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Editorial Review

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Chapter One

"ATTENTION! THIS IS A STARFLEET SPECIAL SECURITY TY FORCES EVACUATION SQUAD! WE ARE ABOUT TO LAND A DIPLOMATIC COACH AND FIVE FIGHTER ESCORTS. ALL CIVILIANS MUST CLEAR THE COURTYARD IMMEDIATELY! ANYONE REMAINING WILL BE STUNNED AND REMOVED TO A SECURITY BRIG! ALL PERSONS...ATTENTION!...THEY'RE NOT CLEARING OUT. CAN THEY EVEN HEAR ME? PERRATON, IS THE TRANSLATOR ON? PECAN, GET YOUR WING BACK INTO FORMATION! WHERE'S THE BROADCAST GREENLIGHT? WHAT KIND OF DUNSELS INSTALLED THIS SYSTEM?"

"AH, PERRATON HERE...STILES, BE AWARE THE BROADCAST SYSTEM IS GREEN AND TRANSLATING. YOU JUST CALLED THE WHOLE PLANET A BUNCH OF DUNSELS."

"SHUT IT DOWN!"

"OAK ONE, THIS IS BRAZIL. FORMATION'S SHIFTING STARBOARD. THE EMBASSY'S GOT A BIG GARGOYLE ON IT AND I'M ABOUT TO CLEAN ITS TEETH."

"LATERAL THRUST. ABORT LANDING PATTERN -- PERRATON, WOULD YOU RED THE P.A. BEFORE I COUGH UP A LUNG?"

"Copy that. Public address speakers are shut down. Fighter formation's still too cramped for diamond grid, Stiles. Acorn just bumped a water tower."

"All wings, pull up! We'll modify formation and try our approach again. Did the whole city hear us arguing?"

"They heard *you* arguing."

"Ahhh, I should've become a medic...Nuts, Oak One. Go to Ruby formation. Pecan, move two degrees port. Brazil, get off his tail. Acorn, keep your wings trim. Why can't you people hold a hover grid?"

"Oak One, Acorn. It's not us. Stiles, it's you. You have to put the coach down and vertical your stabilizers to give us enough room to land in that courtyard."

"Stabilizers...I hate stabilizers...I was supposed to go in for multi-vehicular flight school this week, but nooo, I had to grab a mission. Listen up! I'll land the coach first, then all wings settle around me five seconds later. Keep it sharp!"

"What's the matter with you, Stiles?" Pilot Andrea Hipp's German accent seemed crisp over the comm. *"This isn't synchronized swimming, you know."*

"I said no chatter! The ambassador's watching!"

A prattle of aye-ayes settled the issue for the moment, but did nothing for Eric Stiles's stomach, or his icy fingers, or his tingling feet. This command stuff left a lot to be wished for. And his hair was in his eyes...he was looking through a blond curtain. Didn't help.

On the screens of his fully carpeted cockpit, Stiles saw the platinum glitter of the Federation Embassy at PojjanPiraKot seem to rise up to meet him. Actually, he and the coach he piloted were descending into the brick city courtyard, but the illusion of a floating building disoriented him briefly. On the secondary side monitors, the five fighter escorts regrouped into Ruby formation and found the space to wiggle into the brick court, settling around the main coach vessel like baby ducks crowding a drake.

"Doesn't look like I expected it to," he commented. "What are those metal bands on all the buildings?"

"The city's all reinforced." Ensign Travis Perraton's blue eyes peered with fresh curiosity at a smaller monitor as he adjusted the coach's shields to let them land, irritating Stiles with his eternal good mood. "They've got some kind of gravitational problem on this planet. All the buildings have had to be structurally rebuilt over the past few years since it started."

"What kind of gravitational trouble?"

"Something like high tides or earthquakes, I guess. That's what I've heard, anyway."

Stiles wanted to comment, but was busy settling the coach onto its extender pads. The fantasy of brilliant artisanship in moving spaceborne vessels into an atmosphere and landing them in a surefooted, graceful manner had shriveled in his hands. At least that part was over. He trembled with irritation as the system's check barberpoled. Perraton had managed to clear the belly shields. Otherwise, the coach would've sat in the air like a beachball on the water -- and probably rolled over.

"You're down," Perraton confirmed. "You can unclench now."

"I'm fine!"

