

Smith and Gonzoles had taken a quick lunch break together, and were on their way back to the bridge when Tomas said. "I have something to take care of, Rosa. I'll meet you back on the bridge."

"Ok." Rosita said slowly. Eying him suspiciously, she stepped onto the turbo lift without him. Smith let the door close and waited for the next turbo lift.

"Deck one. Captain's ready room." He ordered. Sulu called for him to come in when Lt. Commander Smith signaled. The captain sat at his desk with a lunch tray in front of him. Smith hesitated, then said. "I am sorry to interrupt, Captain."

"No problem." Sulu looked at him with some surprise and asked, "Didn't you just go on your lunch break a few minutes ago?"

"Twenty minutes ago, Sir." Smith said. Rosa had been telling him that Sulu was open to questions about command decision, but he had never been one to ask these questions directly of the officer above him. But he took a deep breath and said, "I have a question about the confrontation with the Drecas Jenage. I hope I am not out of line."

"Sit down, Mr. Smith." Sulu said. He picked up his sandwich and resumed his lunch. "Ask."

Maybe after the fight in the Café, this was a bad time. But this was a question he really wanted to ask. Smith sat in the chair across the desk and asked. "Would you have fired the torpedo?"

"Technically you would have fired it." Sulu smiled. Smith was not sure what to say to that, he just looked at Sulu. It was obvious that Smith did not appreciate his Captain's sense of humor. Sulu explained more seriously. "They fired on us repeatedly without so much as a hello. They did not answer my hail. By all Starfleet regulations, I was well within my rights to use whatever force was necessary to continue my mission."

"Chances are a photon torpedo would have destroyed that ship." Smith said.

"Yes. But they backed down." Sulu said. "We did not have to find out."

"But if they hadn't backed down?" Smith insisted.

"Any force necessary, Mr. Smith." Sulu repeated. "In this case the necessary force was the threat of a photon torpedo. Anything else?"

"No Sir." Smith stood up and returned to the bridge. Ensign Chai was working relief on this shift. He tapped her on the shoulder. "Any changes?"

"No Sir." Chai said. She locked the station and relinquished it to him. "Still searching the fourth planet."

"Go get your lunch, Chai." Smith said. "A couple more shifts on relief and we'll give you a chance at the helm."

"Thank you, Sir." Chai turned on her heel in perfect military fashion. But she could not keep from grinning as she left the bridge.

Chekov was in command while the Captain was in his ready room. Time moved slowly as the crew did a systematic search of the planet below them. After a while, Chekov got out of the center seat and walked over to the science station. But neither Mirek or Wong had anything to report. Circling around the upper bridge, he checked in with Rand. Nothing. As he headed for the ready room, he called out. "You have the bridge, Gonzoles."

"Aye." She answered, but Chekov was gone.

"Anything?" Sulu asked quickly when Chekov walked in.

"No." Chekov answered just as quickly. "I just needed to get off the bridge for a minute. Sitting still was starting to get to me."

"I know what you mean." Sulu said. "Want half of this sandwich that I am not really eating?"

"Sure." Chekov sat in the chair across the desk from Sulu and helped himself to the untouched half sandwich. "What was Smith in here about?"

"He was questioning my tactics." Sulu said.

"Really?" Chekov asked. "About?"

"The torpedo." Sulu said.

"Oh."

"That's the first time in the eight months that Smith has been on board that he has asked for a reason for anything." Sulu said. "Maybe he's starting to feel at home here."

"He's been on seven ships in eighteen years." Chekov said. "Maybe one of his previous captains did not appreciate those kinds of questions."

"Or maybe I'm just used to the way Gonzoles questions me on everything." Sulu was more interested in his lunch now that he was passing the time with Chekov. Sulu opened the comline to his yeoman. "Mr. Whitney, bring a lunch tray for Mr. Chekov to my ready room."

"Aye Captain."

"Beginning to regret giving up half your sandwich?" Chekov grinned.

"Yeah."

"I have been watching Mr. Smith lately." Chekov said. "With crew reviews coming up next month."

"And?"

"I have been impressed with his ability to deal with his staff." Chekov said. "Just now he sent the new ensign, Chai, off to lunch. He made a point to tell her he was aware of the good job she was doing. She left the bridge on cloud nine."

