

— STAR TREK — ENTERPRISE

With her life in
danger, T'Pol
is facing a
choice :
Starfleet
or Vulcan



Inside Job



SAL

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Archer blurted, "Is she all right?" He hadn't heard of this.

"The ambassador's life was saved by a human acquaintance." She stared hard at him, raising an eyebrow as he smiled. He understood her hidden message: Reed. "It is no longer safe for her to remain on Earth.

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Revision 1

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Inside Job

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CHAPTER 1

Ambassador T'Pol had spent five years living and working with humans. Her understanding had been enhanced by a highly unusual set of circumstances for a Vulcan. From her initial encounter with the V'tosh ka'tur, through her addiction to trellium D and the bond she had shared with Commander Trip Tucker, she was undoubtedly in a unique situation. Even so, as she scanned the boardroom, she found it difficult to read the mood within it. Her gaze swept across the gathered delegates; members of the Vulcan security detail were calm and still, in contrast to the humans present. There was an edge of some emotion she could not define in the air, resulting in a tense atmosphere that held a strange undercurrent.

"Ah." The silence was fractured as Admiral Boone arrived with his entourage. "Ambassador," he continued heartily as she stood, "my apologies for the late

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arrival."

He offered no explanation for being more than thirty minutes late, and she expected none. The discomfort radiating from other members of the human contingent suggested they were unhappy with the admiral's tactics, and T'Pol filed that information away to consider later. That this was a calculated insult was clear to her; she had even expected it. If he had been dealing with the Andorians or Tellerites, then it might have generated the desired response, thus ending the meeting before it could begin. But the fact that no one had left indicated the stakes.

She bowed her head graciously as if conferring a great honor upon him, and worked to sublimate the brief surge of satisfaction as his face suffused with color. "We are grateful for the time you can spare us, Admiral," she said coolly. "Shall we begin?"

They settled themselves around the oval table, and T'Pol opened the proceedings. "I welcome you all to the Vulcan Embassy and I extend my thanks to our Starfleet colleagues for agreeing to this meeting. The recent events on Alpha Centauri concern us all, and it seemed appropriate to discuss joint security arrangements and what changes, if any, should be implemented." She paused for a moment, her gaze sweeping the room once more as she gauged the reactions. "Although I have facilitated this meeting, I am not a security expert, and ask Commander S'levan, of the Vulcan Security Council, to take the chair."

S'levan was a gray-haired, autocratic figure with enough poise and gravitas to silence the objections

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T'Pol could see forming in Boone's features, who had clearly expected to take the floor immediately. One of Boone's aides coughed discreetly and Boone subsided, although he was clearly far from happy.

T'Pol sat back in her chair and prepared to watch and listen. It had been her intention from the start to relinquish control of the meeting to provide her with that very opportunity. She folded her hands within the arms of her formal Vulcan robe, her features serene and unmoving as she surveyed those before her.

S'levan focused the discussion on the practicalities of the security issues facing them, and for T'Pol thought briefly of Lieutenant Malcolm Reed. His expertise would add greatly to this discussion, she considered. Unlike Boone, he would not have downplayed the level of threat they were facing. She identified those in the human contingent who clearly disagreed, but there was a subtle aura of menace exuding from the outwardly jovial admiral, and none of his subordinates challenged him aloud.

Whatever his position, and despite his calm, T'Pol realized that Boone was uneasy. It occurred to her that the admiral could well be aware that this meeting was a ruse, and that she was, to an extent, exposing her own interests. None of her summations was reflected in her expression as she continued to listen calmly and to observe. The fact that Boone was uneasy suggested a subtle lack of confidence. She might be able to capitalize on that.

Across the table, T'Pol's calm gaze was caught by that of the admiral, and with her knowledge of hu-

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mans, she recognized both his uncertainly and his anger.

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CHAPTER

2

The air was cool, and T'Pol pulled her robe a little closer about her to keep out the evening chill as she followed the winding path among flower beds and trees. The park was quiet; few people, even in these relatively peaceful times on Earth, would venture into it at night. She stared up at the night skies, her formidable intellect calculating speed, distance, time as she tried to pinpoint where *Enterprise* might be.

"Just what exactly do you think you're doing?"

She had not heard him approach. His tone was icy cold, and so at odds with what T'Pol had come to expect from this man that she was momentarily speechless.

She recovered quickly as she turned to face him. "To what are you referring, Lieutenant Reed?" she countered, both to gain information and a moment to process this new version of someone she had known

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for five years. When she had received a coded message setting up this meeting, T'Pol had known who would be at the rendezvous point. During their last days on **Enterprise,** they had set up, with Hoshi Sato's help, a simple code that would enable them to communicate and exchange information. It was based on shared experience, which they both hoped would be enough to confuse an enemy.

"Not Lieutenant," Reed reminded her sharply, and she accepted that his attitude was probably the same as it had always been, only with the deference he habitually showed higher ranking officers now removed. Still, she may no longer be his superior officer, but she was the Vulcan ambassador to Earth.