"Yeah, sure you are. You worried about coming in shielded for the whole twenty hours it took us to get here from the starbase."

Stiles bristled at the suggestion that he wasn't in control. "Emergency diplomatic evacuations have certain *regulations* attached. Not getting a second chance is just *one* of the assumptions. Evac regs *assume* the situation is hostile and precautions have to be -- "

"Don't quote the book."

"Give me a view of the whole courtyard."

Screens around the cockpit flashed views of all six lander pads with irritated civilians scooping dirt out of huge potted plants and dumping it on the ship's pads. So much for respect.

"Are they throwing rocks?" Stiles asked.

"It's garbage." Eying the same screen, Perraton stood up and pulled on his torso armor, buckling the padded vest over his chest. "Some of 'em are throwing balls of mud from those pots."

Stiles straightened. "Secure the coach and scramble the evac squad. Nuts, Oak One. Remain in your cockpits. Do not get out, understood? Sit tight and let Oak Squad flush the dignitaries. I'll escort Ambassador Spock

personally."

"They're pushing on my struts. Our light-stun phasers can -- "

"Negative!" Stiles broiled. "Let 'em crowd you. Keep finger shields activated in case they touch the wings. And all of you shut up! I don't want the ambassador to hear the slightest disrespect."

"Oh, we respect you. Don't you respect him, Cashew?"

"I drip respect."

"As you were!"

"As I was? Did I change? I like me this way. Did you change, Acorn?"

"Animals," Stiles grumbled. "I'd like to get you disrespectful slugs on starship duty for five minutes, just five minutes..." He buried himself in padded insulation as he pulled his flak vest over his head, then slipped into his gauntlets, adjusted his sidearm, and led Perraton out into the coach's main seating area.

Here, six other members of Oak Squad were already suited up and looking at him from inside their red-tinted helmet shields. Travis Perraton, Jeremy White, Bill Foster, Dan Moose, Brad Carter, Matt Girvan -- their names and faces swam before his eyes like a manifest, and for a moment he thought the blood was rushing out of his head. Midshipmen and ensigns, all in training for what would eventually become specialties, for now they were assigned to Starbase 10 in the Security Division, under their senior ensign -- Stiles. At twenty-one, Eric Stiles was the old man of the outfit. Perraton was next, at twenty years old and forty-two days junior to Stiles' ensign stripes. Knowing that they had heard the ribbing he took from the wings, Stiles felt his face flush. He had to lead the mission. He'd gotten himself into this on purpose. He had to address them as a commander. Nobody to hide behind. They'd seen the landing. His dream of a crisp textbook military approach and regulation landing had gone up in an ugly puff. Now the squad members were blushing and snickering, burying grins, trying not to look right at him -- that was hard to take!

"Heads up." His voice cracked. "There's a riot going on outside. Some kind of local political trouble. The embassy is beam-shielded, so we have to go in the security door. As we approach, the guard will drop the door shields. We'll have to go in and come out in single file. We're going to put the dignitaries between us, at two or three in a row. There are about twenty of these people, so the seven of us'll be just about right. I'll go last, with the ambassador right in front of me. He's the primary person to guard, and if he gets so much as a hangnail, somebody's gonna answer to me in a dark alley. After we go -- shut up, Foster!"

"I didn't say anything!" Bill Foster protested.

"Quit snickering! This is...this is -- "

"Serious," Perraton supplied.

"I know, Eric," Foster muttered.

"You call me 'Ensign,' mister!"

"Aye aye, Ensign Mister."

"I want this mission to go like clockwork! I don't want a single twitch that isn't in the rule book! Don't snicker, don't slip, don't do anything that isn't regulation!"

A hand was pressed to his shoulder and drew him backward a step on the plush carpet.

"Everything'll go fine, Eric," Perraton mildly interrupted. "We're ready when you are." His short dark hair was buried under a white helmet with Starfleet's Delta Shield printed on the forehead, now obscured by the raised red visor. The shield glowed and sang at Stiles. Starfleet's symbol.

And Stiles had to make it look good. In the wake of Perraton's mental leashing, the symbol now lay heavily upon him. If he couldn't yell at his men, how would he keep them in shape?

He huffed a couple of steadying breaths, but didn't lower his voice. Now that he'd gotten up to a certain level of volume, it was hard to reel in from that. He took a moment to survey the squad -- bright white helmets, black leggings, white boots, red chest pads against the black Starfleet jumpsuits, and the bright flicker of a combadge on every vest. Elbow pads, chin guards, red visors...looked fair. Good enough.

