterprise's firepower to the Jhamel's. The Andorian had deliberately placed his ship between the Romulans and Enterprise.

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"Travis - can we move at all?"

"Thrusters only, sir," the helmsman immediately replied. "Get us moving so I can fire without hitting the Jhamel. T'Pol - where's the Ni'Var?"

"On sensors now. It should arrive in eight minutes, fourteen seconds."

Glancing at the viewscreen, Archer confirmed what the readings on the tactical console were telling him. Mayweather had managed to get Enterprise moving, but at a barely perceptible speed. His ship was slowly angling to starboard, away from the Ni'Var's anticipated point of arrival. As soon as they were clear of Shran's ship, Archer fired the phase cannons several times in succession. The energy beams hit the Romulan ship, but they dissipated on the hull without having any effect other than to draw return fire.

"We're being hailed by the Jhamel," Sato called out over the chaos on the bridge.

"Archer!" Shran's voice echoed over the speakers as the bridge rocked from the latest blow. "What are you doing? They'll rip your ship to pieces!"

"They're ripping you to pieces right now!" Archer retorted as he saw the Jhamel move to put itself between Enterprise and the Romulan ship again.

"My ship is better shielded - "

Shran's response was cut off by a burst of static. With his attention on the weapons' controls, Archer had missed seeing Shran's ship take a hit on one of its nacelles. He glanced up in time to see the Jhamel's glowing engine exhaust ports dim.

Shran is going to be so mad, Archer thought. He

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just got those fixed.

Then, as it moved out once again from behind the protective cover of the Andorian cruiser, Enterprise was targeted again by the Romulan vessel, and Archer had a moment of déjà vu as he saw another torpedo streaking toward his ship.

"Evasive!" he shouted.

Mayweather was already trying to maneuver the ship out of harm's way but thrusters were too slow. There was no way this torpedo was going to miss. Archer swallowed hard and grasped the handholds one more time.

The terrific impact knocked him from his feet, and crewmen across the bridge were tossed to the deck. The only ones who didn't fall were Reed, who had been moved to a supine position on the deck, and the two medical techs who were crouched over him.

Sparks showered from damaged equipment. The lighting flickered a few times before giving up completely.

"Emergency lighting!" Archer called out as he pulled himself to his feet.

Dim lighting slowly relieved the darkness on the bridge. Archer could hear someone over by the situation table moaning.

"Damage report!" he called out.

He heard a cough, then T'Pol said hoarsely, "Power is out on Decks B, C, D, and portions of E...Phase cannons are offline...We have lost sensors...Casualty reports coming in. No fatalities."

"Get the viewscreen back on!" Archer called over

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to Sato. "I want to see what's going on."

"Engineering to the bridge!"

Archer thumbed the comm panel button on the tactical console. "Go ahead."

"Half the systems down here are fried," Tucker's voice informed him. "Whatever that was that hit us sent surges through the EPS grid, causing overloads all over the ship. What the hell was that?"

"What about the engine?" Archer asked.

"We're not goin' anywhere. At least not for a day."

Archer's shoulders sagged. "Give me what you can as soon as you can," he said.

A commotion near his feet made Archer look down. Reed was batting away the restraining hands of one of the med techs who was trying to prevent him from getting up.

"Please, sir," Reed said, hauling himself unsteadily to his feet and pulling his chair back over to the console. "I can take over here now."

Archer looked searchingly at the man. Reed was pale and had a large bruise on his forehead, but his eyes were clear. He glanced at one of the med techs, who shrugged.

Archer nodded to Reed and moved off to his own chair, sitting down just as the viewscreen crackled to life.

"Forward view only," Sato informed him. "It's the only angle still working."

"Good work, Hoshi," he said, although there was nothing to be seen except the nebula. "Travis, if we've still got thrusters, try turning us around so we can see

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what's going on."

"Aye, sir."

The scene on the viewscreen shifted as Enterprise slowly rotated. The first thing to come into view was Shran's ship, somehow back under way and still firing. Archer winced at the sight of dark scorch marks across its hull.

"Mr. Reed," Archer instructed, "as soon as we have a clear shot, fire whatever we've got."

"Targeting scanners appear to be down, sir, as are the phase cannons," the tactical officer responded tersely. "It will have to be torpedoes by dead reckoning."

"Do the best you can," Archer said. A banged-up Reed handling manual firing was still better than anyone else, and Archer was glad the tactical officer had come around.

