

It was July again. That meant the Excelsior and the rest of the Star Fleet ships would be picking up the new ensigns that had just graduated from the Academy. The ensigns had graduated in early June and been given a month's leave time before they had to report to their assignments. It gave the new officers time to visit their respective homeworlds before embarking on their chosen careers. For the crews of the ships, it meant a night or two in port of call. It was a well anticipated break in their routine.

The ensigns shipped out from four locations. The majority of the star ships, including Excelsior, picked up their ensigns at Star Base 12. Twelve was the closest star base to Earth. It was a large space station that orbited Gamma IV. It was also the location of the No Ranks Café, owned and operated by Jean Marie Sulu.

She was called Jimmi or Boss by everyone that came into the Café. She had opened the Café before she had married Hikaru Sulu while he was still on Enterprise. When Jimmi McCoy had been a teenager, she used to travel from her boarding school to Star Base 12 to meet her father every July. It was then that she had gotten to know many of the Enterprise crew and started to think of opening a bar and restaurant on this base.

On Excelsior, the crew had not had any shore leave time in nearly eight months. The entire crew was looking forward to the time at Star Base 12. The ship's third officer, Lt. Commander Tomas Smith was no different. It would be his first time at the No Ranks since he had transferred to the Excelsior a few months earlier. He was whistling softly to himself as he got his lunch. However, the second officer, Lt. Commander Rosita Gonzoles was more apprehensive than excited.

"Is something bothering you?" Smith asked when he and Gonzoles sat down to lunch together. She had been unusually quiet for days. It was starting to make Tomas nervous. "Tell me about it. Maybe I can help."

Rosita did not look at him, but she knew she had to tell him. And she was running out of time. She pushed her salad around with her fork for a minute before responding slowly. "We will be at Starbase 12 this evening."

"Yeah, I know."

"That means I have a date tonight." Rosita said.

"Sure." Tomas nodded. With a smile, he said, "That's why we're both on first shift, so we can go to the No Ranks tonight and watch the new ensigns make fools of themselves."

She finally looked up from her lunch at him. She met his deep brown eyes and said, "That's not what I mean."

"Oh." It slowly dawned on him what she was saying. He tried to stay calm. His words came out slowly as he asked for clarification. "Do you mean a date with someone other than me?"

"You see, it's a standing date." Rosita also spoke slowly as she explained. "Once a year I meet this guy at the Café. We dance. We talk. I generally spend the night with him. Then I don't see him again until the next year."

"And you are just telling me about this now?" Tomas asked.

"There was no reason---" Rosita whispered.

"No reason?!" Tomas almost jumped out of his seat. Several crewman in the mess hall

turned to look at them. He leaned towards her and did his best not to shout. "We've been together for almost two months now. And there's no reason to say, hey there's this other guy I sleep with? Don't I deserve to know more than anyone else?"

"Actually, Tomas, I've never told this to anyone." Rosita spoke softly, hoping he would do the same. She had been practicing this explanation for weeks. "For some of those years he was married and I wasn't very proud of that. I've been trying to find a way to tell you for the last month or so."

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He quietly asked, "Who is this guy we are talking about?"

"L.J. Vasco."

"Any relation to C.J.?"

"Her twin brother." Rosita said. "He is also Jimmi Sulu's business partner. I think you can see why I did not want this to become common knowledge on the ship."

"Yeah." He stared at his plate for a few minutes. He took a couple of more deep breaths to calm himself down. He reminded himself to think and not to go off half cocked like the last time. "What do you plan to do?"

"I don't plan to spend the night with him." Rosita said. She searched his eyes, looking for patience and understanding. "But I do need to talk to him. I hope you understand."

Tomas Smith stared at her. Her long black hair pulled back in the efficient braid she almost always wore while on duty. Her big brown eyes. Her angelic face. He had wanted her the minute he laid eyes on her. Even now, as she was telling him about L.J. Vasco, he found it hard to deny her anything.

"Just so we are straight on this." Tomas said slowly and deliberately. "I don't like it. I don't like it one bit. But you do what you've got to do. As long as you go home with me."

"Guaranteed." Rosita smiled across the table at him, but he was not smiling back.

When Rosita and Tomas walked into the No Ranks, the party was in full swing. Rosita looked around for L.J. but he was no where in sight. Slowly they made their way through the new ensigns, the Excelsior officers and the civilians that came every year to see their family members that served on the star fleet ships. A band played on the small stage. The music was lively and the dance floor was crowded.

The bar was full, no seats available. Tomas looked around. He was taller than the average human and had a better view of the crowd than Rosita. When he saw a familiar face, he grabbed Rosita's hand and led her over to Dr. Tim Patrick who had managed to get a seat near the end of the bar away from the band. The doctor was as tall as Smith but fair skinned and blond. They had been friends since Tomas had joined the Excelsior crew.