Time to go.

"There are riots going on," he repeated, "but so far nobody's tried to breach the embassy itself. Our job is to clear a path between the coach and the embassy and get all Federation nationals out. These people don't have a space fleet, but their atmospheric capabilities are strong enough to cause a few problems. I won't consider the mission accomplished until we're clear of the stratosphere. When we get out of the coach, completely ignore the people swarming around unless they come within two meters or show a weapon. Clear?"

"Clear, sir!" Carter, Girvan, Moose, and Foster shouted. Perraton nodded, and White raised his rifle. Had they accented the "sir" just a little too much?

Stiles stepped between them and the hatch. "Mobilize!"

Perraton took that as a cue, and punched the autorelease on the big hatch. The coach's loading ramp peeled back and lay neatly across the brick before them. Instantly the stench of burning fuel flooded the controlled atmosphere inside the coach. At Stiles's side, Perraton coughed a couple of times. Other than that, nobody's big mouth cracked open. Stiles led the way down, his heavy boots thunking on the nonskid ramp.

They broke out onto a courtyard of grand proportions with colonnades flanking it on three sides and the diplomatic buildings on the fourth side -- a battery of fifteen embassies, halls, and consulates. Most of them were empty now. The Federation was the last to evacuate. Two of the colonnades were in ruins; part of one was shrouded in scaffolding while being rebuilt. Most of the buildings showed signs of structural damage, but generally the Diplomatic Court of PojjanPirakot was a stately and bright place, providing a sad backdrop for the ugliness of these protests.

A quick glance behind showed him the positions of the five fighters landed around the coach. Their glistening bodies, streamlined for both aerodynamics and space travel, shined in the golden sunlight. There was Air Wing Leader Bernt Folmer, their best pilot, code "Brazil," parked like a big car in front of Greg "Pecan" Blake. Behind the coach the tail fin of Andrea Hipp's "Cashew" fighter caught a glint of sun. On the other side, hopefully parked nose to tail, were Acorn and Chestnut, brothers Jason and Zack Bolt -- but Stiles didn't bother to check their position. He only hoped they were in sharp order.

All around were angry people waving signs, some in a language he didn't understand, others scrawled in English, Vulcan, Spanish, Orion Yrevish, and a few other languages familiar from courtesy placards all over Starfleet Command where multitudes wandered.

The ones in English jumped out instantly before Stiles's racing mind. OUT ALIENS...LEAVE OUR

PLANET...GET OUT STRANGERS...ALIENS UNWELCOME...CURSE ALIENS ALL....

Some of the people were calling out in English, too, though clumsily and without really understanding the arrangement of nouns and verbs. The anti-alien message, though, arrowed directly through to the team.

To the music of enraged shouts from the people rattling gates and creating a din by banging small silver knives on the iron posts, Oak Squad broke into a jog and flooded into a broad shield of sunlight glaring between the embassy and the consulate next door. The doorways and lintels were heavily reinforced with titanium T-girders, and titanium bands swept around every building, two on each story, like shiny ribcages. Stiles glanced around at his squad, making sure nobody pulled ahead of the formation. This had to be crisp. The ambassador was watching from some window inside that embassy. Everybody was watching.

Fifty meters...

Oak Squad thundered forward relentlessly, their phaser rifles tight against their chests. As Stiles led his men across the patterned brick, he saw that just the raw heat from the coach's VTOL thrusters had scorched some of the bricks nearly black and pitted them beyond repair, destroying the geometric design in the historic courtyard.

His boots felt secure and thick as he crunched over the litter of broken glass, smashed fruit, and rocks that had been thrown by the rioters, who were now milling around the fighters and the coach. These Pojjan people were stocky and thick, with strong round cheekbones and bronze complexions tinged with an olive Patina, reminding Stiles of Aztec paintings seen under a green filter. They wore various clothing from the men's ordinary shirts and pants or the women's shiftlike dresses to the brightly beaded tribal tunics and leggings he'd seen on travel posters.

The travel agencies might as well rip those posters up. Nobody was going to want to come to this dump anymore.

