

Sulu and Kirk headed towards sick bay to get Dr. McCoy. The doctor was in Dr. Patrick's office. Technically McCoy was an admiral now, however he never used the title. Doctor had always been good enough for him. Even though he was semi retired, he was still attached to the surgeon general's office. He was also still considered Starfleet's foremost authority on the long range effects of space travel on humans.

"It's taken its toll." Dr. Patrick answered McCoy's question on the effects of the investigation on the ship's crew. "There are a lot of rumors. That of course most effects those who don't have any access to real information."

"The Captain hasn't done anything to assure the crew?" McCoy asked.

"The Captain is having enough trouble dealing with it himself." Patrick said. "The first night we were here, he spent an hour playing pool by himself."

"Is that a problem?" McCoy asked.

"Not a problem, but out of character." Patrick said. "Captain Sulu is not a loner. He usually pushes his own problems to the side and deals with the situation at hand. But not that first night."

"What did you do about it?" McCoy agreed with Dr. Patrick's assessment of Sulu. It was characteristic of command officers to deny their feelings in order to handle the problems of the ship. Which was why McCoy required his chief medical officers to be certified in command psychology. He had even suggested that a starship should carry a psychologist in addition to the rest of the medical staff.

"He probably thinks of me as an irritant." Dr. Patrick chuckled. "I keep bringing up things he's trying not to talk about."

"So you talked about it. And?"

"He said all the right things." Patrick said. "But it's still bothering him. He's covering better now."

"Rest of the senior staff?" McCoy asked.

"Now that they have something to work on, they're all right." Patrick said. "It's the waiting they have trouble with."

"You?"

"Me?" Patrick laughed. He hadn't even thought of himself when preparing his report on the crew. "I'm fine."

"He never believes me when I say that." Sulu said from the doorway. Sulu and Kirk came into the office. Dr. Patrick's office was cluttered with books, drawings, models, and computer representations of birds from all over the galaxy. Bird watching had been his passion in his youth in New Zealand. As he traveled through space, he continued studying avian life. It was the first connection Dr. Patrick and Captain Sulu had made twenty years ago. Sulu's enthusiasm had been fleeting but intense.

"He's not supposed to." McCoy said to his son-in-law.

"Bones, we need to check in with Uhura." Captain Kirk said. McCoy nodded and they left sickbay. Sulu walked with them to the transporter room.

"How's Brian doing, Doc?" Sulu asked. "Jimmi's reports are vague."

"He'll be fine." McCoy said. "Meet me for lunch at the bar and I'll give you details."

"I'll see you then." Sulu said as Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy beamed directly over to the

Artful Dodger.

Sulu returned to the bridge. Everything was as it should be. Lt. Commander Gonzoles was at the science station still working with the library computer. Ensign Amin was at the helm and Ensign Colbert at navigation. Colbert had been with the ship just eight months, Amin a year longer than that. Neither was ready to take over for Gonzoles. Lt. Commander Kim was senior helm officer. Lt. Briscoe was the logical choice to take over navigation when she returned to the ship from her leave. They would make due until then.

"Commander Gonzoles, join me in my office please." Sulu said.

"Aye Sir." She said and followed him to his office. Unlike the ship's doctor, Sulu's office was not cluttered at all. On one wall was a picture of Excelsior among a field of stars. It was the original artists conception of the ship, done before she was built. On another wall he had a picture of a baseball game played in the traditional style of the twenty first century. On that same wall hung Sulu's old bat, glove, and his Starfleet academy team hat.

"I've been talking to Captain Kirk, Rosita." Sulu said sitting at his desk. Gonzoles waited patiently. "There is an opening for a first officer on the Pegasus. He recommended you to Captain Higgins."

"Sir?" Gonzoles said because she didn't know what else to say. Leave Excelsior? How could she do that? She had worked for Sulu for twenty years. She hadn't seen Higgins in years.

"I'm sure Captain Higgins will contact you shortly." Sulu said. "It's a good opportunity for you."

"You think I should take it, if offered?" She asked cautiously.

"I think you would be an asset to Captain Higgins and that you are ready. More than ready." He said seriously, and then added with a smile. "Of course there is that one other requirement for this job."

"Which is?" She asked skeptically.

"You have to laugh at his jokes." Sulu said.

"His reputation precedes him." Gonzoles laughed. She turned thoughtful. "I don't know. I've been aboard Excelsior so long. It's hard to imagine leaving."

"I know. I felt that way about Enterprise." Sulu said. "But you can't let that hold you back. Perhaps I should take my own advice."

"What do you mean, Captain?"