"Now if he could only deal with command as well as he deals with junior officers, we might have something." Sulu said. The captain's yeoman hurried in with a tray for Mr. Chekov. Mr. Whitney was a lean young man from Mars Colony who had joined Starfleet as an ordinary crew member straight out of high school. He had a very pale complexion and thin sandy hair. The Captain was wondering if he was ever going to grow into his oversized ears that made him look even younger than his nineteen years. Paul Whitney had been Sulu's yeoman for a little over a year.

"That was fast, Whitney." Chekov said. "What did you do? Run?"

"No Sir." Whitney explained. "But I thought with a search and rescue going on, you might not have a lot of time to eat."

"Thank you, Mr. Whitney." Chekov smiled. After the yeoman had retreated, Chekov put half his sandwich on Sulu's plate.

"So how long is this confinement going to last for Gonzoles and Smith?" Chekov asked as he ate.

"I haven't made up my mind." Sulu shrugged. "If it was just Gonzoles, I'd have lifted it by now. She punishes herself enough that I don't have to."

Chekov laughed at Sulu's accurate description of the ship's second officer then said. "But Smith is a different story."

"While he hasn't caused any problems on this ship before, we know his history." Sulu said. "I don't want him to think he's going to get away with anything here."

"And if you lifted restriction on Gonzoles but not Smith," Chekov added. "Rosita would be all over you about fair treatment."

"Not to mention that it was a very public fight." Sulu said. "I can't have my senior officers just ignoring such basic regulations. What kind of example is that for the rest of the crew?"

"Captain Sulu to the bridge." Gonzoles called. Leaving their lunches on the desk, Sulu and Chekov immediately left the ready room.

As Sulu came onto the bridge, he said "Report."

"A signal Captain." Gonzoles stood behind Commander Rand at the communication station. Chekov joined Mirek and Wong at the science stations. They had already adjusted their scanners to location of the signal.

"It's very faint." Rand said. "But it is a repeating rhythmic signal."

"Let's hear it."

"Aye." Rand said and played the signal. It was an electric pulse, coming across the atmosphere as static. But it was rhythmic static.

"Location?"

"Twenty two degrees south of the planet's equator." Rand said. "On the largest land mass."

"Bring us into transporter range, Mr. Smith." Sulu ordered. He smiled and laid his hand on Rand's arm. "Good work, Janice."

"It looks like the Dodger." Chekov smiled at Sulu as the captain came over to the science station. He looked back down at his readings. "Must have been an emergency landing. It is not pretty."

"Life signs?"

"All over the place." Chekov answered.

"She's still not answering, Rand?"

"No Sir." Rand reported to the captain. "They must have lost regular communications."

"Have Dr. Patrick meet me in the transporter room." Sulu said to Rand. She nodded.

"Gonzoles, you have the bridge. Come on, Pavel."

Sulu and Chekov left the bridge together. Lt. Commander Gonzoles assumed the command chair as Ensign Chai returned to the bridge from her lunch break. Chai took over the empty navigation station.

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The Excelsior officers beamed down on a small hill overlooking the Artful Dodger and her crew. The ship was not standing on her landing struts, but lay in the dirt on her belly. The hull was singed and dented. The crew was working hard on getting the ship back in shape. It was hot and most of the crew had tossed their uniform jackets aside. Scattered around the ship were tools, supplies, and wreckage that had been cleared from work areas.

An ensign and lieutenant that were closest to the beam down point looked up at the three

Excelsior officers. The ensign went running off in the direction of the ship. The lieutenant walked up the hill to meet them. He was a little taller than Sulu with a dark brown complexion. He smiled. "Captain. It is good to see you, Sir. I am Lt. Dixon."

"Captain Sulu of Excelsior. This is Commander Chekov and Dr. Patrick." Sulu said. They started walking down the hill towards the ship. "Looks like you have a bit of a mess here, Lt. Dixon."

"Yes Sir." Dixon nodded. "Although I think we can get her flying again, it is going to take a lot of work."

"Where is Captain Uhura?" Sulu asked.

"She's in sick bay, Sir." Dixon said.

"Injured or just visiting?" Patrick asked.

"The captain was knocked unconscious during the landing." Lt. Dixon said. "A lot of us were. Our medical staff has been a bit overwhelmed. There's Commander T'Penn."

