

It took all of Lt. Commander Gonzoles's effort to walk slowly onto the bridge at the beginning of first shift. Captain Sulu watched her from the command chair. She gently tapped Lt. Gunther on the shoulder. He relinquished the station to her. She sat down and checked the readouts. Everything was as it should be.

"Good morning, Commander." Sulu said.

"Morning, Sir." She turned her chair towards him.

"Late night?" Sulu asked.

"Later than I had intended, Sir." Gonzoles said.

"In my ready room, Gonzoles." Sulu got up and left the bridge. Gonzoles followed at a considerably slower pace. When she went into the ready room, Sulu was sitting at his desk with a cup of coffee. Another cup sat on the desk in front the empty chair across from the Captain.

"Sit down before you fall down. Have some coffee."

"Coffee." Gonzoles sat down. She sipped the hot drink. "What a wonderful invention."

"Didn't it occur to you to schedule someone else for first shift this morning?" Sulu asked.

"I used to be able to stay up all night and go to work like nothing happened." Gonzoles said. "And my plan had been to leave the reception early."

"What happened?"

"Mr. Smith suggested a bar he knew." Gonzoles gulped the coffee to give herself a moment to think. "The band was fantastic. And before I knew it the night was gone."

"I see." He sipped his coffee. "We will be leaving orbit within the hour. Will I require another navigator to finish your shift?"

"No Sir." Gonzoles sat up straighter. "I may be tired, but I am capable of standing my watch. If I wasn't, I would not have reported for duty, Captain."

"Good." Sulu nodded. "Then return to your station."

"Aye Sir." Gonzoles left the mug and returned to the bridge. Mr. Chekov was coming into the ready room as she left. She did not stop but mumbled a greeting as she passed him.

"Gonzoles." Chekov nodded. He walked over to the coffee pot and poured himself a cup. While he stirred in his sugar he said. "She looks a little tired this morning."

"Yes." Sulu nodded thoughtfully. As Chekov sat down, Sulu asked. "Tell me, Pavel. When did I become her father?"

"What do you mean?" Chekov chuckled.

"All I asked was how did she let herself get in that condition when she knew she had early duty." Sulu said. "I got a song and dance about a good band at an after hours bar with Mr. Smith. And when I saw the two of them last night she went out of her way to explain away the fact that they were together."

"You are not her father." Chekov laughed. "You are her captain. What is she suppose to say to you? That she finally gave into an attraction she has been fighting for months? That she lost control of the situation?"

"I do have some experience with that kind of problem." Sulu reminded Chekov.

"Yes." Chekov said. "And as I recall, when the Enterprise stopped at Starbase 12 you spent every off duty minute with Jimmi and every on duty minute trying to prove to Captain Kirk that it did not effect your work."

"So after a night of drinking, dancing, and whatever else, she is going to man her station

if it kills her." Sulu chuckled softly.

"Gonzoles is very much like you in this respect." Chekov nodded. He turned to the subject that had brought him to the ready room. "I've just checked with the transporter chief. Everyone has reported back on board. We can leave whenever you are ready."

"Good." Sulu said. "Our orders are to proceed to the Orhay System to follow up on the reports regarding a spatial anomaly."

"What kind of anomaly?" Chekov asked. Dr. Patrick walked in from the short hallway that led to the turbo lift as usual. Barely acknowledging the other two, he went directly to the coffee.

"Good morning, Pat." Sulu said. The doctor grumbled something. Sulu turned back to Chekov. "I'm not sure. Possibly an interphase. We received sensor logs of a small independent research ship in the area."

"And you are just telling me now?" Chekov asked. He turned Sulu's computer terminal around and accessed the sensor logs.

"I just got the order this morning, Pavel."

"This is all?" Chekov asked.

"That's all she transmitted before they lost contact with her." Sulu said.

"Lost contact?" Dr. Patrick asked.

"Could be nothing." Sulu said. "There is an ion storm in the area. Could be the storm is creating the unusual readings. Our orders are to check it out."

"How long will it take us to get there?" Pat asked.