Ordinarily he would have dismissed her question. But he would miss their talks. Her questions had often helped clarify things in his mind. "Confidentially, Commander. Captain Kirk has been giving me hell for not accepting a promotion myself."

"Admiral Sulu?" She smiled at him. "It has a nice ring."

"Indeed." He sighed. But he couldn't even think about that until after the investigation was over. Captain Kirk at least didn't seem worried about his career outlook. Sulu had to get to the bottom of things. "So what have you come up with?"

"Sir?" The change of subject had surprised her.

"Lucre's records?"

"Right. According to the records Mr. Lucre is doing a lot of business with the Cardassians. A lot of money is changing hands both ways. I had to go back three years before I found any transactions with any Klingons." Gonzoles reported. "I wonder if Mr. Brady could

tell us any more."

"Yes, I want to talk to him. But he is being interviewed by Captain Habib today. So I will have to wait." Sulu glanced at his chronometer. It wasn't even mid morning yet. "Is it me, or has this been a long day already?"

"It's being at the base with nothing much to do." Gonzoles agreed. "Time just drags along."

Sulu managed to pass the time until he could go meet Dr. McCoy for lunch. As he was about to beam over to the base, he ran into Mr. and Ms. Chekov also on their way to lunch. They beamed over and walked towards the bar together.

"Cathy, nice to see you again." Sulu smiled.

"Hello Hikaru." She smiled. "How are you?"

"Fine, thank you." Sulu and Cathy's relationship was nothing if not polite. He turned to her husband. "Don't be surprised if you run into Captain Kirk and Dr. McCoy on the base."

"When did they show up?"

"About four a.m." Sulu said as they walked into the bar but Dr. McCoy was not there yet. "I am suppose to be meeting the doctor for lunch now."

"Cathy, give me a minute with the Captain, please." Chekov said. She made a face at the both of them and walked off to the bar to talk to Mike. He poured her a cup of coffee while Sulu and Chekov found a table. "This is good news that Captain Kirk is here?"

"Maybe." Sulu said. "But I think it means the possibility of war is greater than we've thought. Captain Kirk's interest is more than personal."

"Perhaps someone is trying to discourage the Klingons from becoming involved in a Cardassian-Federation war." Chekov suggested.

"Interesting theory." Sulu said. "Definitely worth investigating. Gonzoles found many transactions between Lucre and the Cardassians. Nothing with the Klingons for the last three years."

"Perhaps they had a falling out." Chekov said. "Maybe it had to do with the debt that Tau Reganer spoke of. I wonder if Tau Mauru knows anything about it."

"I doubt it. Mauru was a pawn. He doesn't seem too bright to me." Sulu said. Dr. McCoy walked into bar and headed their way. Sulu asked. "Are you taking the day off since Cathy is here?"

"No, I will take the bridge at sixteen hundred hours." Chekov stood to join his wife. "Dr. McCoy, good to see you, Sir."

"Hello Chekov." McCoy and Chekov shook hands. "How in the world did Peter get to be two meters tall?"

"It did not come from my side of the family." Chekov laughed. "If you will excuse me, Cathy is waiting."

"So what were you two whispering about?" McCoy asked bluntly as he joined Sulu at the table.

"Possibilities." Sulu said with a sigh. "Just more possibilities."

Angel came over to take their order. She flirted amiably with Dr. McCoy. As usual when talking to a pretty young lady his southern accent made a subtle resurgence. Sulu waited until Angel finished taking their order and retreated.

"Doc. She's only a few years older than Demora." Sulu admonished his father-in-law.

"It's one of the benefits of growing old, my boy." McCoy chuckled. "All the pretty young girls think I'm adorable."

"You are, Doc." Sulu laughed. He leaned back in his chair relaxing a bit. "So tell me about Brian. I understand his grades are up."

"Yes. The boy is making a valiant effort." McCoy said. "That is when his social life doesn't get in the way."

"Oh?"

"He's very popular among his classmates." McCoy said. "I never saw a fifteen year old boy with so many friends that are girls."

"Dating already? I was still trying to figure that out at his age." Sulu commented. Angel brought their lunch. Sulu sighed and just stared at it. He had no appetite.

"I wouldn't call it dating." McCoy clarified. "He and his friends just seem to get together in a group. I don't know if they pair off later, but no one girl seems special."

"Interesting." Sulu said slowly. It still didn't tell him anything definite. "Jimmi is still complaining that he doesn't talk to her."

"She's just going to have to learn to put up with that." McCoy said. "She won't admit it, but she's angry at him most of the time."

"Does he talk to you?" Sulu asked, letting the comment about Jimmi slide.