T'Penn came out of an emergency hatch of the Dodger toward Sulu. Uhura's first officer was a Vulcan woman. She wore her full uniform with the jacket neatly fastened and did not appear hot or uncomfortable in the least.

"Captain Sulu. Ensign Jabaji informed me of your arrival." The Vulcan woman showed no outward sign of relief at the appearance of the Excelsior crew. "We have damage to every major system of the ship. Shield, sensors, and communications are completely off line. The impulse engines have been repaired, but warp drive is still inoperative. We have eighteen dead and thirty three injuries that required medical attention. Plus numerous small injuries that did not require attention. Captain Uhura is in sick bay with concussion, broken ribs, and multiple bruises."

"I'd like to speak to Captain Uhura." Sulu said. T'Penn led the way into the damaged ship. "I noticed Ensign Jabaji informed you personally. Is there a problem with the communicators?"

"There are not enough to go around." T'Penn said. "The storage areas on the lowest decks of the ship are not accessible at present."

"T'Penn." Chekov smiled. "Captain Uhura is rubbing off on you."

"Please explain, Mr. Chekov." T'Penn said.

"Not enough to go around." Chekov said. "It is a human expression."

"Indeed."

Sick bay was full of patients in various stages of recovery. Across the room they could hear Uhura talking to her doctor. "There is no reason to keep me here any longer, Doug. There is simply too much work to do."

"You can't even put your uniform jacket on by yourself, Captain." Dr. Doug Miller said as he watched her struggle to get dressed.

"Don't listen to him, Girl." Sulu smiled as he walked up to her. He held up her jacket so that she could slip her arm in the sleeve. "You look good to me."

"Hikaru! Pavel!" Captain Uhura's wide smile radiated warmth and relief. "You are a sight for sore eyes. I'd hug you both, but that might hurt too much."

"Doug." Patrick said. "Could you use an extra set of hands?"

"I will be glad to put you to work, Pat." Doug took Patrick's arm and led him away. "We are low on everything. Replicators are off line. And there are a few patients I'd like to evacuate to

Excelsior."

"Pavel." Sulu said. "You and T'Penn go over a detailed status report. Decide what can be done in the time constraint."

"Time constraint?" T'Penn asked.

"I'll explain." Chekov said and the two first officers walked away together.

"Now that we're alone..." Uhura smiled.

"What happened?" Sulu asked.

"Let's take a walk." Uhura said. "I'd like to my crew to see me up and about."

"I understand." Sulu said and took her hand to help her off the bed. "Let me know if you get tired."

"Well, we were on our way to Starbase Twelve." Uhura explained as they walked slowly out of the sick bay. "We were early and T'Penn noticed the unusual asteroid belt. So I decided to investigate. On the outer edge of the belt five ships of similar size to the Dodger were probing the asteroid belt."

"Outer edge?" Sulu asked.

"Yes." Uhura said. "They fired on us as soon as they saw us. And did not answer my hail at first."

"I also ran into the Dercas Jenage." Sulu nodded.

"Really? The leader of this group called them the Vereel Jenage." Uhura said. "When they finally answered our hail, they started talking about a boundary agreement and how they would destroy us if we didn't leave."

Sulu and Uhura stopped at a turbo lift. The doors did not open. "I don't think your lifts are working."

"Very little is working." Uhura sighed. "I don't think I am up to climbing ladders today. T'Penn will have to handle the bridge. There is an emergency hatch over here. Let's go outside."

"Ok." Sulu followed along next to her, letting Uhura set the pace. They continued walking very slowly. "They suggested you leave and?"

"We left." Uhura said. "Their weapons weren't state of art, but there were five of them and their aim was good. Warp drive was off line. So I left by way of the asteroid belt. I think that surprised them. Once I crossed the asteroid belt another group started firing on us. I sent the distress call. Then phasers failed and we took a beating. When life support started to fail, I made a run for the uninhabited class M planet. And here we are."

"The Dercas Jenage also talked about boundaries." Sulu said. "I think we stumbled on a border war. They did not want me to continue to search for you, so I threatened the Dercas with a photon torpedo. They have given me forty hours and that was over six hours ago."

"Why forty?"

"Two full rotations on this planet." Sulu explained. "I believe they are waiting for reinforcements."