He cast the rioters a threatening glance or two, but although some were touching the ships' landing struts, they weren't doing anything destructive. Not yet anyway. If anything happened, the escort pilots would zap them. So he kept moving forward at a pace, letting the natives swerve out of his way. He led the squad manfully through a large puddle of fuel, some of which was still gulping out of a discarded and dented container. Their boots splattered it and freshened the stench.

Thirty meters.

Cries of anger, protest, and insult at Starfleet's intrusion into their courtyard grew louder, as the squad jogged across the brick plateau. Stiles didn't understand the Pojjan language, but some of these people were shouting in English or Vulcan and waving get-out-of-town banners in English, apparently smart enough to know how to get to the Federation personnel.

It's getting to me. I'm allowing it to shake me. Just do the job, get the people out of the embassy, into the coach and lift off. Ignore the crowd. Just ignore them.

At his right elbow, Travis Perraton was watching a gang of Pojjan teenagers on the other side of the embassy fence. A flash of flame -- the teenagers were lighting up a fuel-soaked towel.

"They can't throw that this far, can they?" Blake asked from behind Stiles.

"They don't have to," Perraton said. "We're jogging toward puddles of kerosene."

"Gasoline," Midshipman Jeremy White corrected from the flank.

"Stinks," Dan Moose added, then cast to the man on his left, "Make room, Foster."

"Sorry."

"Bag the noise," Stiles snapped, turning his head briefly to the right. "Don't splash through the gas. If we get it on our uniforms, we're in big trouble."

And that was his error -- that one glance over his shoulder. A stunning force struck his left shin just below the kneepad, driving his entire leg out behind him. Blown forward by the force of his own movement, Stiles let out a single strangled yell, leaped forward over a slick of gasoline, and crashed to the bricks just beyond the slick. Though he evaded the gas, he slid sidelong into a pile of garbage dumped on the courtyard. Managing to thrust his arms out, he somehow kept from landing on his phaser rifle, which instead clattered to the brick and butted him in the face shield, then scratched across his bared jaw. If his visor had been up, the rifle would've taken out his teeth.

A blunt force rammed into his lower back -- a boot -- as Carter tumbled over Stiles, crumpling to the bricks on top of the garbage. Carter rolled and ended up on one knee.

With his jaw and knee throbbing, Stiles tightened his body, twisted onto his side, and brandished his weapon at the laughing crowd as his face flushed with humiliation. They were laughing at him. His fantasy of a clockwork mission had just cracked and blown up before his eyes.

Bile rose in his throat, a rashy heat down his legs. His lungs tightened as he felt slimy garbage soak into his uniform and the stench of petroleum knot his innards. The sky wheeled above him, cluttered with white helmets and flashing red visors reflecting the afternoon sun.

Smiling, Perraton reached to pull him to his feet. "Nice going, lightfoot."

"Don't help me!" Stiles blurted.

As if bitten, Perraton retracted his hand. Stiles rolled to his feet, now smudged with the gummy remains of garbage and mudballs.

When he got to his feet, Stiles staggered a few steps in the wrong direction and was forced to endure the foolish chicken-scratch of turning around and struggling back to the front of his squad, and the further embarrassment of realizing his men were deliberately slowing down so he could get in front. He slammed his way between them, elbowing Perraton and White cruelly out of his path. He didn't need their charity!

At the gates, two Pojjan guards immediately opened the iron grid and let them in without a word. The embassy's medieval-looking carved wooden door, three guys wide and set between two gargoyles, also opened automatically.

No, not automatically -- this door was manual. Another guard or servant of some nationality Stiles didn't recognize was now peeking around the door's iron rim like a shy cow peeking out of a barn. He was an elderly man, with bent shoulders and bright green eyes set in a jowly dark face with stripes painted on it. More tribal weirdness.

Moving further into the heavily tiled foyer, Stiles suddenly felt ridiculously out of place. The foyer was splendid, its mosaics of gold-and-black chipped stone and glossy ceramics portraying some kind of historic battle scene and the coronation of somebody. Must be from way back, because this wasn't a monarchical

culture anymore.

Was it?

The guard pushed the big door shut and swung a huge titanium bolt into place to lock them safely inside, then turned to the clutch of evac troopers and gasped, "One minute! I'll get the ambassador's assistant!"

And he disappeared into a wide archway that was two stories tall.

Oak Squad stood in the middle of the gorgeous tile floor, their uniforms scuffed and stinking, and looked around.