A few tense moments passed as Enterprise continued to rotate at an excruciatingly slow rate before the Romulan ship appeared on the screen. Reed immediately fired two torpedoes and Archer watched their flight on the screen. One missed; one found its target, hitting the Romulan ship between two energy beam strikes from the Jhamel. They seemed to have no effect.

Suddenly a volley of explosions rocked the Romulan ship from above.

The Ni'Var had finally arrived. The Romulan ship having been occupied with the two other ships, the Ni'Var had come in on a higher plane, seeking to exploit a different angle of attack as well as utilize its

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speed. After its initial attack, the Vulcan ship had continued on course, soaring over the Romulan ship, only to quickly turn and make another run.

"Let's give Sopek some help," Archer said, looking back at Reed. "Try to time our torpedoes to hit when they fire again."

Reed was ready, firing at the appropriate moment. To Archer's satisfaction, Shran's ship also joined in, unleashing all its weapons at once. As the bridge crew watched, the combined barrage rocked the Romulan ship, which listed to one side before righting itself. It moved off, heading toward the nebula.

"Hoshi, can you get through to Sopek?" Archer asked.

Sato worked at her console and looked up, nodding at Archer.

"Sopek - try to cut them off!" Archer said. "If they go in the nebula, we'll never find them."

There was no response from Sopek, but on the viewscreen Archer could see the Ni'Var alter course to pursue the fleeing Romulan ship. He watched anxiously until both ships moved out of sight.

CHAPTER

13

Archer was in Engineering getting a firsthand report on the damage. The compartment was crowded as crewmen from all shifts went about fixing what needed to be fixed - which was just about everything, he reflected.

"We're going to have to figure out a way to protect the EPS system better than it is," Tucker said over the din. "Whatever they used, it got into the grid and sent surges down all the conduits."

"Maybe the Andorians and the Vulcans can help us with that," Archer said. "Their ships seemed to withstand it better."

Tucker raised a dubious eyebrow. "I'm willin' to try if they are," he said.

Archer clapped him on the shoulder and headed for the hatch. He veered off to the comm panel when he heard his name paged. "Go ahead," he said into the

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comm.

"Commander Shran is waiting for you in the command center, and Captain Sopek also will be arriving momentarily," came T'Pol's voice.

"Sopek's back?" Archer said in puzzlement, more to himself than to T'Pol. "Have him escorted to the command center. I'll be right there."

CHAPTER

14

"No luck finding the Romulans?" Archer asked Sopek as he entered the command center.

"We lost them from our sensors shortly after entering the nebula," the Vulcan replied.

"You let them get away?" Shran asked with his old belligerency. "You should have kept searching!"

Sopek favored the blue-skinned commander with a level stare. "The humans have an apt saying: Discretion is the better part of valor. It was best that the Ni'Var returned here to assist with repairs, as well as provide protection should the Romulan vessel return. Any one or two of our ships is not a sufficient match for that ship."

Shran's antenna curled in displeasure, and Archer hurried to defuse the tension he could feel growing. "He's got a point, Shran," he told the Andorian seriously. "It took the combined firepower of our three

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ships to drive the Romulan off."

Shran considered his words and backed down, nodding grudgingly. "You're right again, Archer, as is the Vul - as is Sopek. Together we are stronger."

Archer turned to look at the main screen in the command center where a chart of the nebula and the shipping lane was displayed. Sopek and Shran came to stand on either side of him.

"Somehow," Archer said after a few moments, "I think the Romulans are done with whatever it was they were doing here."

Sopek dipped his head. "They have every reason to stay away," he said. "We have confirmed the identity of the attacker, and that they most likely were testing new weapons. Their continued presence here would be foolhardy."

"To say the least," Shran put in. "They found out that to take on all of us together was a mistake."

"To say the least," Archer echoed softly, a small smile curving his lips.

Starfleet may have sent Enterprise to uncover the perpetrator of the attacks, but it had gained much more, Archer thought. They'd learned that not only could various species work together to build an alliance, they could work together to defend it - and each other - as well. That could only bode well for whatever the future might bring.

End.

— STAR TREK — ENTERPRISE

Amalgam

Archer, Shran the Andorian and Sopek the Vulcan are sent to investigate on mysterious attacks on cargo crossing a space corridor. They will have to work together in order to unveil the authors and bring back security in this sector.

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

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