"I was not aware I had to explain my actions to you, Mr. Reed," she admonished, emphasizing his proper title slightly.

"You know I'm investigating Boone," Reed pressed, his face a pale oval in the half-light. "I've got close enough to rattle him, even if he's not sure who's after him. And I've got an idea to get even closer. If you get involved, he may well take another look at **Enterprise's** crew. He'll know I've resigned my commission, but I've made sure the authorities think I'm out of the country. If, as we suspect, he's involved with the covert ops section I worked for, then he'll be aware of my previous involvement--and my connection to Harris. He'll make the obvious connection." Reed slumped against a tree, and suddenly the fury was gone. He seemed merely exhausted as he continued. "If he believes that he is only dealing with your

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suspensions, then it is well within his power to remove you. Paxton may be dead, but there is enough support remaining for Terra Prime that any assassination could be blamed on them. And you know what that would do to Earth's relations with any alien species still willing to talk to us."

In his analysis, she heard his concern, and her own stance eased slightly as she finally understood that his anger was generated more by his worry about her than any consideration of his investigation.

"I am taking appropriate precautions," she tried to reassure him.

"Right." He didn't sound particularly convinced. "Have you heard from *Enterprise*?" His tone was suddenly eager. "How are they?"

T'Pol said, "I saw Captain Archer before they left. He was well. I believe he would prefer us to be on board."

He smiled slightly, then changed the subject. "What did you make of Boone?"

T'Pol remembered Boone's bravado at the disastrous meeting. "I believe he is aware that he is under suspicion."

Reed nodded. "That's what my sources tell me, too. Which means he has to make a move soon. My guess is he's busy looking for a scapegoat--some way of unmasking someone else that will lessen suspicions of him. Except he knows that with some groups, it won't necessarily work." His tone was grim, and T'Pol understood that he was warning her. She began to speak, but she subsided as he held up his hand. "Ssh,"

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he ordered peremptorily.

Her eyebrows rose. Even with her superior hearing, there was nothing in the surroundings that she detected as unusual. There was a long pause, and then Reed seemed to relax fractionally.

The next moment, Reed pushed T'Pol roughly to the ground and threw her robe over her head--an attempt, she understood, to confuse the target, even as she forced herself to lie calm. If her would-be assassin was possessed of a night vision device, Reed's tactic would not help her. She heard the distinctive sound of a phase pistol being withdrawn from its holster, followed by the old-fashioned sound of shots being fired. She heard an energy discharge from the phase pistol, a scuffle of movement, retreating footsteps, and finally silence.

Reed uttered a low curse, and then moved from the protective stance he had taken. He extended a hand as T'Pol uncurled herself, helping her to her feet. "My apologies, Ambassador," he said mildly, "but I rather think I've just proven my point." His gaze was still watchful, obviously still on alert. "We need to get you inside--and fast." He was already moving, one hand gripping her elbow. As she had often been in the past, she was surprised by the strength of this young man.

In moments, she led him into the Vulcan compound, entering from the street through a secure doorway, ignoring Reed's raised eyebrows. Once inside, she led him directly to the same area in which she had spoken to Archer--it seemed like days ago.

"This room is shielded?" Reed questioned.

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"It is. However--" She hesitated. "No one in the Embassy was privy to my movements. No one knew I was meeting you. I am...concerned...about the security here. I made certain no one knew of this meeting. I am positive I left undetected."

Reed shook his head, clearly frustrated at her. "You're being monitored--and followed. Probably within the Embassy as well. Not particularly surprising." His expression turned thoughtful.

"If they saw us together, Mr. Reed, I may well have compromised your investigation."

"Or they may well assume we were two old ship-mates catching up."

T'Pol wondered which of the two of them was least convinced by that possibility.

Reed sighed, scrubbing his hand through his hair, clearly frustrated by the latest turn of events. "It may well be enough to prompt Boone into some action, I suppose. You'll report this?"

"I must do so immediately," she concurred. "What will you do?"

"Continue digging. I've been trying to trace Harris, but he's too damn good at this."

"You are not without skills, Mr. Reed."

He blinked at the compliment and shrugged, although she thought he was pleased. "I'm not bad," he accepted. "But Harris has twenty years of experience in this field. And he has a great deal more information than either of us. As has Boone." His frustration was obvious.

"I will contact you if I uncover anything of inter-

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est," she assured him.

He nodded. "Take care, Ambassador. Stay in the Vulcan compound as much as possible."

Dryly, she asked, "And do you believe I am safe there, Mr. Reed?"

"Safer--perhaps." He hesitated. "If you speak to *Enterprise*--"

"I will pass on your good wishes."

There was a short pause. He seemed to struggle for words. "Tell Trip he'd better maintain the power output to my armory."

She understood. "I am sure he will do everything in his power to keep *Enterprise* safe until our return."

"I know." Abruptly he straightened, and the lingering impression of a young man missing his home and his people was gone, swallowed by the competent officer. "Contact me if you need me," he advised.

"I will," she promised, and she led him out, not staying to watch him disappear into the darkness.