"I'd hate to be the guy who cleans the grout," Perraton commented.

White grunted as he scanned the mosaic on the ceiling. "How long you think we'll have to wait?"

"Not long," Stiles filled in. "They called for us to come get them, so they're probably ready to leave. And they're Vulcans, so you know they're efficient."

"How do you know they'll be stiff?" Moose asked.

"Because Ambassador Spock's a st -- a Vulcan. They like to have their own kind around. They understand each other better than we do."

"Oh, right," White drawled. "They do everything better than we do."

Stiles scoured him with a glare. "Don't start on me, Jeremy."

He turned away, but in his periphery he noted Perraton's quick motion to White, erasing any further annoying comments.

Though they stood in this wide foyer feeling dirty and small, they were not alone. Sounds of footsteps and voices leaked from the depths of the embassy halls, and twice Stiles saw ethereal forms slip from one office to another. Did they trust him to get them out safely? Had they seen the botched choreography of the landing? Did they wonder whether the ensign in command was competent enough to handle this?

He gripped his phaser rifle until his hands hurt and shifted from foot to foot, halting only when a young woman -- a human -- skittered through the grand main door and into the foyer. Stiles didn't pay attention....The small-boned woman, with tightly wrapped brown hair, tiny pearl earrings, and a twitch in her left eye, went directly to the tallest of them -- Jeremy White -- and breathily said, "I'm Miss Karen Theonella, Ambassador Spock's deputy attaché. Are you Ensign Stiles?"

She had a tight foreign accent that sounded Earth-based, but Stiles couldn't pinpoint the country.

"He's over there, ma'am," White told her, and gestured.

Stiles stepped through the cluster of Starfleeters and took his helmet off, revealing his sweat-plastered blond hair. "Eric Stiles, ma'am. I'm here to evacuate the entire embassy. Nobody should be left behind."

"We understand." Miss Theonella rubbed her tiny pink palms as if kneading bread dough between them. "All embassy envoys, functionaries, ministers, delegates, and clerks will be going, as well as four Pojjana defectors who lost their homes in the last Constrictor. They're being given asylum here and we have

clearance for them to be evacuated with us. In all there are thirty-five of us."

"Thirty-five!" Perraton blurted. Then he instantly clammed up, but the number twenty kept flashing in his eyes like beacons.

How could seven of them safely escort thirty-five dignitaries through fifty meters of rioting?

"We're prepared, ma'am," Stiles shoved in, more loudly than necessary, before anyone else could speak up. "About the landing...the ambassador is probably wondering why we were so...out of formation...."

"What?" Miss Theonella's white temples puckered and her brows came together like pencil points. "We can't see the courtyard from here. There are only reception rooms on the court side of the building. Was there some reason you wanted us to be watching you? Was there a signal?"

He stared at her, caught between relief and disappointment that nobody had been watching. "Uh...no, no signal."

Preoccupied, the thin young woman simply said, "Continue to wait here, please, Ensign. I'll get the ambassador."

Again the evac squad stood alone, holding their rifles, standing in the middle of the gleaming tile floor, listening to the drumming chants of angry people outside in the square and trying to imagine how they were going to hustle thirty-five dignitaries through that. The unpleasant possibility of rushing half of them out to the coach, then coming back for the second group -- Stiles winced. Two trips through that courtyard full of alien-haters? Was that safer than one big rush? If he ordered two separate groups, would the angry people see that as their last chance to get them and attack the second group?

"Wonder why they hate aliens," Dan Moose voiced.

Stiles noted that his men were looking at the windows and doors, but his own eyes were focused on the long hall of offices into which Miss Theonella had disappeared. The ambassador was in there somewhere.

All the men turned to face the hall to their left as a crowd of elegant dignitaries bobbed toward them. In the midst of them was the tall, instantly recognizable figure of the famous Ambassador Spock.

Bow? Kneel? Handshake?

"Don't faint! Eric, stand at attention!"

Perraton's anxious whisper boomed in Stiles's ear like a foghorn.

"Stand at attention!"

"Attention...." Stiles planted his boots on the tile, but wasn't able to get them together. He squared his shoulders, raised his chin, held his breath, clutched his rifle, and forced an appearance of adept steadiness and control. Cool. Calm. Military. Crisp. In control. In charge. Confident. Smelly.