"We'll be there by the end of first shift." Sulu said. "Why?"

"That should be enough time to clear out sick bay." Pat smiled.

"If sick bay is busy, what are you doing here?" The Captain asked.

"Hangovers do not require my presence." Pat said. "If anything more interesting comes up, they'll call me."

"How many?" Sulu asked.

"I don't know." Pat shrugged. "Between ten and fifteen. And you know that for every one that showed up in sick bay, three that probably should have did not."

"You've got to admit, Pat." Chekov said. "That no one want to hear your lectures on self inflicted wounds."

"It wouldn't be a lecture if everyone wanted to hear it." Pat grinned.

"I can think of at least two more that might benefit from it." Sulu stood up and headed for the bridge.

"What?" Pat asked. "Who?"

"Later." Chekov said to Patrick and followed Sulu.

On the bridge Lt. Kim asked quietly. "You ok, Commander?"

"I'll survive, Kim." Gonzoles managed a brief smile. "But from now on I'm sticking to Trillian. That champagne went down too easy and too fast."

"I know what you mean." Lt. Kim nodded. He glanced over his shoulder as the door to the ready room opened for Captain Sulu, Commander Chekov, and Dr. Patrick.

"Commander Rand." Sulu said as he sat down in the center seat. "Inform Risa orbital

control that we are ready to leave."

"Aye Captain." Rand said. "Risa Control, this is Excelsior. We are ready to depart your space."

"Excelsior." Risa Control answered. "All ships in your area have been informed to hold relative position. You are clear to depart. A safe journey. Risa Control, out."

"Gonzoles, set course for the Orhay System."

"Course plotted and laid in, Sir." Commander Gonzoles said.

"Full impulse, Kim, until we clear the shipping lanes." Sulu ordered. "Then increase speed to warp six."

"Aye Captain." Lt. Kim nodded. "Leaving orbit."

The morning passed slowly for Commander Gonzoles. She was thankful when her lunch break finally came around. But instead of lunch, she went home to lay down. When she had left for work, Tomas had been snoring in her bunk. Now he was leaning over it making the bed.

He turned and smiled at her. "Lunch time already?"

She ripped open her uniform jacket and tossed it on the desk chair. "I've got to lay down."

"You didn't get much sleep last night." Tomas said and backed up to let her sit on the bed. He sat down next to her, put his arm around her shoulders, and kissed her. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Don't take this the wrong way, Tomas." She sighed. "But go away."

"I understand." He laughed and stood up. "I'll see you for a minute at change of shift."

"Tomas." Rosita looked up at him. "We are going to keep this to ourselves, right?"

"Don't worry, Rosa." Tomas assured her. "Take your nap. I'll talk to you later."

She nodded and laid down as Tomas left the cabin. Rosita closed her eyes and said.

"Computer, set alarm for forty five minutes from now."

"Confirmed." The computer said. "Alarm set."

Lt. Commander Tomas Smith walked through the corridors of Excelsior whistling to himself. He had planned to return to his own bunk for a few more hours of sleep, but the growling in his stomach turned him towards the officer's mess. He loaded up a tray and joined Dr. Patrick and Lt. Commander Yazdani for lunch.

"I thought you were on second shift today." Pat said when Smith sat down.

"I am." Tomas nodded and started in on his lunch. "And I should be asleep right now. But I'm starving. I'll catch a couple more hours before I'm due on the bridge."

"You shouldn't need anymore sleep." Yazdani said. "You left the party awfully early last night."

"That doesn't mean I went home." Smith smiled. "Risa has other things to offer, you know."

"We know." Yaz laughed. "We went to the Green Maga Saloon. We thought we might run into you there. After all you are the one who told me about it."

"Did it live up to your expectations?" Smith asked.