CHAPTER

3

"Captain, I am receiving a message from Vulcan." Ensign Hoshi Sato's voice was as calm as ever, but her raised eyebrows were eloquent of her surprise. All current contact between Earth and Vulcan was happening at a much higher level.

"I'll take it in my ready room." Archer did nothing that would give away his own surprise or sudden concern. He could not, however, hide his shock as the screen cleared and he saw his contact. "T'Pau." He caught himself and continued calmly. "This is a great honor--"

T'Pau cut him off. "Thank you, Captain Archer, but allow me to state my business. Vulcan must ask for your help. My officials have spoken with Starfleet Command, who has agreed to our request. However, I prefer to ask you in person."

"Go on." He was wary now. He couldn't read

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T'Pau's expression.

"There has been an attempt on the life of our Ambassador to Earth." T'Pau paused for a moment, obviously to let the implications of what she was saying sink in.

Archer blurted, "Is she all right?" He hadn't heard of this.

"The ambassador's life was saved by a human acquaintance." She stared hard at him, raising an eyebrow as he smiled. He understood her hidden message: Reed. "It is no longer safe for her to remain on Earth. A replacement has been found and is en route. We have also been asked to attend a summit meeting on Betazed. Our request is for *Enterprise* to bring Ambassador T'Pol to Betazed as our representative and afterwards to return her to Vulcan--that can happen at your own convenience."

"We would be pleased to help in any way," Archer answered.

"Thank you, Captain." She raised her hand, fingers spread. "Live long and prosper."

His was an automatic and perfect response, a remnant of his experiences on Vulcan when they had first met. "Live long and prosper, T'Pau."

When the screen showed only the Starfleet logo, he whispered, "Now what the hell was that about?" before he quit the ready room to order the change in course and let his senior staff know the reason.

CHAPTER

4

T'Pol gazed at the communiqué. She experienced a certain amount of confusion at its contents. It would have been neglectful of her not to inform her government of the attempt on her life, but she had not expected this response. She had been recalled to Vulcan, and an appropriate replacement was already on the way to take over the ambassadorship. Furthermore, arrangements were being made for her return to Vulcan. She would be contacted with full details in due course, the brief message informed her.

The comm chimed, and a toneless voice said, "Ambassador, Admiral Boone is here."

For a moment she considered her safety. Logically, Boone was unlikely to harm her in this place, but she may be able to gather more evidence from him.

"Ask the admiral to join me," she ordered, stand-

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ing to receive him.

Boone presented the same jovial front he had in the security meeting, but the same subtle aura of menace was also present. T'Pol invited him to sit and then asked, "What can I do for you, Admiral?" His eyebrows rose, and she realized her enquiry had been phrased more in the human vernacular than some Vulcans may have done.

"I was sorry to hear that you had been attacked, Ambassador, and I wondered why the fact had not been officially reported to the Earth security forces. They are still rounding up members of Terra Prime and all such information would be helpful. "

Reed was right, she mused: Terra Prime had been set up to take the blame had the attempt been successful. As an organization on its last legs, it would be an ideal scapegoat. "I reported the matters to my superiors, Admiral," she responded. "They will take the appropriate steps."

"You were saved by a human, I understand?" Boone pressed.

"That is correct."

"Well," Boone continued, and she decided that were she human, his hearty tone would be excessively irritating. "You must let us know who he is, so we can thank him properly."

"He was what you would call a Good Samaritan--I do not believe he would wish attention drawn to his bravery." That at least was dissemblance, rather than an outright lie.

"Really." Skepticism underlay the smooth voice.

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"Well, I would certainly be very keen to meet him. I think we may have something in common." He smiled, then slapped his hands onto his knees, pushing himself to his feet. "Well, I am relieved that he was there, Ambassador. Good day to you."

T'Pol was left with the distinct impression that Boone's final remark had more meaning than the words themselves would suggest, and she resolved to contact Reed and inform him of this development. It was also clear to her that Boone had more access to her communications than even she had believed. The sense of being watched intensified.

For the moment, she still had her duties to perform, and she readied herself to attend a meeting to discuss a cultural exchange, which would send Buddhist monks to the rebuilt monastery on P'Jem.

CHAPTER

5

On *Enterprise,* Captain Archer made his way to main engineering in search of his missing first officer. He found Commander Tucker and Hess, ostensibly the new chief engineer, in deep discussion over a set of schematics.

"Commander?" Despite his best attempts, Archer could not quite hide his exasperation, and Tucker's slightly guilty expression did not help. "I need to talk to you, Trip."

"Sure, Captain," Tucker turned back to Hess for a moment. He finished with, "Well, Chief Engineer--it's your call. I'll talk to you later," then followed the captain from the room.

"Let's grab some lunch," Archer decided practically. He waited until they were in his private mess with food in front of them before he began to speak about what was on his mind. "You know we're being

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sent to Earth to pick up T'Pol."

Tucker murmured his affirmative around a mouthful of sandwich, and Archer continued, his eyes lighting with amusement and affection as Tucker attacked his food. What is it with these guys and missing meals, he thought, reminded of the times both Tucker and Reed had needed to be ordered to either eat or sleep.