The ambassador and his party approached them, but Spock wasn't looking at them. Instead his dark head was bowed as he spoke to Miss Theonella, who was clipping along at his side. The ambassador listened, nodded, then spoke again while a male attendant slipped a glossy blue Federation Diplomatic Corps jacket onto the boss's shoulders.

The sight was a shock -- Stiles had expected the flowing ceremonial robes that Vulcan seniors were usually seen wearing, but now that he saw Spock in the trim gray slacks and dark blue jacket with the UFP symbol on the left side, that outfit seemed to make more sense for a spaceborne evacuation. Robes might be harder to handle on boarding ramps and in tight quarters.

Why hadn't he thought of that?

Though Spock -- tall, narrow, controlled -- possessed all the regal formality common to his race, his famous form was somehow less imperious in person than Stiles had anticipated, his angular Vulcan features more animated, and framed by the fact that he was the only Vulcan in the bunch. Of course, Stiles had only seen still photos or staged lecture tapes. Seeing Spock in real life was very different -- he wasn't stiff at all.

As they approached, he could hear Miss Theonella's thready voice.

"...and the provincial vice-warden will be sending his prolocutrix as proxy to speak for the entire hemisphere at Federation central. Also, sir, the consul general's wife and children are waiting in the Blue Room, and Chancellor De Gaeta's wife is in his office."

Miss Theonella finished her sentence just as she and the ambassador and their party came into the foyer.

"Thank you, Karen, very good work," Ambassador Spock said gently, countering her quivering report with his silky baritone voice. "Suggest to the Sagittarian military attaché that he post a Pojjana communications, sentry, and that person must speak both Bal Quonnot and Romulan."

That voice! That famous voice! Stiles had been hearing it all his life! Historical documentaries, training tapes, mission interactives, holoprograms -- now he was here, in person, right in the same room with that voice!

"This is Ensign Stiles," Miss Theonella added with a gesture. "And the evacuation escort men, sir."

The ambassador scanned the team, then fixed his gaze at Stiles. Directly *at* him. Right in the eyes! He was looking right at him!

Those eyes -- like blades! Black blades!

Stiles tried to take a breath, but all he got was a gulp of garbage fumes from his soaked trouser leg. As his lungs seized up, he felt the boink-boink of Perraton's finger poking him in the back.

Report, you idiot!

"Ev...Evacuation Squad reporting as you requested, sir! Ensign Eric J. Stiles, Starfleet Special Services reporting, sir! One G-rate transport coach, evacuation team, and five fighter escorts, sir!"

The ambassador's black-slash brows went up like bird's wings. The chamber fell to silence. Stiles' fervid report echoed absurdly.

Calmly Spock said, "At ease, Ensign."

His deep mellow voice took Stiles utterly by surprise.

"Aye aye, sir!" Stiles choked.

"We'll be ready within five minutes," the ambassador told him fluidly, then turned to the attendant who'd put the jacket on him. "Edwin, please bring out the consul general's family and Mrs. De Gaeta and turn them over to Ensign Stiles."

"Right away, Ambassador."

As the man left, Spock turned again to Miss Theonella. "You have our records and diplomatic pouches? The legal briefs and service files? Personnel manifests?"

She held up a stern black pilot's case with a magnetic lock, hanging from a strap on her shoulder. "All here, sir."

"Very well. We should also bring the jurisdictional warrants. They could be confiscated and used to gain passage into restricted areas."

"I'll get them, sir."

"No, I'll get them." The ambassador turned to leave, then paused and gazed briefly at the tiled floor, thinking. "Stiles..."

"Here, sir!"

Spock looked up at the inflamed response. Coolly he repeated, "At *ease*, Ensign."

Stiles shivered, glanced at Travis Perraton, and again met the ambassador's eyes. "Yes, sir...."

"Are you by chance related to -- "

"Yes, sir! I am, sir! Starfleet security commander John Stiles, Retired, is my grandfather, sir! He served with you under Captain James T. Kirk, Stardates 1709 to 1788 point 6 as Alpha-Watch navigator aboard the *U.S.S. Enterprise*, NCC 1701, commissioned stardate -- "

"I recall the ship, Ensign."

"Oh...oh...aye, sir...."

"You have a long line of Starfleet service of officers in your family heritage, I also recall."