"You bet!" Yaz laughed. "Loud. Rowdy. Great fun."
"And the hostesses were very friendly." Pat nodded. "I had to drag Yaz out of there. He couldn't get enough of the girl with the pink hair."
"Pink?" Smith asked. "What species are we talking about?"
"Sorry, Smitty. I didn't ask her any scientific questions." Yaz said. "But her name was Arnani. It just rolls off the tongue. Arnani. Arnani. Arnani-nani-nani-nani."
"He's in love." Pat laughed. "So where did you end up?"
"Actually Gonzales and I ended up at a little bar with a band that played Me-epo music." Smith said.
"You and Gonzo?" Yaz asked, sitting up straight to emphasize his surprise.
"Yeah." Smith shrugged. "She was heading back to the ship as I was heading out for some fun. I challenged her to stay and see some of the sights of Risa."
"And we all know how Gonzo is about a challenge." Yaz laughed. "So, did anything happen?"
"You know about the Commander's rules." Smith smiled.
"Yeah, I know." Yazdani nodded. "Damn, look at the time. I've got to go."
After Yaz had gone back to work, Dr. Patrick watched Mr. Smith concentrate on his meal. "Me-epo, huh?"
"Yeah." Smith nodded. "Know it?"
"Sure." Pat smiled. "I used to know a girl on Risa, it was her favorite. And it always put her in the mood."
"Really?"
"Oh yes." Pat sipped his drink. "The low lights and soft music. The slow dancing. Add a little intimate conversation. And then... Hmm, I wonder if she is still on Risa."
"You didn't try to locate her?" Smith asked.
"It was years ago. She's probably married or something." Pat shrugged. "So, how are things really between you and Rosita?"
"Are you asking as the ship's CMO?" Smith asked.
"I probably should be." Pat said. "Since you are second and third officers. But let's just keep it casual."
"And confidential." Smith said.
"Sure." Pat nodded.
"I'm not sure what happened last night." Smith said.
"Oh?"
"Ok, I know what happened and between you and me we really connected." Smith said softly. "But I don't know how she will interpret it. We spent hours talking last night, but I don't know if it was one night or forever."
"How do you feel about it?" Pat asked.
"It was a great night." Smith said. "And I was surprised by her. She's very different when not on the ship. She, ummm... Aw, don't listen to me. I don't know what I'm saying."
"You're doing ok." Pat smiled. He finished his drink and got up. "I'll see you later."

Lt. Commander Smith reported to the bridge for his duty shift at sixteen hundred hours. Captain Sulu and Commander Chekov were conferring at the science station. Smith walked down to the helm station. "You're relieved, Kim."

Lt. Kim stood up and reported. "We are on course for the Orhay System at warp six. ETA thirteen minutes."

"Thanks." Smith nodded and sat down. He looked over at Gonzoles. She was turning her station over to Lt. Briscoe. He couldn't help but smile at Rosita. He casually brushed his arm against hers and whispered. "See you at my lunch break?"

"Sure." Rosita whispered. She wanted to say more, but she had already lingered too long. Hoping the entire bridge crew hadn't already discerned what was going on, Gonzoles turned and left the bridge.

"Morning, Maggie." Smith said to Briscoe.

"Good morning, Tomas." Lt. Maggie Briscoe said.

Captain Sulu returned to the center seat. "All stop, Mr. Smith. Hold position."

"Aye Sir." Smith said. "All stop. Thrusters at station keeping."

"Distance from the edge of the Orhay System?" Sulu asked.

"Approximately seventy million kilometers, Sir." Lt. Briscoe said.

"At present." Chekov said from the science station. "The ion storm engulfs the entire system."

"What do we have on the missing ship?" Sulu asked.

"It is called The G'Nex. A small warp powered ship full of graduate students doing field work." Chekov said. "Fourteen people on board."

"Let me guess." Sulu said. "Studying ion storms?"

"Probably." Chekov said. "I have never heard of this university. But it is located on Arkaria. According to them, the G'Nex has a crew of three. There is one professor and ten students also on board."

"Ok." Sulu said. "Any sign of an spatial interphase?"

"No." Chekov said. "But the location of the original readings is presently inside the ion storm."

"Meaning the G'Nex is probably inside the ion storm as well. Lt. DuBois." Sulu turned to communications. "Any distress calls? Any contacts at all?"