"I was thinking about what T'Pol said," Archer continued. "She said we should take T'Pol back to Vulcan--at our convenience."

"Yeah?"

"Well, it might not be convenient to go to Vulcan for quite some time. And if T'Pol is on board anyway, she might as well be our science officer again. I was just wondering what you thought of that." He held his breath. Although Tucker had been difficult to prise from the engines, when he had concentrated on being first officer, he had been shaping up as a good one. But Archer was well aware his heart wasn't really in it. He waited for his friend to make the connection.

Tucker swallowed thoughtfully. "You thinking what I'm thinking?" he asked.

"What are you thinking?" Archer grinned at him.

"T'Pol could be your first officer again, too."

"She could." Archer added cautiously, "What would you think about that?"

"You kidding? Cap'n, I'd be more than happy to give all that admin stuff a miss for another few years." He obviously noticed his captain's serious expression. "What?"

This was the real reason for this talk: Tucker's de-

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velopment as an officer. "You need to spend some time thinking about what you want to do with your career, Commander." He had Tucker's full attention now. "You'll make a good captain, Trip, maybe even a great one. Part of becoming that is the role of first officer. It's not just about administrative duties--and I think you already realize that. It's about people. And when you put your mind to it, that's where your real strength lies."

Tucker's expression shifted. He looked almost guilty. "I know you're right, Cap'n. It's just...so much has happened over the past couple of years and I could do with some settling-down time. Does that make sense?"

Archer regarded him and sighed. It was true enough, he thought. His friend had traveled a hard road ever since the Cogenitor died, and perhaps his inability to tear himself away from Engineering was more about emotional security than anything to do with his love of the job. "Okay, Trip, I'm busting you down to chief engineer for the time being. With one caveat," he added. "You now run the performance reviews."

Tucker grinned, his delight obvious, "Sure thing, Cap'n," before he sobered. "Don't know how I'll tell Hess, though."

Archer had been thinking about that. "I don't think you'll find she's too upset. And I would ensure she knows she's automatically in charge if you're not around. I suggest you formally appoint her as assistant chief engineer and put her in charge of the beta shift.

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It'll be good for her resume, too."

Tucker nodded. "Good idea, Cap'n. I'll go talk to her now."

"No, you won't," Archer disagreed, and he pointed at the seat Tucker had just vacated. As the man stared at him, he elaborated. "Not until you have finished everything on that plate, Mr. Tucker."

Tucker chuckled and sat. "Gee thanks, Mom," he joked.

CHAPTER

6

It was nearing the end of the shift by the time Tucker made it back to engineering. He was not looking forward to the coming interview but had refused Archer's offer to be present. It was his responsibility, he asserted, but he had not missed the warmth of approval in his captain's expression.

"Commander," Hess called, and he moved to join her in front of a console that had been giving them trouble.

"Found the problem?" he asked.

"Think so. We're just running a final diagnostic." She glanced at him then and asked, "Something up?"

"We need to talk," Tucker responded, and led the way to a quiet corner. Once there, he glanced nervously at Hess before he began. "This is not general knowledge, and you need to keep it to yourself, but it looks like T'Pol will be rejoining the crew."

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Hess was a brilliant woman, and she quickly made the connection. "You'll be chief engineer again?"

"Yeah. The captain just told me. Look, I'm sorry." He hurried on before she could speak. "I'd like you to officially be second in command--and you'll be running the beta shift on your own, with no hand-holding from me. You're a damn fine engineer, Lieutenant, and you'll make a great chief."

She broke in, her tone dry. "But not today."

Tucker hesitated. "No. Not today."

Hess smiled, and it seemed genuine enough, if a little ironic. "I'd better have a great report after my next performance review."

"I don't doubt it, Lieutenant." Tucker grinned at her in relief, making his own silent promise to ensure that Hess would benefit from the first opportunity for advancement that arose.

CHAPTER

7

Ambassador T'Pol had spent several days patiently waiting for the information to arrive concerning her removal from Earth. In that time, she had continued to probe as discreetly as possible into Admiral Boone and his known associates, using sources to which she knew others would not have access. She passed any information she gained to Lieutenant Reed in the hope he would be able to make some use of it in his own investigation. It was with some trepidation that she did so, aware that while she was under surveillance, any communication would be intercepted. But the information she passed was crucial to his investigation. After finalizing a brief resume of her most recent findings and encoding it, until it appeared to all intents and purposes a short, inconsequential note between former colleagues, she sent it off.

She looked up sharply as the door to her office

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was opened. The rarity of such an entry without announcement, coupled with the recent attack and her own concerns about whether she could trust her staff, brought her to her feet. Her hand was already on the energy weapon concealed beneath the desk.

"Ambassador T'Pol."