"Yes, sir! Several active-duty servicemen lost in the Romulan Wars, sir! A captain, two lieutenants, two -- "

"Commendable, Mr. Stiles. Carry on." Spock turned to the little gaggle of people behind him and said, "All of you please stand by until everyone else arrives. Then you'll take your instructions from Ensign Stiles as to how you will arrange yourselves during the actual evacuation. As you know, the building is beam-shielded, and therefore we must go out the door and board the transport coach on foot. Unfortunately, our general safety compromises our safety during emergency evacuations. Karen, keep them in order. I will return momentarily."

With that he disappeared down a different hallway and into an office leaving a confused clutch of embassy persons standing here in the foyer, wide-eyed and obviously frightened. By nature, the two groups divided to opposite sides of the foyer, embassy folks over there, Oak Squad over here.

Stiles let himself be tugged aside, and barely registered the low mutters of his men around him through the

afterglow of his meeting with Spock.

"Beam-shielding," Matt grumbled. "There's planning. What if they had to get out under more dangerous conditions than mudballs and molotovs?"

"It's beam-shielded so assassins or terrorists can't beam in."

"Why couldn't they make it one-way?"

"Too unstable. Sucks too much energy to maintain over time."

"Doesn't matter. We'll get 'em out. Eric'll carry them all on his back if he has to."

"If he doesn't choke up a lung first."

"We'll be lucky if he doesn't make us bow backward out of the room."

The team laughed. A cluttered sound, muffled...like a storm coming.

Beside Stiles, Perraton raised his helmet visor and smiled with genuine sympathy.

"You okay, Eric?" he asked.

Stiles felt his lips chapping as he breathed in and out, in and out, like a landed fish. He'd just met his hero and he didn't know if he'd liked it.

And it wasn't over. In fact, it was just beginning. He'd have to do everything perfectly from now on. No more botched formations. No more stammering. He had to be perfect. Smooth.

"Ease up, lightfoot," Perraton suggested privately. "He's just a guy."

"Just a guy," Stiles rasped. "He's a hero, Travis...a Starfleet icon...the first Vulcan in Starfleet...Captain James Kirk's executive officer...I've heard every story a hundred times all my life -- do you know how many times he participated in saving the *whole* Federation? And even the Klingon Empire?"

"Doesn't matter now. Anyway, the hard part's over. You met him, you survived, and the experience didn't suck out your brains. He was a Starfleet man for half a century. He knows the drill. So get a perspective. Here he comes."

Do the job. Do the job.

The ambassador flowed back into the foyer, now carrying a slim red folder and followed by more than a dozen people and his attendant Edwin. Suddenly the foyer was swarming with civilians. At least they were mostly adults, a few teenagers -- Stiles didn't relish the prospect of herding toddlers through that mess out there. He stiffened as the ambassador came directly to him.

"We're ready, Mr. Stiles."

"Yes, Sir...how would you like to do this?"

Spock handed the folder to Miss Theonella. "Pardon me?"

"I...I figured you'd have some preference about...what order you want them in and...how to do it."

The ambassador thought about that briefly, his dark eyes working, as if he hadn't considered such an option. After a moment he vocally shrugged. "Your mission, Ensign."

Over Spock's shoulder, Perraton smiled and gave Stiles a thumbs-up.

Sustained by that, Stiles forced himself to rise to the demand. "Uh...if you people would form a line, two by two, and Oak Squad situate yourselves between them, uh, one every...uh -- "

He paused, tried to do the math, but couldn't remember how. His brain *had* been sucked out!

Maybe he wouldn't have to count and add and divide -- his men were already arranging themselves into position. Perraton was taking the lead, and motioning the others into the queue at intervals.

"I'll take the rear guard," Stiles said. "Ambassador, would you mind coming back here with me, sir?"

"Thank you, Ensign, I will."

"All right, let's -- no, no, you can't do the door." Stiles motioned to the funny-looking butler who was still standing his post at the door, waiting to open it for everybody. "Travis, put that man in line behind Girvan and you do the door. Then fall in."

"Copy that."

"Okay, phaser rifles ready."

"Ready!" his men shouted.

"Rifles up!"

"Up!"

"Very well!"

Stiles took one more look at Ambassador Spock's steady form in line before him, at the large UFP shield printed on the back of the blue jacket. The stars of the United Federation of Planets swam before his eyes.

He drew a breath. His voice echoed under the high tiled ceiling

"Mobilize!"

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