"Nothing, Sir."

"Try to raise the G'Nex."

"Aye Sir."

"Is the storm moving?" Sulu asked.

"It appears to be stable right now, Captain." Chekov said. "Although it has moved nearly twenty million kilometers since the G'Nex's last transmission."

"What about the Orhay System?" Sulu asked.

"Four planets." Chekov said. "Two of which can support life."

"DuBois?"

"No response, Captain."

"Anything on sensors?" Sulu asked.

"Sensor readings in an ion storm are not reliable." Chekov reminded Sulu. "I am not

getting anything on the edge of the storm."

Sulu walked back over to the science station. "I understand the difficulties, Pavel. Are you getting anything? Any possibilities?"

"I am reading several sites of dense matter." Chekov stood to face the Captain. "Two must be the outer most planets of the system. The smaller ones could be just about anything."

"Like a ship?"

"Like a ship." Chekov nodded. "Or an astriod, or a sensor ghost. There is simply no way to tell."

"Unless we go in ourselves." Sulu said.

"Sensors will be even less reliable once we are in the storm." Chekov said. "I would suggest we wait and see if the storm subsides."

"Last contact with the G'Nex was over ten hours ago." Sulu said. "If they were anywhere outside the storm, they would have checked in with their home base by now."

"Assuming the ship was not destroyed." Chekov said.

"Is there any evidence that the ship was destroyed?" Captain Sulu asked.

"No."

"Can you get any more information on these areas of dense matter?" Sulu asked. "Can you give me a clue, Pavel?"

"Mirek," Chekov returned to his station. "Run comparative spectral analysis on the small dense matter areas. I will check their ionic bonds and ionization rates."

"Mr. Chekov..." Lt. Ellen Mirek started to protest.

"Your best guess, Lieutenant." Chekov said.

"Aye Sir." Mirek sighed and started the analysis. Normally the computer would have had the information categorized and analyzed in a matter of minutes. But she had to make several adjustments for the ionization caused by the storm. Once she had the information she conferred with Chekov on the rates of ionization and made a few more adjustments. Finally she said. "That is the best we are going to get, Sir."

"Degree of accuracy?" Chekov asked.

"Maybe seventy five per cent." Mirek said, but she did not sound confident.

"Captain." Chekov switched their analysis to the main view screen. The dense matter areas appeared in different colors according to the elemental composition. "There are two possibilities. This small green area just inside the storm's edge is the correct size and has some elements that should be present in the hull."

"You don't think that's it though." Sulu said.

"No Sir, I don't." Chekov said. "There is something in orbit around the third planet. It is difficult to see because the planet is reading rather fuzzy."

"Fuzzy?" Sulu tried not to laugh. Chekov was dead serious.

"The planet has no natural moons and the civilization there does not have any space flight capacity that we know of." Chekov continued. "What I can read of the object in orbit suggests that it is the correct size. It is in a standard orbit. And the composition suggests processed metals."

"That's it?" Sulu asked.

"It is our best guess." Chekov said.

"Any life signs?"

"None that we can ascertain through the storm." Chekov said.

"Very good, Mr. Chekov. Let's have the standard view back on the main screen." Sulu said. Smith returned the screen to standard. "Lt. Briscoe set course for the third planet."

"Course computed and ready, Captain." Briscoe said.

"Mr. Smith." Sulu ordered. "Take us to the edge of the storm at warp five. Then slow to impulse and proceed to the third planet."

"Aye Sir." Smith said. "Warp five. ETA to the ion storms edge, ten minutes."

As they waited to reach the edge of the ion storm, the science departments made adjustments to take in as much information about the storm as possible. Chekov called another science officer to the bridge to man the third science station. Lt. Miguel Perez reached the bridge just as Excelsior approached the edge of the storm.

"Slowing to impulse power." Smith reported. "Contact with the storm in thirty seconds."

"Shields up." Sulu ordered. "Yellow alert."