T'Pol required all her lifetime of training to hide her shock. "Soval," she hesitated for a moment. "It is agreeable to see you." It was the truth, she discovered. Over the years she had served on **Enterprise,** she had witnessed the journey Soval had taken, from his initial mistrust of Archer to his eventual wholehearted support of the captain. Despite his trenchant views on humanity he, like T'Pol had come to understand that when the humans started their mission of exploration, they had also begun something much bigger: a shift in the way different groups, planets, and races interacted. It was the start of a cooperative approach, which would ultimately shift the balance of power in this small part of the Galaxy. Something that had led directly to the dangerous times in which they now lived.

As was habitual way, Soval stood quietly, waiting until he had her full attention before he spoke. "I was already on my way here when I was informed of the attack on your life. The Vulcan Council requested that I take the role of ambassador again until the replacement can arrive." He glanced around the room. "I have been inside for many days. Perhaps we may walk in the garden?"

Immediately T'Pol realized that he had much more to tell her, and she led the way to the shielded area of

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the garden, waiting until he settled himself on the bench. The pallid color of his skin and the weariness she detected in his posture led her to inquire, "Are you well?"

Soval pondered the question. "I am...adequate," he responded finally, and then moved the conversation away from himself. "T'Pau has asked me to inform you that she considers it is no longer safe for you to remain on Earth. T'Seren has been appointed as the new ambassador, and she will be traveling to Earth once her business on Vulcan is complete. In the meantime, I will take over here. I have been charged with investigating the Embassy staff and other Vulcans resident on Earth. T'Pau has asked *Enterprise* to collect you. Captain Archer will take you to Betazed as our representative to a meeting there. It was then suggested that he return you to Vulcan, but at his convenience. It would be helpful if you remain with *Enterprise* as our liaison officer. Any information we gain can then be passed to you, and anything Archer learns can be passed to us. T'Pau is insistent that this arrangement is explained to Captain Archer at the outset. We are not asking you to spy."

"It would seem a logical method to exchange information," T'Pol agreed.

"In addition, we would like you to inform Captain Archer that we have been approached by the Denobulan authorities. They have reconsidered their position and wish to open discussions with Earth. However, they are not yet ready to do so openly and wish to conduct negotiations through us. You will be in charge

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of those discussions and will retain your status as ambassador during that process. You have full authority to make decisions binding on Vulcan. As far as anyone knows, you are there to conduct initial talks in preparation for a trade treaty between Denobula and Vulcan. Only Archer will know the truth."

"Have any others made similar approaches?" T'Pol asked.

"No, but they will. The Romulans will not be satisfied with breaking up any incipient alliance--they will want to expand and conquer. It will not be long before other races begin to understand that."

"They will have to do so soon," T'Pol pointed out.

"Indeed." Soval's response was sober.

CHAPTER

8

Reed tracked his quarry along the city street, intrigued and slightly alarmed as he recognized that not only did the woman know she was being followed, but she was actually leading him. For a moment he considered abandoning the chase, wondering if he was being led into a trap that would result in a particularly sticky end. The woman cast a quick glance over her shoulder and then ducked into a nearby alley. He weighed his options. It was broad daylight and he was armed. He would check the alley first before he decided his next move. Cautiously, without making it obvious, he approached the corner and looked around. He saw the woman cooling her heels.

"I assume you're waiting for me," he remarked as he walked up to her. If someone had wanted him out of the way, he concluded, they could have done it quite easily already.

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"Why were you following me?" she demanded.

"You worked for Harris."

"Who?" she asked innocently.

Reed rolled his eyes, and leaned against the wall.

"Why were you letting me follow you?" he countered.

The woman grinned. "Got a message for you from a mutual friend."

"Oh?" He presented indifference.

"I won't bother if you don't want to hear it."

He let loose a long-suffering sigh. "I don't have time for games. If you want to go back to our mutual friend and tell him you couldn't manage to pass on a simple message, then carry on." And he made to walk away.

That got her attention. "*Enterprise* is coming for the Vulcan. She'll never make it to the spaceport. See you around." She ducked past him and out into the street, to be swallowed by the milling crowd.

For a few moments, he stood in the entrance to the alley and thought about what he had been told. He supposed it should not have been so much of a surprise, and yet he was still shocked by the thought that their enemies would try and kill T'Pol even when she was leaving and should no longer pose a threat. It made him wonder what else he didn't know. Why was she still considered dangerous?

CHAPTER

9

Ensign Travis Mayweather was enjoying some well-earned rest. He had pulled two bridge duties in a row as they made their best speed possible back to Earth. The sound of his comm was an unwelcome intrusion into a comfortable doze, and he cursed mildly as he hauled himself off his bunk to answer it.

"Sorry, Travis." Sato's voice was contrite. "I've got a message coming in from your brother and he wanted to talk to you right away. Something about the *Horizon*--he says because you're the joint owner, he needs your go-ahead for something urgent."

"That's all right, Hoshi. Put him through." Inwardly, he wondered what was going on. Paul had never consulted him about business, and he was only joint owner on paper, as was their sister. He had no say-so in the running of the ship, which was just the way he and Paul liked it.

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He greeted his brother with a confused, "Paul?"

"Hey, Travis, how are you?" Paul looked good, Travis thought--healthy, a little fatter.

"Good, thanks. How's everyone there? The ship all right?"