"What did you do, Pat?" Smith asked Excelsior's chief medical officer. "Jump ship the minute we were in orbit?"

"I was not the first person off the ship." Pat said.

"No," Gonzoles said with a little laugh. "I'm sure that was Captain Sulu and Mr. Chekov. Right?"

"Of course." Pat sipped his drink. "What are you guys drinking? Randy! When you get a

minute."

When the bartender walked over, Gonzoles had to yell to be heard. "Trillian."

"Make it two." Smith added.

Randy handed the two ales across the bar. Pat grabbed the payment padd and pressed his thumb to the sensor. "On me."

"Thanks." Tomas nodded. "I'll get the next round."

Captain and Mrs. Sulu walked up to the end of bar together where the waitresses could put in their orders. She had an empty tray in her hand. "So?" Captain Sulu asked with a grin. "They are just new ensigns."

"To you they are new ensigns. To me they are customers." Jimmi said to her husband. She waited for Randy to come down the bar and said, "Randy, refill for table eight."

While Randy filled her tray, Hikaru pulled his wife close to him, pushed her auburn curls out of the way and whispered in her ear. She giggled and said. "In your dreams, Mister."

"And will you make all my dreams come true?" Hikaru asked and gave her a brief kiss.

Jimmi smiled as she pushed him away. She turned around to pick up the full tray. Before leaving him to deliver the drinks, Jimmi winked and said. "Later."

Sulu watched his wife disappear into the crowd, then turned back to the bar to find Randy handing a beer across the bar. He thanked the bartender and drifted over to Patrick, Gonzoles, and Smith. "Good evening, Gonzoles, Smith. Pat, how did you manage to hold onto a bar stool in this crowd?"

"By not venturing out on the dance floor." Pat said.

"Where did Chekov disappear to?" Sulu asked. "It's about time for the poker game."

"He and C.J. were here a little while ago." Patrick looked around at the crowd. "I don't know where they got to."

"I guess he'll be late." Sulu said and sipped his beer. "Do you play poker, Mr. Smith?"

"On occasion." Smith said. But he was distracted by a tall man with long light brown hair worn in a pony tail. He had walked up behind Rosita and was now whispering in her ear. She turned to him and was smiling up at him.

Sulu followed Smith's gaze. "L.J." Sulu said. "How's business?"

"Can't complain." L.J. Vasco said. He put his hand on Rosita's shoulder. "I love this song. Want to dance?"

"Sure." Gonzoles smiled.

Without a word, Tomas Smith left Patrick and Sulu. He found a spot at the bar where someone had moved the bar stool. He leaned on the bar and caught Randy's eye. "Aldeberan whiskey. Straight."

Sulu looked at Patrick and grinned. He said, "This could be a fun evening."

Dr. Patrick laughed. "A week's pay says there is a fight before the Cafe closes."

"That's a little general, Doctor." Sulu said. "Do you mean between Smith and Gonzoles or between Smith and Vasco?"

"Either." Pat said. "Why not between Gonzoles and Vasco?"

"Oh, I think Mr. Smith is the loose cannon here." Sulu said. "I wonder what Rosita has told him about L.J."

"Why?" Pat asked. "What has she told you?"

"Nothing." Sulu shrugged. He sipped his beer before adding, "Gonzoles has never been inclined to discuss her personal life with me."

Pavel had his arm around C.J.'s shoulder when they came through the crowd towards Sulu and Patrick. C.J.'s arm was around his waist. She smiled at her husband as she spoke softly in his ear. He nodded and laughed. When they reached the bar, Chekov leaned close to Patrick and asked. "Have I missed anything?"

"Nothing yet." Pat confided. He nodded towards the dance floor. "L.J. just asked Rosita to dance."

"What are you expecting?" Cathy asked.

"An explosion." Sulu said to Cathy. He turned to Pavel. "The bet is a week's pay. Are you in?"

"You are betting on this?" Cathy asked.

"Is physical contact required?" Chekov asked.

"If the fight is between Smith and Vasco, yes." Patrick said. "If it is between Smith and Gonzoles, I'd say yelling is sufficient."

"You are betting on this!" Cathy pushed her husband away from her. But he wasn't paying any attention to her.

"I think you are wrong, Pat." Chekov said. "Gonzoles may be reserved, but when provoked she is capable of physical violence."

"Aren't we all." Pat agreed. "But men fight differently with men than they do with women on an emotional playing field. I don't doubt that Smith would deck Vasco. But I don't see an argument between Smith and Gonzoles escalating in the Café."

"He is the expert, Pavel." Sulu said.

