

When Captain Sulu beamed into the main transporter room of Starbase Twenty three, he saw Commander Jenna Lee standing amid a pile of moving boxes. She was directing two maintenance crew men with their antigrav sleds. When Sulu had finished materializing, she turned to him and smiled. Even though she was off duty, she wore the standard maternity version of the duty uniform.

"Good morning, Captain." Lee said. The two crewmen took a load of boxes on a antigrav sled and left the transporter room. "It's taking a little longer to get this organized than I thought."

"Well, you have plenty of time." Sulu smiled. "That is if the baby cooperates."

"The doctors estimate three more weeks." Lee said. "I thought Excelsior had gone on its way."

"We were just about to go, but I have been summoned to the Admiral's office." Sulu shrugged. "Have you reported yet?"

"No Sir." Lee said. She unconsciously straightened the uniform jacket and ran one hand over her deep brown hair that she had recently cut short. "I thought I'd freshen up first. I've never met Admiral Smith and I'd like to make a good impression even if I'm not going to be on active duty for another couple of months."

"You look beautiful. Come on." Sulu dismissed her concern quickly. He offered his hand to help guide her out of the pile of boxes that surrounded her. She took it gratefully and stepped carefully over two of the smaller boxes. As they walked side by side down the corridor, Sulu asked. "What is it about pregnant women? My wife also needed constant reassurance on her appearance during pregnancy. I have never known you to be overly concerned with these matters."

"If your body had gone through as many changes as mine has in these past nine months and you no longer recognized yourself in the mirror," Jenna Lee explained. "You might find yourself a little concerned."

"I see." Sulu said.

Commander Lee laughed. Captain Sulu just looked at her with one eye brow raised. "I am going to miss that."

"What?"

"I see." Lee smiled as she mimicked the line she had heard her captain use do many times before. "Meaning you don't really understand but you are willing to accept the statement at face value. Do you realize how often you say that?"

"That bad, huh?" Sulu asked.

"Let's just say consistent, Sir." Lee tried not to laugh. "I've been on Excelsior a little over fifteen years. It's just one of the things I'm going to miss. I have a lot of new things to get used to. The baby, a new C.O., being on a base instead of a ship."

"At least you will have your husband with you." Sulu said as they stepped into the turbo lift. He ordered the lift on its way. "Operations Center."

"I don't know what I would have done without Marc." Lee nodded. "When I first realized I would have to choose between Excelsior and the baby, I was overwhelmed. It seemed like my life or the baby's. And I felt very guilty for wanting my life."

Sulu resisted saying 'I see' and said. "I think that's understandable."

"Well, Marc didn't see it that way. He was the one who saw things clearly when I couldn't." Lee said. "And he found this base where we could both get a posting and keep our family together."

The lift doors opened onto Starbase Twenty Three's Operations Center. None of the duty officers looked up from their stations. Admiral Smith was looking over the shoulder of one of the science officers. He finished what he was doing, then turned to the two new officers. "Captain Sulu, good to see you again."

"Good morning, Admiral." Sulu came over and shook his hand. "I brought Commander Lee with me."

"I've heard a lot of good things about you, Commander." Smith said shaking her hand. He was a tall man with thick black hair streaked with tiny bits of gray. "I believe Captain Sulu is sorry to let you go."

"I certainly am." Sulu said.

Admiral Smith's hand was strong and warm, his eyes a deep brown. Jenna Lee took an instant liking to him. "I'm glad to be here, Sir. Although I must admit, sorry to be leaving Excelsior."

"It looks like you will have your hands full for awhile." Smith said. "You'll let me know when you are ready for active duty."

"Of course, Sir." Lee said. "Even though I am officially on maternity leave, I'd like to spend some time in ops getting to know people and procedures. With your permission, Sir."

"Permission granted Commander." Smith nodded. "A good idea. Now, if you will excuse us, Captain Sulu and I have a few things to discuss."

"Of course Sir." Lee nodded. "And I have a lot of unpacking to do."

Admiral Smith nodded to Sulu to follow him into his office. It was a small room dominated by Admiral Smith's large semi circular desk. He had pictures of his family on the wall and a large viewing port behind his desk. Smith and Sulu both sat down.

"Tough way to lose your second." The Admiral said.

"If Dr. McCoy had his way, I wouldn't have to lose her." Sulu sat back in the chair and relaxed. He knew exactly what reaction to expect from his statement.

"McCoy isn't living in the real world." Smith snorted. "When is he going to give up this crusade to have families living on Starships?"

"You know Doc as well as I do." Sulu smiled. "If command gives a centimeter, he'll be in there pushing for a kilometer. I doubt he'll ever give up."

"Crazy." Smith shook his head. "So have you found a replacement for Lee?"

"My third officer is moving up to second." Sulu said. "I've had quite a few requests for transfer to fill the job of third officer and primary helm officer. Among them a Lt. Commander Tomas Smith."

"I wasn't aware that Tomas wanted to leave the Lexington." Admiral Smith said. "You aren't going to hold the fact that he's my son against him. Are you, Hikaru?"