The ship proceeded unhindered except for the dancing electric charges as the ionized particles contacted the shields. It resulted in a beautiful but distracting light show. As they got deeper into the storm, the ionized particles collected into waves pushing against Excelsior's shields from all sides and giving the crew a rough ride.

"Distance to the third planet?" Sulu asked.

"Umm." Lt. Briscoe adjusted her controls. "About one million kilometers, Captain."

"About, Briscoe?"

"Computed from the point when we entered the ion storm, Sir." Briscoe said. "I am not reading any planets at all right now."

"Let me know if you find it again." Sulu said.

"I'm looking, Sir." Briscoe tried recalibrating her instruments.

"Chekov?"

"I am adjusting forward sensors to ignore all ionization processes." Chekov said. "That may give the navigational computer something it can decipher. Are you reading anything now, Lt. Briscoe?"

"No Sir." Briscoe frowned at her board. "Wait a minute. There it is. I think. Yes, that's it. Distance one point seven million kilometers. ETA two minutes, thirteen seconds."

"I'm glad you found it before we ran into it." Smith grinned. Lt. Briscoe just ignored him. She concentrated on the fuzzy image, willing it to stay put.

"Chekov, any problems with assuming a standard orbit?" Sulu asked.

"I don't know. It's never been done." Chekov said. "The atmosphere protects the planet. It must interact with the storm. Expect sudden energy bursts and shock waves. The lack of reliable instrument readings suggests that we not cut anything too close."

"Got that, Mr. Smith?"

"Yes Sir. A wide margin for error." Commander Smith said. He watched his controls and checked them frequently against what he could see on the view screen. The planet should have been clearly visible, but the energy discharges were playing havoc with the screen. The planet would become momentarily visible only to dissolve into static and bright lights. When they could get a good look at it, it seemed to glow with a dim silver light.

"There is a ship in orbit. It must be the G'Nex." Chekov reported as the Excelsior closed in on the third planet in the Orhay System. He adjusted the screen to bring the G'Nex into view. It was a small ship compared to Excelsior, but it was at least four or five times as large as the largest Starfleet shuttle. It was acting as a lightning rod in the ion storm being hit repeatedly by electrical energy from all sides. Shields were apparently down.

"Standard orbit plus one third, Mr. Smith. Give the G'Nex plenty of room." Sulu ordered. "Open hailing frequencies, Mr. DuBois."

"Plus one third, aye." Smith acknowledged the order.

"Frequency open, Captain." DuBois said. "But I'm not sure if she'll read us with all this interference."

"G'Nex, this is the U.S.S. Excelsior. Do you read?" Sulu said. They waited, but received no response. "Keep trying, Mr. DuBois."

"Aye Sir."

Sulu turned to Chekov. "Life signs?"

"Sensors are barely reading the ship, Captain. I am not reading any life signs." Chekov said. "Nor am I reading any viable energy sources or an internal atmosphere."

"Well, the shields are down. The ship is being hit directly by the energy discharges." Sulu observed. "Can you tell if the orbit decaying?"

"I believe it is, but very slowly." Chekov said. "Left to natural forces, it would take several months to fall into the atmosphere."

"She's missing an escape pod, Sir." Lt. Briscoe said.

"Only one?" Smith asked.

"It appears that one escape pod has been ejected." Chekov confirmed Briscoe's report. "The other is in place."

"Fourteen people." Sulu said. "They could have opted for one pod."

"Sounds crowded." Smith said.

"Yes." Sulu nodded. "They probably did not want to chance getting separated on the planet's surface. What do we know about this planet, Pavel?"

"Captain." Mirek interrupted. "Lower and aft shields are down to eighty two per cent. The ionization of the top level of the atmosphere is sending substantial electrical energy charges to these areas."

"Reinforce shields." Sulu said. "We'll try not to stay too long."

"Reinforcing shields, aye." Mirek said.

"We do not know much about the planet." Chekov consulted the library database. "It was surveyed by the Yamato when she passed this way four years ago. Captain Gannon reported that the planet was politically, economically, and technologically fragmented. Some areas were technologically equivalent to Earth's nineteenth century, while other areas had barely made it out of the iron and bronze age. There are no more details available."