"All right." Chekov conceded. "I will take no fight IN THE CAFE. Gonzoles will walk out first."

"I'll take Vasco and Smith." Sulu said. "And any aggressive physical contact counts."

"That leaves me with Smith and Gonzoles." Pat smiled. "Which would have been my first choice anyway. Be prepared to pay up, Gentlemen."

"I can't believe you are betting on this!" Cathy tossed her long ash blond hair over her shoulder and walked away from Excelsior's three senior officers.

On the dance floor, L.J. held Rosita Gonzoles lightly in his arms as they moved easily among the dancers. "Rosita, what's on your mind? Or should I ask who?"

"Does it show that much, L.J.?" She smiled up at him. L.J. and Tomas were almost the same height. Rosita had always preferred tall men.

"It showed more on that tall officer standing next to Sulu. He was not happy that I asked you to dance." L.J. said. "And you are quieter than usual. So, is it serious?"

"More serious than I've been about anyone in a very long time." Rosita nodded. "So, I hope you understand that this has to be our last dance."

"Then dance a little closer." He winked at her and tightened his grip a little to pull her close to him. "Let's see if we can make him jealous."

"L.J.!" Rosita laughed.

"Ok. Ok." He loosened his grip letting her dance half a step away from him. "Tell me all about him."

"His name is Tomas Charles Smith." Rosita said. "He is the head of the helm department. He transferred onto Excelsior as a replacement for Jenna. He is third officer."

"Wait a minute." L.J. said. "I thought you were third officer."

"I am now second officer." She smiled.

"So you out rank him."

"Yes."

"And that doesn't bother him?" L.J. asked.

"You are just trying to start trouble." Rosita laughed. "You forget how well I know you, Leonid! Just so you have this straight. When we are off duty, ranks don't matter. And on duty, the ship runs by the chain of command. Got it?"

"Got it." He laughed then bent his head to whisper in her ear. "I just love a strong forceful woman. I guess your Mr. Smith is the same."

"Thank you for a lovely dance, L.J." She stopped in the middle of the dance floor. The song had not ended, but L.J. just nodded and smiled and watched her walk away.

While Rosita was still dancing, Cathy walked over to the bar next to Lt. Commander Tomas Smith. Jimmi was now behind the bar with Randy. She rapped on the bar twice with her fist and called. "Hey, J.M.! Hit me."

Jimmi walked down to Cathy. She took out two glasses and a bottle of vodka. She filled both glasses. They kinked the rims of the glasses together and drained the vodka. After she swallowed, Jimmi said. "What's up?"

"We have married little boys." Cathy said.

"And you are just figuring this out now?" Jimmi laughed and refill C.J.'s glass. The bar was too busy for Jimmi to allow herself more than that one drink just yet. "What are they doing that is so annoying?"

"You won't believe what they have a bet on. It is too stupid to even talk about." Cathy said. Jimmi shrugged and returned to work. C.J. turned to Smith, who was staring into a half empty glass. "Well, Mr. Smith how are you?"

He looked up from his glass. "I'll survive, Mrs. Chekov."

"Problems?" She asked.

But before Smith could say anything, Rosita came up behind him. She laid a hand on his shoulder. "That didn't take too long, did it?"

Smith turned towards her, his back to C.J. "You had to dance with him? I thought you just were going to talk."

"In this crowd, there is no better place for an intimate conversation than on the dance floor." Rosita said. "You should try it."

"Just how intimate was this conversation?" Tomas asked.

"Tomas. What did you want me to do?" Rosta asked with irritation. "Should I have walked up to him with you and said 'Hey L.J., this is Tomas. I'm sleeping with him now so get

lost?' Is that what you wanted?"

"Yeah." Tomas turned back to the bar and held up his empty glass. "Randy! Another Aldeberan whiskey."

"You can't be serious." Rosita said. Randy poured Smith another drink.

"Can I get you anything, Commander Gonzoles?"

"Not right now, Randy. Thank you." She said. After Randy had moved on to the next customer, Rosita asked Tomas, "So what happened to 'As long as you go home with me?' Isn't that what you said?"

"I thought you were going to tell him to get lost?" Smith demanded. "Did you have to dance so damn close to him to tell him that?"

"I was not dancing close to him!" Gonzoles raised her voice slightly. "He was dancing close to me! And I told him to back off!"

Smith drained his drink in one gulp. "Another Randy."

"You don't need another one." Rosita said. The bartender did not rush over to serve him another whiskey.

"You are not going to tell me what to drink." Smith said. "Or how much!"

"I'm not going to tell you anything." Gonzoles said and started walking towards the door as quickly as the crowd would let her.

