

Time passed slowly on Excelsior for those not directly engaged in repair operations. Finally, third shift came to an end. The change of shift took longer than usual as the science officer brought their counterparts up to date. Commander Rand spent quite a few minutes making sure Lt. DuBois had all the messages and requests straight.

"Come on Rosa." Smith stopped at the command chair and spoke softly. "That's end of shift."

"Captain Sulu has not returned to the ship." Gonzoles said. "He left me in command and I will return command to him."

"Lt. Kim can handle the bridge." Smith said. "And the captain's orders regarding you and me are clear."

"Lt. DuBois." Gonzoles said. "Open a channel to the Captain."

"Channel open, Commander." DuBois said.

"Sulu here."

"Captain." Gonzoles said. "It is end of shift. I am turning over the bridge to Lt. Kim."

"Acknowledged." Sulu said.

"Excelsior out." Gonzoles said. She stood up. "You have the bridge, Mr. Kim."

"Yes Sir." Kim nodded.

Lt. Commander Gonzoles walked towards the turbo lift with composure and command. As soon as she and Tomas were alone in the lift, she relaxed and slumped against the wall. "I should still be on the bridge, Tomas."

"Normally." He was feeling helpless and unable to comfort her.

"What if the Dercas Jenage come back sooner than they said?" Gonzoles said. "What if there is a battle?"

"If Kim is in over his head, he'll call us. Besides, chances are we'll be back on duty when they show up." Smith said. The lift doors open. "Come on, I'll walk you home."

"It is hard, Tomas." Rosita said as they walked slowly along the corridor towards her quarters. "I am not good at waiting around."

"And the captain knows it." Tomas smiled at her. He put his arm around her shoulder. "He's just trying to make a point."

"I am aware of the theories of discipline." Rosita said. "But there is so much to do. I could be helping. I should be."

There was nothing Tomas could say. There was no way he could fix it for her. When they stopped in front of her door, he asked. "Do you think anyone would notice if I restricted myself to your quarters instead of mine?"

"I wish it worked that way." Rosita could not help but smile up at him. That one suggestion made her feel better. She was not sure why, but it did. "But if you and I can't handle a little discipline, how can we ever dish it out to others?"

"Now that's a positive way to look at it." Tomas teased her. He leaned down and kissed her. "It's a learning experience."

"There are other things I'd rather be learning right now."

Tomas took her in his arms and kissed her with all his might. Rosita held him tight. When their lips parted they looked each other in the eye. Tomas whispered. "I better go."

"I know." Rosita nodded and slowly let go of him.

"I can't wait until we can spend the night together again." He kissed her quickly and turned to go. "Goodnight."

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The Excelsior kitchen crew set up a buffet to feed the Dodger crew on the starboard side of the downed ship. The Arcyba sun was starting to set when the crew eagerly went through the line. When everyone was sitting around on the ground eating, Captain Uhura got up and stood in front of her crew.

"As many of you have heard." Uhura started. "We are on a tight schedule to try to get out of here. We are in a war zone and Excelsior has been threatened if she stays in past this time tomorrow. We will keep working up until the last minute, but we will concentrate on what is necessary to get the Dodger off the planet. I expect life support to be functioning only in critical areas. So when we lift off it will be with a skeleton crew. Most of you will be on Excelsior. We can do this if we all work together. So let's enjoy this wonderful meal provided by the Excelsior mess crew and get back to work."

After Uhura sat down and resumed her meal, Chekov said to Sulu. "She makes a nice speech."

"Yeah." Sulu agreed. "But then talking has always been one of her strong suits."

"Jealous?" Uhura asked with a smile. She was one of the few people that knew that speaking in front of an audience scared Sulu to death. It was something he had never admitted to Chekov.

Commander T'Penn got her meal and joined the senior officers. Chairs were at a premium. She settled herself on the ground near Captain Uhura and reported. "The internal power grid is online."

"Again." Chekov added as he ate.

"I believe the underlying problem has been resolved." T'Penn clarified.

"Good." Uhura said. "What about life support?"

"Yaz is still working on it." Chekov said. "He is almost finished cutting off the crew quarters from the system. Then he should be able isolate and repair the problems. If he doesn't run into anymore problems, four or five hours."

"If all goes well, we should be ready early." Uhura said.

"If all goes well." Sulu repeated. "Why don't you come onboard Excelsior, Captain? Get a couple hours sleep."

"Maybe later." Captain Uhura said. "There is still so much to do."

"Well, I have some things to attend to on board." Captain Sulu stood up. "Pavel, you coming?"

"Not yet." Chekov said. "T'Penn and I are going to go over the crew list to decide who goes on which ship."

"All right." Sulu said. "I'll be back in a few hours."

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Captain Sulu checked in on the bridge. No problems. Lt. Kim was busy coordinating supplies and repair requests from the planet. Sulu went into his ready room and checked his

mail. There was a letter from Jimmi. He played it.