"Which explains the time constraint." Uhura said. They reached the open hatch. Sulu stepped through first and helped Uhura come through. Several members of her crew stopped work and looked to the two captains. Uhura smiled at them. "Lt. Dixon. How are repairs coming?"

"Slow but steady, Captain." Dixon reported.

"Good. Keep after it." Uhura said. "Once Captain Sulu and I have finished with our meeting I will want to speak to the entire crew."

"Aye Captain." Dixon nodded.

"You do that well." Sulu smiled at her as they continued walking.

"What?"

"Putting on the brave face." Sulu said. "It doesn't matter that you can hardly walk or that your ship is in ruins. That crew is still looking up to you."

"Just like you, I learned from the best." Uhura smiled. She sighed and put her hand on his arm to stop him. "Give me a minute, Hikaru."

"Are you ok?" Sulu asked quietly. "Let's sit down."

"Yes." She took as deep a breath as her healing ribs would let her. They walked over to a make shift tent the repair crews had erected to supply some much needed shade. There was a water supply and a few chairs. The two captains sat down. "There is no way in this galaxy that the Dodger will be ready to leave this planet in the allotted time."

"If we can just get her back into orbit, Excelsior can tow her home." Sulu said. "Or we can take your crew on Excelsior and come back for the Dodger later."

"I don't like the sound of that option." Uhura said. "If we take my crew back to Starbase Twelve without a ship, command will assign them and me elsewhere. And if I ever get the Dodger back I will have to start from scratch."

"You have a point." Sulu nodded. "I wonder how many reinforcements the Dercas Jenage are sending."

Both Captains looked up at the sound of transporter beams. Excelsior crew members carrying tools boxes joined the Dodger repair crews. Uhura said. "Looks like Chekov and T'Pol sent for help."

"That was Lt. Commander Yazdani."

"I know Yaz." Uhura nodded.

"Doesn't everyone?" Sulu laughed. "He brought Lt. Valentine, Lt. Bucci, Ensign Jacoby and Ensign Heiss. Definitely the A team."

"Well, I expect nothing less."

Sulu took out his communicator. "Sulu to Chekov."

"Chekov here."

"What's the story, Pav?"

"It is a mess." Chekov said. "Engines are on line. She could achieve orbit. But the internal power grid is on one minute, off the next. I do not think shields are repairable here. No sensors. No life support. I have called in an engineering team. We will try to get the power grid stabilized and the life support back on line. With those we could get her into orbit and escort her home. Of course if there is a battle..."

"Understood." Sulu said.

"Pavel." Uhura said. Sulu handed her the communicator. "Just worry about life support and power to the bridge and engineering. We will transfer all nonessential personnel to Excelsior and take Dodger into orbit with a skeleton crew."

"Aye Captain." Chekov said.

"How long is this going to take?" Sulu asked.

"Don't ask." Chekov said. "Give us until the morning, then we'll have a time estimate for you. Chekov out."

"One other thing, Hikaru." Uhura said. "We are on short rations. We can't get to the kitchen and the replicators are off line."

"Sulu to Excelsior."

"Gonzoles here."

"The Dodger crew hasn't eaten." Sulu said. "Have the cook set up down here to feed the entire crew as soon as possible. And tell them to be prepared to stay as long as necessary."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles said "I will coordinate--"

Sulu cut Gonzoles off in mid sentence. "Put Briscoe on it."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles said crisply.

"Sulu out."

"Do I detect a chill between you and Rosita?" Uhura asked.

"She's on restriction while off duty. And this assignment will go past her duty shift." Sulu said. Uhura raised her eyebrow at him. Sulu grinned. "Girl, you missed it by not being at Twelve on time this year."

"Well?"

"Gonzoles and Smith. Do you know Tomas Smith?" He asked. She shook her head no. "He transferred over from Lexington to take the helm position when Lee left. Anyway, he and Gonzoles have been an item for a couple of months. At the Café, L.J. asks Gonzoles to dance and Smith can't handle it."

"They had a fight in the Café?"

"Big time." Sulu nodded. "At one point Gonzoles knocked Smith off his feet. I was laughing so hard, I had to send Chekov over to break it up. How he kept a straight face I'll never know."

"That's awful." Uhura said, but she was laughing.

"It was awful." Sulu agreed. "I lost a week's pay over it."