"Yeah, everything's good. Oh, and Lisa says hi." Paul paused a beat and waited for Mayweather's comprehension to dawn on his face. Lisa--the Boomer he'd met during the Alpha Centauri mission, who ran their intel. "Got some information on the business to pass on, though, but it's been a while since we talked, so I thought we could do it face to face. You got a PADD handy?"

"Sure." Mayweather tried not to let his excitement show, aware that this was an unsecured channel and any indication that his brother was passing him information could compromise not just his brother, but also the Boomers. He grabbed a nearby PADD.

CHAPTER

10

Archer, Sato, Mayweather, and Tucker squeezed into Archer's ready room. Neither Collins nor Weber was included in this briefing. As far as Archer was concerned, they were still unknown quantities, and for this mission, he needed people he could trust completely. Collins had proved her worth during the investigation into the sabotage of their spare parts, but even so, this situation was too dangerous to include anyone he did not know. She was watchful, too, and he was aware from Tucker that she had been digging deep into the records of the crew, past and present. There may be a perfectly logical reason for that, he accepted, but until he knew more about her, there were times, like this one, when she would have to remain on the outside.

When they were all settled as comfortably as they could manage, the captain began. "Travis, why don't

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you fill us in?"

Mayweather's expression was grave. "We've had some information through the Boomer network. There's going to be another attempt to kill T'Pol. Starfleet security has organized transport to get her from the Vulcan Embassy to the spaceport. The Boomers don't know any details, but their sources say something is planned for along the route."

"Which means," Archer took up the story, "we need to find another way to get T'Pol off Earth."

"Does she know?" Tucker asked.

"Not at the moment," Archer admitted, "but we are reliably assured that someone will stop her boarding any transport sent for her."

Tucker grinned. "Someone not so tall, dark, and handsome?" he quipped.

"I'll tell him you admitted he was handsome," quipped Sato, her dark eyes laughing though her face remained solemn.

Mayweather capped that comment with one of his own. "And I'll tell him you said he was short."

"Hey," Tucker protested.

Archer let them have a moment to experience the same relief he had felt when he realized that Reed would be looking out for T'Pol, then brought the meeting back to the point. "Ideas and possibilities, people?" he asked.

"Transporter?" Sato suggested.

Tucker shook his head. "I guess it looks like the obvious solution, but the technology is not secure enough--anyone planning this will have looked at what

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we might do if we find out about it. I say we go for something less straightforward."

Mayweather and Sato stared at him.

"What?" he demanded.

Archer grinned, "You sounded suspiciously like Malcolm there for a moment," he clarified.

"Well, if you're gonna be insulting me, I'll take my ideas elsewhere."

They laughed, and Mayweather took up the discussion once more. "I think we should take out both shuttlepods--say we're doing some tests to keep the rest of the crew in the dark, then anyone has to deal with at least three possibilities."

"Sounds good to me," agreed Tucker.

Sato added, "We could add more layers by booking fictitious passage on shuttles to the lunar colonies and Jupiter station--anywhere where *Enterprise* might be able to pick her up."

Tucker grinned. "I've got it. We'll pick her up in the cell ship."

Archer frowned. They had been working on the Suliban technology for almost four years and were not much further ahead with it. They had also managed to keep it quiet--something Forrest had insisted on at the time of its capture, and an order Archer had never seen any reason to question, even now--especially now. Luckily, its storage unit hadn't been damaged during the attack, and nobody at Starfleet had asked for the ship.

"The cloaking device is not very reliable." Archer sounded a note of caution. "And if it is seen, we lose a

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major tactical advantage down the road--assuming we ever can reverse-engineer the technology and get it to work with our power systems."

"Your call, Cap'n," Tucker said. "We can make the run in the shuttlepod."

They stood ready, waiting for his orders.

Archer made up his mind. "Hoshi, set up as much confusion as you can coming from as many different directions. Travis, Trip--organize runs for the shuttles, and then the two of you work on the cell ship--you're both going. I'll take out one of the shuttles, and Collins will pilot the other. Any questions?" His glance passed over their resolute features, and he had his response. "Get to work, people--we don't have much time."

As Tucker would have filed past him with the others, Archer gripped his arm, staying him. At the questioning look, he said, "If you see Malcolm, try and convince him to come back. It's getting too dangerous. And I really want someone I can trust to have my back." His reading of Collins hung in the air, unspoken.

Tucker shrugged. "I'll do the best I can, Cap'n, but you know Malcolm. He's not likely to want to leave until the job's done."

As they exited, Archer saw Collins walk in, her expression indicating her confusion as she scanned the faces of the personnel leaving his ready room. "Captain, my apologies," she began. "I was not aware that there was a senior staff meeting."

Archer was discomfited. "It wasn't an official meeting, Lieutenant," he hedged. "Just

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a...conversation." He tried to change the subject. "We'll be taking the shuttlepods out for a spin when we reach Earth, Lieutenant. It'll give you a chance to practice your piloting skills."

"I see, sir." Collins's voice was cold. "And was that decision made during your recent conversation?"