"Sometimes." McCoy nodded. "He's confused about where he's going with his life. He thinks he should have that all figured out by now. I try to tell him he has time, but he's impatient."

"In other words, he's fifteen."

"Yes." McCoy laughed. But he really wanted to know how Sulu was dealing with the situation at hand. "It's good to see you taking some time to relax, Hikaru."

"Yeah, I haven't done much of that lately." Sulu admitted, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Angel, darling." McCoy called to the passing waitress. "Get us a couple of beers over here."

"You've got it Doctor." She called back as she went by with a loaded tray.

"I'm still on duty, Doc." Sulu said knowing it made no difference to McCoy.

"Doctor's orders." McCoy dismissed his concerns. "Dr. Patrick has expressed concern regarding the crew and how they are handling the present situation."

"Thank you, Angel." Sulu said as she put two beers on the table. She nodded and went on her way. The bar was filling up with lunch customers. "Pat has not said anything to me about the crew. Frankly, he and Chekov have been handling that side of things the last couple of days."

"Why is that?" McCoy asked.

"I believe they both think I have my hands full right now." Sulu said taking a drink of his beer. "Why don't you just ask what you want to ask, Doc?"

"Fine. Are you ok?"

"Yes."

"Well that's the short answer." McCoy grumbled. "How about the longer version?"

"Ok, Doc." Sulu sighed. "I wasn't upset by the official complaint. I feel that I can answer for any command decisions I've made. If those decisions prove wrong, I will take what

comes. But when I heard Jacob Habib was the investigator, I have to admit I was thrown. You know the history, Doc. I couldn't help but wonder if Captain Habib was capable of impartiality."

"Are you still wondering?" McCoy asked.

"I've only had one meeting with Habib so far." Sulu said picking at his lunch "He's been cordial, almost friendly. He even apologized for his behavior the last time we spoke. Doc, that was twenty some years ago. But my career is in his hands."

"Is it?" McCoy asked. "How many times have you told me your career was in your own hands, no one else's."

"Right. I've always believed that." Sulu agreed. "But I'm questioning that now, Doc. I'm questioning a lot of things."

"Such as?"

"Such as all the personal and career decisions I've ever made."

"That's a bit much."

"Ok, take this problem with Brian." Sulu said. "If I had taken the promotion last time it was offered two years ago, I could have been home. I could have been a proper father to Brian. A proper husband to Jimmi."

"A bit of the road not taken, Hikaru?" McCoy asked wistfully. "Everyone has to examine that road at some point in his life."

"Have you, Doc?" Sulu somehow couldn't imagine his father-in-law having taken a different path.

"Sure. Several times in my life." McCoy confided. "What stands out most was when I found out I had another daughter. Jimmi was nine and her mother was dying. Where would I be today if I had known about her ten years earlier? Or if I had listened to Jimmi when she didn't want to go to boarding school so that I could take the original appointment on Enterprise?"

As they spoke, both McCoy and Sulu paid little attention to the comings and goings at the bar. It became more crowded. Someone had played a love song on the holograph imagining generator. A boisterous group gathered around the pool table. Mike was busy behind the bar, pouring as many beers as he did coffees. McCoy and Sulu didn't see Captain Kirk come into the bar.

Kirk strode up to their table and sat down without waiting for an invitation. As he approached seventy, Kirk had grayed a bit and put on a few pounds. But he still had the command presence that sent ensigns scurrying. "Gentlemen."

"About time." McCoy growled. "Where have you been?"

"Busy." Kirk smiled smugly. "What's good to eat? I'm starving."

"Angel, darling." McCoy smiled at the busy waitress "Bring the Captain today's special and a beer."

"In a minute, Doctor." She smiled back.

"Trust me." McCoy said before Kirk could object. The Captain didn't mind. Food had never been that important to him and McCoy had been monitoring his rations for almost forty years. But he raised his eyebrow at McCoy just the same.

"She's a little young, even for you, Bones." Kirk had to give McCoy a hard time about something.

"Maybe so," McCoy agreed "But I'm getting damn good service."

Angel brought Kirk his lunch. He ate heartily unlike Sulu who still had barely touched his meal. Between bites Kirk said, "I just talked to Spock. He is very interested in the turn of events here."

"He thinks it will have an effect on the talks with the Cardassians?" Sulu asked.

"That is one of the possibilities Spock and I spoke about." Kirk said. "He had some questions that I believe your friend Matthew Brady might be able to answer."

"Well, he is talking to Captain Habib today." Sulu said.

"The Captain is still talking to Commander T'Penn." Kirk said. "Captain Uhura gave her instructions to be very thorough."