"They probably don't even have airplanes then." Sulu said.

"Probably." Chekov shrugged. "What are you thinking?"

"The atmosphere shields the planet from the ion storm, correct?" Sulu said. Chekov nodded. "So we send in two shuttle craft for search and rescue. They remain in the upper atmosphere and scan for the escape pod. Excelsior gets out of the storm returns to pick up the

shuttles when the storm has passed."

"Two shuttles could handle it." Chekov nodded. "If we sent only a skeleton crew."

"A pilot, science officer, and doctor." Sulu nodded. "Mr. Smith, you will pilot one of the shuttles. Your choice of science officers."

"Lt. Mirek would be my first choice." Smith said. Sulu nodded. "If I can make a suggestion, Captain, Commander Gonzoles is the next best pilot on board. After me, of course."

"Gonzoles needs her sleep. Briscoe will pilot the other shuttle." Sulu said. Lt. Briscoe turned to face the Captain and hoped her surprise wasn't obvious. She was beginning to think Captain Sulu would never give her a command opportunity. "Your science officer, Lt. Briscoe?"

"Lt. Wong, Sir." Briscoe answered without hesitation.

"Good choice." Sulu said. "Dr. Patrick will assign the medical personnel. I don't know how soon we will be able to return, but the prime directive is in full force. Do not contact the planet's indigenous population. Any questions?"

"No Sir." Briscoe and Smith said with one voice.

"Then get going."

Lt. Commander Smith, Lt. Briscoe, and Lt. Mirek got on the turbo lift together. They rode in silence for only a moment before Mirek asked. "What was that crack about Gonzoles needing her sleep?"

"Got me." Briscoe said.

"She was on first shift this morning." Smith said. "But I know I beat her back to the ship last night. She couldn't have had much sleep."

"Rosita?" Mirek asked. "That's not like her."

"Risa does have a reputation." Briscoe said. "Maybe she met someone. Anyway, we have more important things to think about. From the orbit of the G'Nex, the escape pods could have landed in an ocean, a desert, a jungle or glacier. We have a lot of ground to cover and we better do it systematically."

"Agreed." Smith said. "For now we'll assume the orbit did not change after they left the ship. I'll search ten degrees north of the orbit. You search ten degrees south. We'll give it two or three times around, if nothing comes up we'll expand the search area."

"Sounds good." Briscoe nodded.

When they reached the shuttle bay Dr. Shimerman, Dr. Caruso, and Lt. Wong were waiting for them. Two ships stood ready to launch. Smith started the preflight check on the Newton III. Lt. Mirek and Dr. Mikhail Shimerman went into the ship to get ready. Briscoe walked on to the Newton VI.

Dr. Doug Caruso and Lt. Aaron Wong walked up to Briscoe. Wong asked. "What's up, Maggie?"

"Search and rescue, Aaron." Briscoe said without stopping. She had known Wong for five years. They partnered for bridge regularly. "There are fourteen people missing from the ship in orbit. The escape pod had only one place to go."

"And the ion storm is interfering with sensors and transporters, right?" Wong grinned and followed her into the shuttle.

"You got it." Briscoe nodded at Lt. Wong and sat down in the pilot's seat. "From the atmosphere we can use sensors and effect rescue. Excelsior will withdraw until the storm

subsides."

"Any idea of the condition of the missing?" Dr. Caruso asked.

"Nope." Briscoe said as she went through the last of the preflight check. "Better buckle up, boys. This first part is going to be a rough ride."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Lt. Wong sat at the copilot's station and secured the safety restraints. Briscoe checked over her shoulder to make sure the doctor had done the same. He had just transferred to Excelsior a few months ago and Briscoe did not know him well. He was medium height and weight, with medium brown skin, regulation cut dark hair. Nothing stood out in her mind about him.

Briscoe opened the comline. "Shuttle bay control. This is Shuttlecraft Newton VI ready to launch."

"You are cleared to launch Newton VI."