"I'll try to ignore that black mark, Sir." Sulu smiled. "Actually, he's one of the top candidates on the list. I've sent a memo to Captain Piazza to ask her opinion."

"There are a couple of incident reports on his record." Smith warned.

"There are a couple on mine." Sulu shrugged. "I would not dare ask what is on your

record, Admiral."

"And I wouldn't tell you." Smith laughed. He turned more serious and said. "Now, to get down to the business at hand. Negotiations with the Cardassians are on shaky ground."

"That's not exactly news, Admiral." Sulu said.

"True." Smith nodded. "But with these pirates raiding the colonies along both sides of the border, the Cardassians have beefed up patrols. They've called in ships from other parts of their empire. They've established new large sensor arrays that can only be scanning Federation space. We have to be ready."

"Yes Sir." Sulu nodded. "Are you sending Excelsior to patrol the border?"

"Yes, but that's not all." Smith said. "We are building ships at a record pace. The fleet is getting bigger every day. That's good, but it also means less experienced captains in sensitive areas. We have decided to organize each sector under one starship captain. Every ship in that sector will report to that captain. We are putting you in the hot seat, Hikaru. You will have the Cardassian border area. Congratulations, Fleet Captain Sulu."

"Thank you, Sir." Sulu said automatically. He thought about the possibilities. "Admiral, things can happen pretty quickly on the border. How much leeway will I have?"

"Substantial." Smith said. "Of course we expect you to keep in touch. You will have direct access to the admiralty and the diplomatic corp and top level clearance. But when it comes down to it, we will back your decisions. That is the whole point of this reorganization."

"What is the protocol when ships travel from one sector to another?"

"If they are in your sector, they are in your command." Smith said simply. "If Excelsior travels to another sector, you will come under the command of that fleet captain. Any other questions?"

"Who are the other fleet captains?" Sulu asked.

"You know them all." Smith said. "MacLean at the Klingon border, Piazza and Addison along the Romulan Neutral Zone, Chen at the Tholian border, T'Rock at the Della Mir border and Abdullah just this side of the First Federation Space."

"Just along the borders then?" Sulu asked.

"For now." Smith nodded.

"And when does this take effect?" Sulu asked.

"Immediately." Admiral Smith said.

"Have the colonies been informed?" Sulu asked.

"Yes." Smith nodded. "By the time you get back to your bridge, you will have a detailed list of everyone and everything that is going on in the area. All Starfleet ships will report to you as they enter your sector. All contacts will be reported."

"Well." Sulu sighed and smiled. "I can't think of any other questions. I better inform my staff of the changes."

When Sulu stepped off the turbo lift onto the Excelsior's bridge, the entire crew stood, faced him, and came to attention. Commander Chekov smiled. "Congratulations Fleet Captain Sulu."

"Thank you." Sulu chuckled. He walked down to the command station. "Now, everyone

sit down. You're making me nervous."

With muffled laughter and smiles all around, the crew resumed their duty stations. As soon as Sulu sat in the command chair, Ensign Pratap handed him data padd with the daily personnel report. Sulu took a quick look. The sick call list and last minute schedule changes were within accepted limits.

"Rand?" Sulu asked without looking up from his reading.

"We are cleared for departure, Sir." Rand replied. "Beta blue four."

"Take us out of orbit, Mr. Kim." Sulu said. "Departure course beta blue four."

"Beta blue four." Kim nodded. "Aye."

"Set course for the Cardassian border. Warp two." Sulu ordered. When he report came to the line for bridge shift commander, Ensign Pratap had entered Fleet Captain Sulu. Grinning, Sulu entered his code to approve the report and handed the padd back to the waiting ensign.

Two hours into the shift, Commander Rand said. "Captain. I have Captain Piazza on the Captain's channel."

"In my ready room, Rand." Sulu said. Chekov followed Sulu off the bridge. At his desk, he accessed the captain's channel. Piazza's image appeared. Sulu smiled, she never changed. Same pale blond hair neatly pulled back off her face, same ice blue eyes. "Good morning Fleet Captain Piazza."

"Stop that, Hikaru." Piazza laughed. "I'm getting a hard enough time from my first."

"Tell me about it, Taziana." Sulu laughed as well. "When I came back from Admiral Smith's office, my entire bridge crew came to attention."

"One step closer." Piazza shrugged. "We got here at the same time, but the bet is still on."

"Of course." Sulu appeared very serious. "But remember, I beat you to captain. And I'll beat you to admiral."

"In your dreams, Sulu."

"So are you calling about Lt. Commander Smith?" Sulu took them back to business.

"Yes." Piazza nodded. "He is an excellent officer. His skills are first rate. I hate to lose him, but he is ready to move up."

"I saw his record." Sulu said. "What about these incident reports?"

"It had nothing to do with work." Piazza shrugged off the question. "He can be a little hot headed, but it has never effected the job. Do you want me to talk to him?"

"Yes." Sulu nodded. "I need a replacement right away."