Archer stifled a sigh. He had mishandled this, he realized, and there was no easy way to extricate himself. "I wasn't aware I had to explain my actions or decisions to you, Lieutenant." His mild tone softened the rebuke, but he witnessed her reaction to it and realized she was both unhappy and suspicious.

He ended the encounter. "Dismissed."

CHAPTER

11

T'Pol waited in the entrance hall of the Vulcan Embassy. Soval was at her side, and they stood in silence until the transport slid to a stop at the doors. Members of the Vulcan security force were a watchful presence, which meant that she and Soval could not exchange any final thoughts that may occur to them. At the moment, none of the security staff was beyond suspicion. Soval was the only one she trusted.

No matter, thought T'Pol. Enough has already been said.

Once beyond the gates of the compound, Earth's security service insisted on taking over control of the convoy and its security until she was safely delivered to the spaceport. Her aide had tried to accompany her, but she had refused to countenance his presence. Should the worst happen, she informed him, it would be illogical to lose more than one life. He had accepted

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her reasoning, although she knew he had his concerns. Silently, she also accepted that although she had never been given any reason to doubt his loyalty, it was not wise to test it now.

Soval turned to her. "I wish you a safe journey, Ambassador T'Pol. Live long and prosper."

"Live long and prosper," she returned, and exited the building without looking back. Had she done so, she may well have witnessed the brief spasm that contorted his features, but was rapidly smoothed away.

"Ma'am." The uniformed security guard offered her a hand into the car. She accepted the unneeded help and settled herself with a minimum of fuss, looking straight ahead as the car pulled out into the San Francisco streets.

CHAPTER

12

Between the two shuttlepods, they made a total of five trips. In addition, once the transporter was operational, it was used to p In the event, they barely managed two city blocks before the convoy was ambushed. T'Pol was aware of a massive truck sliding out from a side street, cutting across their path and stopping their progress. They skidded to a halt, and there was a flurry of doors opening and shouting before the man sitting beside her drew his gun and pushed her down, his weight bearing down on her. It was uncomfortable, not only physically, but also knowing that this stranger could well die trying to protect her.

Both doors were thrown open. A moment later, there was a whine of a stun gun, and the weight on her was suddenly the solid, heavy weight of an unconscious body. There was a brief moment of calm, and then the weight was removed.

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Composed, if slightly untidy, she sat up, to be faced with two figures. Their faces were covered, making any form of identification impossible.

One of them spoke. "Get out of the car, Ambassador. No sudden moves, and keep your hands in plain sight."

T'Pol obeyed. She calmly suffered the indignity of being frisked for weapons, her only response to the removal of a Starfleet-issue phase pistol a raised eyebrow. She was then hustled into a taxi that drew up beside them: she was unceremoniously pushed into it, one of her kidnappers on each side, strongly gripping her arms.

After a few minutes of driving, they stopped again and transferred to another cab. Twice more their vehicle and direction changed, until even with her excellent sense of direction, she had no clear idea where she was or where they might be taking her. Her escorts did not attempt to speak with her, and she did not attempt to engage them in conversation. Eventually, she was transferred into an ordinary vehicle, and this time, her escort did not join her. Instead, she caught a brief glimpse of them entering another cab that seemed to contain, if her eyes didn't deceive her, a dark-haired woman wearing Vulcan robes and a cloak identical in color to her own.

The car moved steadily through the traffic, and she sat silently in the back. In her mind, she was quite sure that her kidnappers meant her no harm. The logical course of action would have been to kill her immediately. The excessive care taken to mask their route

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suggested an alternative explanation. Her theory was proven as the car turned into a quiet street and paused while a garage door opened, and they passed within.

As the engine was powered down, the driver remarked. "So far, so good."

"Mr. Reed," she acknowledged as he turned to face her.

"I'm sorry I couldn't let you know what was going to happen," he apologized, "but it was safer if as few people were involved as possible."

"You seem to have amassed a number of helpers." She could not keep the implicit question from her voice.

"Yes," he responded, but he did not elaborate, and she knew not to press the point.

"This was a risky undertaking, Mr. Reed. I assume there was some reason you felt you had to take this action."

"I was passed information suggesting there was going to be an attempt on your life on the way to the spaceport. I'm not entirely sure I believe it, but I couldn't take the risk. It might even have been a ruse to smoke me out, but I'm not sure. You certainly have enough information to be a threat and therefore a target." He shrugged.

"What now?"

"Now I need to get you safely to the rendezvous point. *Enterprise* should be here by now." He checked the time. "We have thirty minutes, and you need to change." He tossed a pile of clothing over the seat. "I'll be through that door when you're ready."

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T'Pol lifted the bundle of garments and her eyebrows rose. There was a pair of rather disreputable trousers, a baggy shirt, leisure shoes, and a cap--hardly the dignified garb of the Vulcan ambassador to Earth, she mused. If it got her to safety, however, she was more than willing to wear any disguise. Swiftly, she changed.