"Isn't telling a Vulcan to be thorough like telling anyone else to breathe?" McCoy observed. Kirk just laughed. "By the way, Hikaru, I told your wife I'd have you call her as soon as I saw you. I think she's worried about you."

"Thanks Doc." Sulu complained and threw his napkin on his plate. "You've been on the base for over eight hours and you just telling me now?" McCoy just shrugged. "Excuse me."

After Sulu left the table, McCoy asked. "Aren't you doing an end run around Habib?"

"Nonsense, Bones." Kirk replied. "I don't think anything is going to come of his investigation, but I have to let him complete it for the record. Sulu doesn't think Brady will talk to Habib anyway, so Sulu and I will take care of that possibility."

"In other words you will let Habib take care of the details, while you answer the big questions." McCoy said. Kirk said nothing; he just smiled and drank his beer. "And Sulu's career is not in any jeopardy?"

"This is possibly the best thing that has ever happened to our friend Hikaru. He just doesn't see that yet." Kirk reassured Dr. McCoy. McCoy did not seem convinced. "Bones, if we get the answers I am hoping for we will avoid this war. Or at least put it off for sometime."

Sulu stopped at the bar to clear using Mike's office to call his wife. Of course Mike didn't mind. Sulu made himself comfortable at his nephew's desk and requested a connection from the Starbase information network to Earthlink. Once the connection was established, he inputted Jimmi's personal ID code.

But a smiling image did not appear. Jimmi wore her hair in a ponytail. She had no makeup on and was scowling when she answered angrily. "What?!"

"Bad day, dear?" Sulu smiled.

Jimmi's appearance softened considerably as she smiled at him. There was a lot of noise on her end. Before she could answer him a small ball came into view, passing between Jimmi and the computer console. "Just a minute Harry." She said pleasantly to him. Jimmi turned to the others in the room and yelled loudly. "You two...sit! Yes there. And you, and you....freeze! I don't want to hear another word! I don't want another thing to go flying across this room! I don't want you to move or think until I'm done! Have you got that?"

"Yes Sir!" The four Starfleet brats replied loudly.

"Sorry, Captain." Jimmi sighed and smiled at her husband.

"Sounds like you have your hands full."

"Four teenage boys a on a rainy Saturday afternoon. This house isn't big enough!" Jimmi said. "They are rambunctious but I'll manage. Tell me how you are doing."

"I'm ok." He smiled. "I can't give you any details, but things are looking better since your

fathers showed up for their inspection tour."

"Watch out, Dad's worried about you." Jimmi laughed.

"Funny, that's what he said about you." Sulu sighed. There was so much he wanted to talk to her about, but even the things he could say were too complicated for a subspace discussion. The things he wanted to talk about he could only say holding her in his arms in the dark. "Baby, I'm sorry but I really don't have time for a long conversation. Captain Kirk is waiting for me."

"I understand." Jimmi said. And she did, more than he knew. "July is not that far away. Just let me know when it's over."

"I will." He said. "I love you."

"I love you too. Be careful."

"Always." He said and terminated the connection. He was on his way to rejoin Kirk and McCoy when he saw Matthew Brady and his golden friend sitting at a table having lunch. Sulu changed direction and went over to Brady's table. When he reached Brady he was still trying to remember his friend's name.

"Captain." Brady looked up from his lunch and said pleasantly. "I thought I had missed you today."

"Not likely, Mr. Brady." Sulu said. "Have you had a chance to talk to Captain Habib?"

"No. Habib is too busy for me right now. But that didn't stop him from sending an armed escort to my ship this morning. I hadn't even gotten there yet." Brady grumbled. "It scared Tomom to death."

"Mr. Basu, isn't it?" The name finally came back to Sulu. The golden skinned, bronzed haired humanoid studied his plate.

"Yes." The younger man said cautiously. Tomom had been too young to remember have lived under Cardassian rule but his father had told him enough to make him very careful of any military involvement.

"I have some further questions." Sulu said to Brady. "Perhaps you could indulge me, when you are finished your meal of course."

"I thought Habib was conducting this investigation." Brady said. "I really don't want to answer all these questions twice."

"You won't." Sulu assured him. "Captain Habib does not have access to the source of these questions."

"That sounds just a little bit sneaky, Sulu." Brady accused with a smile. "I like it. But can we dispense with the armed escort?"

"I am not armed." Sulu said. Brady watched as the Captain walked back over to his table and sat down comfortably with the two senior officers that Matthew did not recognize. They must be the source of his questions.

"How do you always get into such trouble with Starfleet, Matthew?" Tomom Basu asked as he ate his lunch.

