

It wasn't long after Chekov had returned the two Tyllarans to their planet, that Excelsior and Dodger turned towards Starbase Twelve. They had been traveling at full impulse power for almost six hours when Captain Uhura hailed the Excelsior.

"Good news, Captain." Uhura said. "Warp power has been restored and life support is at ninety eight per cent capacity."

"That is good news." Sulu said. "We will return the rest of your crew to you then we can head home. Has your engineer restricted your speed?"

"Commander Hughes recommends that we not exceed warp three." Uhura said. "He doesn't want to tax the crystals."

"Ok." Sulu nodded. "Stand by for crew transport."

At the end of the third shift, Lt. Commander Tomas Smith turned his duty station over to the first shift helm officer and walked into the captain's ready room. "Reporting as ordered, Sir."

"Sit down, Mr. Smith." Sulu said. Smith sat and waited. The captain took his time. "I have considered our earlier conversation."

"Yes Sir."

"And I am lifting all restrictions on your time, Mr. Smith."

"What about Gonzoles, Captain?"

"All restrictions lifted."

"Thank you, Captain." Smith smiled

"Don't thank me." Sulu said. "This is not a favor. I can not afford to have my second and third officer on restricted duty."

"Yes Sir."

"Certainly not at the same time."

"Yes Sir."

"Smith." Sulu sighed. "I was beginning to think you had found your place here. Don't screw up now by telling me what you think I want to hear."

Lt. Commander Smith just stared at his captain for a moment. Slowly, he said, "I don't understand, Captain."

"I've gotten nothing but good reports regarding your command skills. Your staff speaks highly of you." Sulu said. "You have even become comfortable enough to question my tactics. Now you revert to a steady stream of yes sirs. Generally that's not what I want to hear in my ready room."

Smith studied Captain Sulu for another minute. This conversation was not at all what he expected when the captain had ordered him to report at the end of his shift. Smith asked, "Then you approved of my questioning the torpedo threat?"

"I would not have appreciated the question on the bridge." Sulu said. "But I have never declined to discuss any aspect of command with my officers at the proper time."

"I'll be damned." Smith shook his head. Rosita had been right. The Captain did not just accept her questions because he was her mentor. Just talk to him, she had said. So he asked, "So, where does that leave us Captain?"

"As far as I am concerned, you have one more chance on this ship, Mr. Smith." Sulu said.

"How you handle your personal problems are your concern, but I expect you to handle them."

"I'll do my best, Sir."

"I have some personal experience with these types of problems." Sulu said. "I would suggest you find someone objective to talk to. Dr. Patrick is a good choice."

"I've never been good at that kind of conversation, Captain." Smith said. "I've just tried to handle those problems myself."

"With varying degrees of success." Sulu noted. "Dr. Patrick has helped me when I thought I did not need help. "

"I will talk to him, Captain."

"Good." Sulu nodded. "Unless there is something else?"

"No Sir."

"Dismissed."

Lt. Commander Tomas Smith left Captain Sulu's ready room deep in thought. In the eight months he had known Captain Sulu, Smith had never actually sat down and talked to him before this rescue mission. Now Smith wasn't sure what to think about his captain.

When Smith stepped into the turbo lift, he automatically went to the mess hall. He found Gonzoles sitting alone at a table in the corner. Without a word, he put down his tray and sat down.

"Tomas." Gonzoles smiled. "Isn't it great to have that restriction lifted?"

"Yeah." He was distracted and staring at his dinner tray as if someone else had put it on the table.

"Something wrong?" Gonzoles asked. "Your restriction was lifted too, right?"

"Right." Smith nodded.

"That means we can work out in the gym, we can go to parties, we can spend the night together." Gonzoles asked. "Why the long face?"

"I'm not sure." Smith looked up from his still untouched dinner to Gonzoles. "I'm just not sure what to think."

Gonzoles raised one eyebrow at him. "I'm sorry. You'll have to give me more to go on."