When she went through the door, she realized that Reed had changed into similar gear. In the dusk, they looked like two teenage boys, especially when Reed handed her one of two scruffy packs he was carrying. After he checked the surrounding area, they stepped out into the street. She made sure her cap covered her ears and tried hard to mimic his walk, recognizing that her usual posture would look out of place.

"Are you returning to *Enterprise*?" she asked.

"Not yet," he answered. His response was terse, and T'Pol realized he did not want to talk. She lapsed into silence.

They walked until they reached a park, slipping in through the gates and heading to a central, clear space. With her excellent hearing, she did not miss Reed's soft curse.

"Is there a problem?"

"They should have been here by--"

He was interrupted as, without warning, a door seemed to open in the middle of nothing, and both of them were staring at Tucker's wide grin. "Anyone need a ride?" Tucker drawled.

"Trip," Reed said. "Thank god. Did you manage to cloak any part of your anatomy this time?" They ap-

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proached the cell ship, and as if he couldn't help himself, Reed grinned widely at Tucker, and then at Mayweather, who was sitting in the pilot's chair. T'Pol merely inclined her head in greeting, but she was glad to see them too.

"Hey," Tucker groused. "You promised you'd stop teasing me 'bout that!" Then he grinned again. "You ready to come home?"

Reed shook his head. "I'm just here to make sure T'Pol is safe. I'm not done here yet."

Tucker turned serious. "Cap'n's worried about you, Malcolm. Hell, we're all worried about you."

Reed shook his head. "I'll be fine."

Mayweather and Tucker both snorted at that, but Tucker obviously had the sense not to pursue the argument. "Interesting outfit, T'Pol," he said instead, shifting his attention to her. "Not quite regulation."

She raised an eyebrow, "Indeed. However, it is remarkably comfortable. I may well add it to my wardrobe."

The Vulcan heard Reed's muttered remark: "She's telling jokes again." And Tucker's response: "Been around us humans far too long."

Mayweather interrupted the reunion. "I hate to mention it, sirs, but we have a forty-minute window and it's up in ten minutes."

T'Pol turned to Reed. "Thank you, Mr. Reed. I trust your investigation will bear fruit soon."

"I hope so," he returned, and he reached out to grip the hand Tucker extended to him.

"You take care of yourself, you hear? And come

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home soon."

"As soon as I can, Trip. Stay safe--all of you."

Reed retreated to a safe distance and watched as the door slid shut, separating him from his friends. T'Pol was safe and going back to *Enterprise,* where she belonged. That was the important thing. The grass and surrounding vegetation were disturbed, and a low roar filled the air as the cell ship powered up, lifted off, and was gone. But Reed stood in the park for a long time, and when he turned away, it was with reluctance.

CHAPTER

13

Later, wearing something more appropriate, T'Pol joined Captain Archer in his mess. They ate together quietly, as they had often done in the first years of their mission. Then, T'Pol thought, the silence had often been uncomfortable, but now it was the kind of silence that could be found between friends who shared a mutual respect.

When they finished their meal, the talk turned to their current situation, and T'Pol briefed him on both her findings and what she knew of Reed's. She also passed on the request from the Vulcan authorities. She found herself gratified as Archer grinned.

"Well, T'Pol did say we should take you back to Vulcan at our convenience, T'Pol. And it's going to be quite some time before we'll be able to manage that. In the meantime," he continued, "how about filling the post of first officer and science officer again?"

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Her eyebrows rose. "I understood that Commander Tucker was first officer." There was nothing in her tone to suggest the slight disquiet at ousting the commander from his position, nor her surprise as Archer laughed and shook his head.

"Trip is delighted at the idea. He can't wait to get back to being chief engineer."

"It would be illogical not to undertake suitable duties during my time on board, Captain."

Archer smiled and began to speak, but was interrupted by Sato's voice through the comm: "Captain, we have received clearance to leave space dock."

"Thanks, Hoshi. We're on our way."

They made their way to the bridge, and T'Pol felt a curious peace settle within her as she stepped out of the turbolift and took her accustomed position at the science station. She looked around and witnessed the smiles on the faces of those she knew. They truly welcomed her presence. Indeed, Tucker was grinning so widely that it merited a raised eyebrow. He chuckled in response, then turned his own attention back to the engineering station. Her attention was caught by Collins's assessing gaze. The captain had told her only Collins's name and post, although she had thought that he did not like her. In that direct look, T'Pol was reminded of Reed for an instant. T'Pol could only hope that she had not compromised either Reed's safety or his investigation. Reminding herself briskly that she had no control over either, she began her work.

They slid gently out of the restraining arms of the dock, and it seemed as if everyone breathed a sigh of

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relief when they were once again in clear space.

"Set a course for Betazed, Mr. Mayweather. Warp 3." Archer looked around the bridge and felt a sense of satisfaction when his gaze settled on his science officer. That's one back, he thought. "Steady as she goes, Ensign."

The End.

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— STAR TREK — ENTERPRISE

Inside Job

An attempt is made on T'Pol's life as she and Reed dig into the attacks on Alpha Centauri. Decision is made to recall her on Vulcan.

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

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