"Just lucky, I guess." Matthew smiled. "It's ok, Tomom, I can trust Sulu."

"If you say so." Tomom said. "Just the same I'll stay around as long as you need me."

"You worry too much, Tomom." Brady told his young friend. He looked around for the waitress. "Angel."

"What can I get you, Matthew?" The young woman said when she came over. She was making it a point to get to know as many of the regulars as possible. Mike was helping her sort out who was worth the extra effort.

"Who are the officers sitting with Captain Sulu?" Brady asked quietly.

"You know, I just asked Mike that question." Angel rested her hand on Matthew's shoulder. She leaned down and confided in his ear. "Dr. McCoy, he is always to get the best service because he's the Boss's father. The other is Captain Kirk. Everybody's heard of him."

"Sulu seems awfully chummy with them." Matthew observed.

"Well the Doctor is his father-in-law. But more than that I guess you'll have to ask him."

Angel shrugged. She was too busy trying to keep her orders straight to worry about intrigue. Although speculating on the Excelsior's problem was definitely the conversation of the day. "Did you want anything else to eat or drink?"

"No." Matthew said distractedly. But his distraction was not due to the notorious captain. Rosey Gonzoles had just walked in with another Commander. Two such attractive women should not lack the company of a gentleman. There were no empty tables, so the two officers were headed towards the bar. Matthew stood as they were passing his table. "Rosey. Nice to see you again."

"Mr. Brady." Gonzoles said rather coolly. She started to continue on her way but Lt. Commander Mirek elbowed her in the side. Gonzoles looked at her like she had forgotten she was there.

"Aren't you going to introduce me?" Mirek said.

"Matthew Brady, Lt. Commander Ellen Mirek." Gonzoles responded automatically. She had told Ellen about her encounter with Brady in Mrs. Sulu's apartment. And about her confused attraction to him. Ellen couldn't understand why Rosita was holding back.

"Nice to meet you, Commander." Matthew gave her his most winning smile. "Tables are at a premium today. Why don't you ladies join us? This is my friend Tomom Basu."

"Thank you, Mr. Brady." Mirek smiled and ignored the look Gonzoles was giving her. The two women sat down. "Hello, Mr. Basu. Nice to meet you."

"Commander." Basu nodded self-consciously.

"Call me Ellen, please." Mirek said with a smile. Ellen had a natural ability to put people at their ease. "Have you two known each other long?"

"Since I was a child." Tomom said. "Matthew has been kinnery to my family."

"Kinnery?" Ellen asked. "That's not standard, is it? I don't know that word."

"There is no real translation into standard." Tomom struggled to explain. "It is family but not family. A helpful friend."

"Like a dutch uncle; almost." Matthew provided. He seemed embarrassed; almost. It surprised Rosita. "But it's not important."

"Give Ellen ten minutes and she will have your entire life story." Gonzoles changed the subject to relieve him of his embarrassment. "People tell her things they never tell anyone else."

"And Rosita never asks anybody anything personal." Ellen mocked her friend. Had they been alone, she would have stuck her tongue out at her. "Takes her forever to get to know someone."

"Does it?" Matthew smiled. He was much more comfortable discussing someone other

than himself.

"My friend exaggerates." Gonzoles said testily.

"Matthew." Tomom said and nodded towards Captain Sulu's table. Kirk and McCoy were leaving the bar. Sulu was waiting for Brady.

"Ellen, since you seem to have all the information, what can you tell me about Captain Kirk?" Brady asked

"Captain Kirk is a legend." Ellen shrugged adding her most innocent smile. She wondered why Brady was pumping her for information regarding the Captain. "Check your recent history data banks."

"I'll do that." Brady smiled. The pretty and friendly Ellen was not about to give away state secrets. These Starfleet types were never what they seemed. Matthew Brady got up to go. "But right now, Captain Sulu is waiting for me. Thank you for your company ladies."

"Nice to meet you." Tomom added as he stood to leave them also. The waitress came by and took their lunch order.

When they were alone, Rosita turned to her friend. "What were you trying to do?"

"You are crazy, girl! He is gorgeous. Did you see how he looks at you?" Ellen laughed. "If it was me, I'd have had him in bed by now."

"Well, I'm not you. But maybe, if it wasn't for this investigation." Rosita admitted.

"You've got to go off duty once in a while, Rose." Ellen advised. The waitress brought their salads and soft drinks.

"The last time I listened to you about a man..." Rosita sighed and let the thought die there.

"You two were happy for almost five years." Ellen finished. "Face it Rosita, we know each other very well."

"Or at least for a very long time." Rosita said.