"I've just had a conversation with our captain." Smith said slowly.

"I know." Gonzoles said as she ate her salad. "I was sitting next to you when he told you to report at end of shift."

"I've never had a conversation like that with a captain." Smith said.

"Like what?"

"I wasn't a department head on Lexington." Smith explained. "I was the second helm officer. The only time I talked to the captain was to answer an order or give a report. Maybe that's the difference."

"Tomas." Gonzoles said. "What are you talking about?"

"The Captain just gave me some things to think about." Smith shrugged off her questions.

"He's good at that." Gonzoles nodded. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Do you mind if we don't? At least not yet?" Smith asked. Gonzoles shrugged and

drank her iced tea. "I need to get it straight in my own mind first."

"I understand." Gonzoles said. "Are you going to eat your dinner?"

"Yeah." Smith smiled and picked up his fork. "Now that we're free, what do you want to do tonight?"

"Decisions, decisions." Gonzoles laughed. "There's a poker game in rec three. We haven't been to the gym in way too long. And Mirek just told me life science is throwing a party in the main shuttle bay. Or we could just go home together for a change."

"Life science throws one hell of a party." Tomas said.

"Yeah." Gonzoles smiled. "I'd like to be around a lot of people tonight too."

"Then later we can go home together."

"Yeah."

Smith and Gonzoles went to the party together. It was loud and boisterous. They spent a good deal of the evening mingling side by side. After a while they were each drawn into separate conversations.

"What about you, Mr. Smith?" Lt. Kim asked.

"What about me?" Smith asked.

"I'm looking for a fourth for a bridge team for the Parrises Squares competition." Kim said. "Last time Systems Analysis wiped the floor with us. We need some new blood."

"Squares isn't my game." Smith said. "Have you asked Briscoe? I understand she's very competitive."

"She is." Kim nodded. "I'll ask her."

"Don't you like inter-department competitions?" Dr. Patrick asked Mr. Smith after Kim had gone to look for Briscoe.

"I'm all for them, Pat." Smith said. "But the game depends on speed and I have found my height to actually be a disadvantage."

"I know a game where height is not only an advantage, it is a necessity." Pat said. "Have you ever heard of basketball?"

"No."

"I have an ancestor several generations back that played the game professionally." Pat said. "It was very popular for over a century."

"Ok." Smith nodded. "How do you play?"

"You scored points by throwing a ball through a hoop called a basket while the opposing team tried to block the shot." Pat said.

"Doesn't sound hard."

"The hoop is over your head by about half a meter." Pat explained. "I'm going to get something set up in the gym so we can play a little one on one."

"What's one on one?" Smith asked. "I thought you wanted to play basketball."

"That just means one person per team." Pat explained. "I'll let you know when I get it set up. The rules of the game should be in the historical database."

"Hey Pat, I know you're not on duty right now." Smith hesitated. "But, could we talk?"

"Sure." Pat casually strolled away from the party. Smith followed. They stopped next to

one of the shuttle crafts. "What's up?"

"How am I doing?" Smith asked. "I mean as third officer. As a member of a command team."

"Isn't that a question you should ask Chekov at crew evaluations?" Pat said. "Or perhaps the Captain?"

"Stepping up to third officer, that was a big step for me." Smith leaned against the shuttle. "I am finding there are elements to the job that I wasn't aware of eight months ago. I need someone to tell me if I am missing something."

"You never established a relationship with a senior command officer, did you?"

"No." Smith admitted sheepishly. "Earlier in my career the chip on my shoulder was too big for that. And it is a little late now."

"Maybe." Pat said. "I'll tell you what I see, Tomas. On the bridge, no problem. On away missions, no problem. In your department, no problem."

"That all sounds good." Smith said.

"But there is that intangible part of the job." Pat said. "Being part of that team. How you interact with Chekov and Sulu. The Captain has said to me that he felt you were moving in the right direction, but it was taking a long time."