"Well Harry, it is now officially later. As in 'I'll explain later.' That was the message you left when Excelsior flew out of here at warp nine. The scuttlebutt around here is that the Dodger was in trouble. If that's true, I hope everything is turning out ok. The kids are hoping you'll come back when your rescue mission is over. What should I tell them? I know you probably don't have time for this right now, so call me when you can. And be careful. I love you."

Captain Sulu set his computer to record a letter. "Hi, Baby. I'd call you in real time, but you and the kids are sleeping right now. I didn't know the rumor mill on the base was so accurate. We did respond to a distress call from the Dodger. She's badly damaged and we plan to escort her back to Twelve as soon as possible. If we can get the warp drive back on line that won't be too long. But no matter what, it will take us a lot longer to get home than it did to get here. As soon as I have a time schedule I'll let you know. In the mean time, I'll call you at our normal time. I love you too. And I am always careful. Kiss the kids for me."

He sent the letter and checked the intra-ship messages. Most were routine business. The captain went through each. Approving changes, logging requests, informing department heads of decisions. There was a message from Lt. Commander Smith. Sulu played it in turn.

"Captain Sulu." Smith was in full buttoned up uniform, something he rarely wore off duty. "At your convenience, Sir, I'd like to speak to you privately."

Sulu sat back in his chair with his elbow propped on the arms of his chair and his chin resting in his hand. It wasn't like Smith to do things according to regulations and with proper military etiquette when he wasn't on duty. He opened the comline. "Sulu to Mr. Smith."

"Captain." Smith appeared on Sulu's monitor. "Thank you for calling, Sir."

"What can I do for you, Mr. Smith?" Sulu asked.

"It's about Gonzoles, Sir." Smith said. "This restriction has been hard on her."

"It's not suppose to be easy." Sulu said. "And it has only been in effect for a couple of duty shifts."

"I know, Captain." Smith said. "But it is just that she is paying the price for my mistakes and it bothers her that she can't not contribute to the rescue operations. She is sure that she has let you down."

"She said that to you?" Sulu asked.

"No Sir." Smith answered. "But that is how she feels. She would never ask you to make an exception for her, but I would."

"Interesting." Sulu said. "And if I made this exception for Gonzoles, what about you?"

"I don't expect any preferential treatment, Captain." Smith said. "It was my mistake and it is one I have made before. I am happy not to be in the brig, Sir."

"I see." Sulu said. "Mr. Smith, I will think about it."

"Thank you, Sir."

"Sulu out." He signed off with Smith and called Dr. Patrick. When the doctor turned the view screen towards himself, Sulu recognized Pat's silk robe. "Sorry, Pat. Did I catch you on the way to bed?"

"I thought I'd sneak in a few hours while no one was looking." Pat smiled. "What's up, Captain?"

"I just had an interesting conversation with Mr. Smith regarding the restrictions I issued."

Sulu said "And I wanted your opinion."

"Ok." Pat nodded. "First, who instigated this conversation?"

"He left me a message that he wanted to talk." Sulu said. Pat raised his eyebrow in surprise. "I know. He did it according to protocol, too. Anyway he asked me to reconsider the restrictions on Gonzoles."

"Not for himself?"

"No." Sulu said. "He asked that I not make her pay for his mistakes."

"You know Rosita would never put him up to that." Dr. Patrick said.

"I doubt she even knows he and I talked." Sulu said. "This seems out of character for Smith to me."

"Love has been known to make men do odd things." Pat said. "Maybe Rosita is rubbing off on Tomas."

"You know him pretty well, Pat." Sulu said. "What do you think?"

"Psychologically, he scores very high on independence and not so high on either team work or self sacrifice." Patrick said. "So in that respect this is out of character."

"I hear a but coming, Doctor."

"But I was serious about Gonzoles influencing Smith." Pat said. "Whatever else they do together, they do a lot of talking and Rosita has never been shy about voicing her opinions. And I've noticed he listens."

"I see."

"This is very unofficial, but I think this relationship may actually make Smith a better officer." Pat said. "Perhaps your conversation with him is an indication of that."

"I am all for anything that makes Smith a better officer." Sulu said. "Official or not."

"Hmmm."

"What?"

"That is the first time you've given any indication that you might approve of the relationship between Smith and Gonzoles." Patrick observed.

"The love lives of my crew is none of my business." Sulu said. "Until it interferes with the operations of this ship."

"Right." Pat nodded. "I guess you are going to deny that you feel protective of Rosita."

"Yes, I'm going to deny it." Sulu said. "Gonzoles is one of the best young command officer to ever serve on my ship. I do not need to protect her."

"What ever you say, Captain."

"Exactly." Sulu smiled and nodded. "Goodnight, Pat."