Smith stared at his empty glass. Cathy leaned over to him and said softly. "Better go after her now. She won't want to hear it later."

"You think?" Smith considered her advice. "I don't know."

"Well, if you don't care about her." Cathy shrugged. "Then don't worry about it. Don't do anything."

Smith put down the glass and went after Gonzoles. He caught up to her near the door. He grabbed her by the shoulder, pulling her to a stop. "Rosita, wait."

Rosita Gonzoles stopped and turned suddenly towards him. She brought up her arm and forcibly knocked his hand off her shoulder. "Don't touch me."

"Wait a minute." He stepped close to her and lowered his voice. "What do you want from me?"

"Nothing!"

"How am I suppose to react to seeing you in another man's arms?" He whispered.

"Why do you think I told you about him?" Gonzoles demanded. "I wanted to avoid a scene like this, but you just couldn't leave it alone. Could you?"

"Why didn't you send him a message? Tell him by subspace?" Tomas grabbed her by the arms near her shoulders. "Why did you have to dance with him? Look at him like that?"

Gonzoles planted her foot behind his and with one movement knocked his hands off her shoulder and pushed against his chest as hard as she could. The maneuver had the desired effect.

Tomas Smith lost his balance and fell to the floor with a thud. Rosita Gonzoles looked down at him and answered his questions. "Because I did!"

Gonzoles turned to go. She had not realized that during their brief argument the crowd had backed away, leaving a clear circle around them. Before she had taken three steps into the crowd, Mr. Chekov called her. "Lt. Commander Gonzoles."

Gonzoles turned on her heel and looked at Chekov. He was standing next to Smith who

was still sitting on the floor. Gonzoles squared her shoulders and answered. "Sir."

Chekov lifted his hand and called her closer with his finger. She took three steps towards him. Chekov looked down at Smith. "Lt. Commander Smith."

Without an ounce of proper military protocol, Smith rested his arms on his knees and answered. "Sir."

"Get up, Mr. Smith." Chekov said with some annoyance. Smith got to his feet and faced Gonzoles. Chekov shook his head slowly. "A fine example you set for the newly commissioned officers. You realize you could face court-martial for such behavior."

"Yes Sir." Smith and Gonzoles answered together.

"Get back to the ship. Your liberty is cancelled." Chekov said. "Both of you report to Captain Sulu first thing in the morning."

"Aye Sir." Gonzoles turned and left the Cafe.

"You are waiting for something, Mr. Smith?"

He felt like telling Chekov he was giving Gonzoles a good head start. But instead he said "No Sir." And left the Cafe.

"You're a damn good bouncer, Pavel." L.J. laughed as he walked up to his brother-in-law. "Any time you want a job, just say the word."

"A lot of help you are." Pavel said. "I just lost a week's pay."

"Is that my fault?" L.J. asked as they walked back towards the bar together. "She must be very serious about him. I've never seen Rosita blow up like that before. My god, she was beautiful."

"What is it with you and women who love someone else?" Pavel asked.

"I don't know." L.J. said. "Besides, she didn't love someone else until just now."

They stopped at the bar by C.J. She smiled at her husband and brother. "It would seem you lost your bet, Pavel."

"I was so close." Pavel said. "If she had just made it out the door before he caught up with her."

"That's too bad." Cathy shrugged. L.J. made some excuse about having to return to work and left them alone. "Maybe that will teach you not to bet on other people's feelings."

"It is harmless." Pavel said. "We do not bet on people's feelings, but on how they handle them."

"You mean you've done this before?" Cathy asked.

"Dr. McCoy started it years ago. I used to win regularly when the bet was on Jimmi and Hikaru." Pavel laughed. "But then I had inside information."

"And you don't see any problem with this!"

"No." He was still laughing. "And I know they have bet on us on occasion."

"And I guess Hikaru won those bets." The corners of Cathy's mouth were turned down with disapproval.

"I don't think so." Pavel stepped closer to his wife. He gently pushed her hair back from her ear. Leaning close, Pavel kissed her cheek and whispered. "He never did understand you."

"Like you do." She teased.

"Better than anyone." Pavel kissed her neck.

Cathy sighed, enjoying his attention. "You are just trying to put me in a good mood so I

won't be mad when you go to play poker."

"How can you say that?" Pavel whispered in her ear.

Cathy turned her face into his, brushing his cheek with hers. She kissed him. "Why don't you skip the game? I can think of much better things to do."

Pavel smiled at her and twisted a strand of her hair between his fingers. "Captain Uhura is late. The game will not get under way for a while."

"I have a suite at the CTQ." Cathy kissed him again, lingering longer this time. As their lips parted she whispered. "The boys are sound asleep. And I have caviar and vodka waiting for us."

"Let's go."