"When I talked to the Captain today I was surprised." Smith said.

"Why?"

"Considering what happened and the restrictions." Smith said. "I had assumed our conversation would be one sided. Him lecturing and me saying yes sir eight or ten times."

"But that's not how it went." Pat said.

"Not at all." Smith said. "I mean he told me what he expected, but it was a conversation. Not a lecture."

"Well, you are three officers away from command of the largest ship in the fleet." Pat said. "Don't you think you are beyond the need for lectures?"

"I do, sure." Smith shrugged. "But that someone else does surprises me."

"So, now what?" Pat asked.

"That's what I was going to ask you." Smith laughed.

"But you are the one who has to answer that question."

"Can I get back to you on it?"

"Of course." Pat nodded. "Let's get back to the party. I bet your girlfriend is looking for you by now."

The party was getting quite crowded. Rosita saw Tomas and Pat coming back from the shuttle craft. She separated herself from the people she had been talking to and watched them approach.

"Hi." She smiled. "About time you came back."

"Sorry." Tomas said. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "You about ready to go?"

"Sure." Rosita leaned into him. "Goodnight Pat."

"Hey, you two." Pat said. "The gym. Regular time. Tomorrow. I haven't done my laps since we left Starbase Twelve."

"You could have done them without us." Tomas laughed.

"It doesn't work that way." Pat said. "I need to know you guys will yell at me if I don't show up."

"Don't worry." Rosita said. "We will."

It took them awhile to leave the party. Saying good night as they made their way towards the door. Once they were in the turbo lift, Tomas asked. "Mind if we go to your cabin tonight? I am sick of mine."

"Ok." Rosita said. "Were you talking to Pat about your meeting with Captain Sulu?"

"In part." Tomas said.

When he did not continue, Rosita said. "You don't want to talk to me about it."

"That's not it, Rosa." Tomas said

"It's ok, Tomas." Rosita said when the turbo lift doors opened. "You don't have to tell me everything."

"Rosa." Tomas followed her down the hall. "Captain Sulu suggested I talk to Pat. Or some other objective person."

They walked into her quarters together. Rosita took off her uniform jacket and tossed it on the chair before asking. "About your relationship with me?"

"The captain said about personal problems." Tomas said. "But tonight I talked to Pat about me. I asked his opinion on how I handle my job."

"What did he say?"

"Some of the same things you've said to me, but I never understood." Tomas took her in his arms and kissed her. "Do you know how good you smell?"

"Do you understand now?"

"Let's just say I'm thinking about things in a different light." Tomas said. "But right now all I am thinking about is how much I want to make love to you."

"I've missed having you here." Rosita started undoing his jacket.

"Good morning, Captain." Gonzoles smiled when she saw him in the hall. "I understand we'll be back at base before the end of first shift."

"Yes." Sulu nodded. "Where's your other half this morning?"

"I don't know." Gonzoles fell into step with the captain. "A regulation bunk is not conducive to overnight guests."

"Perhaps that is what the designers had in mind." Sulu said.

"Someone once told me there were no regulations against romance." Gonzoles stopped in front of the turbo lift doors. "Perhaps we should tell the design engineers."

"I'll leave that to you." Sulu said as they stepped onto the turbo lift together. "Bridge."

"When I spoke to Tomas last night," Gonzoles said. "He was preoccupied by your conversation. I believe..."

"Computer. Halt turbo lift." Sulu turned to face her. "Gonzoles, you can not take that role for Mr. Smith."

"Can not, Captain?"

"As I recall you were the one who pointed out to me that the roles of mentor and lover were mutually exclusive." Sulu said.

"I am not sure that is what I said, Sir." Gonzoles said.

"I remember the night well." Sulu said. "And you were right. If he is important to you, you have to let him find his own way."

Gonzoles studied her Captain for a moment before saying, "Yes Sir."

"Computer. Resume turbo lift." Sulu said.