

"Good morning, Commander." Chief Tony Elliot said to Lt. Commander Gonzoles when she walked into the transporter room.

"Good morning, Chief. We have a lock?" Gonzoles asked. The transporter officer nodded. "Then, whenever you're ready."

"Energizing." He said while working the transporter controls.

A tall Latino man materialized on the pad. He had short black hair and a neatly trimmed beard. He took a quick look around the transporter room before introducing himself. His gaze settled on the Latino Lt. Commander who stood in front of the transporter duty station. She wore her long coal black hair in a neat regulation braid and had the most beautiful face that Tomas could ever remember seeing on an officer. "Lt. Commander Tomas Smith. Permission to come aboard Sir."

"Permission granted, Mr. Smith." Gonzoles smiled. She enjoyed the job of greeting new personnel. It was nice to meet new officers in a less formal setting, especially if she would be working together as she would with the new third officer. "I'm Lt. Commander Gonzoles. Second officer. Welcome aboard."

Mr. Smith came down the two steps and shook Gonzoles's extended hand. "Nice to meet you, Gonzoles."

"Come on. I'll show you your quarters." Gonzoles led the way out of the transporter room. "Smith? As in Admiral Roberto Smith?"

"There are a lot of Smiths in this galaxy." He said. "I'd appreciate if you'd keep my father's ID to yourself. It took me three years to live it down on the Lexington."

"No problem." Gonzoles nodded. They got on the turbo lift. "Deck six."

After a moment of silence in the lift, Smith asked. "So, what happened to the officer I'm replacing?"

"Commander Lee took a post as first officer of Starbase Twenty Three." Gonzoles said.

"Ah, there's the connection to my Dad." Smith smiled. A nice smile, Gonzoles noted. "So Lee left Excelsior for a Starbase? Is he crazy, or what?"

"She." Gonzoles corrected Smith. "And her baby is due next month. She was happy to get a command post where she could be with the baby and still keep her career on track. Believe me, she is already missed around here."

"Ok." Smith nodded. "So who thought he or she should move up to this post?"

"Lt. Kim was Lee's right hand man." Gonzoles said. "As far as I know, Heesun's not upset about Captain Sulu bringing you in."

"Good." Smith smiled. "I'll be sure to get Kim to give me the run down on my staff and to bring him in on any changes. As for the Captain, I hear he's a real straight arrow. True?"

"True." Gonzoles smiled at the characterization. "But not unreasonable. Here's your cabin."

"Thanks Gonzoles." Smith walked though the door and took a quick look around. It was a standard single cabin. He tossed his duffle on the bunk. "Can I assume the Captain is on the bridge?"

"In his ready room." Gonzoles leaned in the doorway. "I'm sure he is expecting you. I'm heading that way."

"All right." He said. "Let's go."

"So, why did you leave the Lexington?" Gonzoles asked as they walked back towards the turbo lift.

"For a command position on Excelsior? Are you kidding?" Smith asked as they stepped into the turbo lift together. "So what is your job around here?"

"Deck one. I'm head of navigation." Gonzoles said. "I over see orientation and training of new personnel. I also coordinate staffing requirements for all non-science positions. And the Captain usually find a few other projects for me."

"Classic over achiever? Huh?" Smith asked with a friendly smile.

"Guess so." Gonzoles shrugged. The turbo lift door opened. Gonzoles pointed him in the right direction. "That's the ready room."

"Thanks." He nodded. Gonzoles turned and entered the bridge by the secondary gangway. Smith hesitated outside the Captain's door. He pressed the door signal. After a second it slid open. Captain Sulu was sitting at his desk. Smith saw an Asian man with short black hair and a very serious expression talking to his desktop view screen. With his hand, Sulu signaled Smith to come in and wait.

"I am tired of having this argument with you." Sulu spoke firmly. Smith could not see who the captain was talking to, but he instantly knew he was glad it wasn't him. "The ground rules have not changed. Now I suggest you reevaluate your position and make peace with your sister. Understood?"

"But Dad..."

"I don't want to hear any more but Dads." Sulu said. "Do you understand what I want from you?"

The boy sighed. "Yes Sir."

"Good." Sulu nodded. He softened just a bit when he said, "I have to get back to work. I'll talk to you again in a couple of days. After all we have to make plans for that fishing trip. OK, Hikaru?"

"Ok Dad."

Captain Sulu terminated the connection with his son and turned to the officer who was not quite standing at attention in front of his desk. "Mr. Smith?"

"Yes Sir." Smith stood a bit straighter. "Lt. Commander Tomas Smith reporting for duty Sir."

"I have spoken to Captain Piazza regarding your record, Mr. Smith." Sulu said. "She suggests I ignore the disciplinary notations. But I don't like to ignore something I don't understand. I believe an explanation is in order."

"I had a few problems of a personal nature two years ago, Captain." Smith said. "It was an isolated incident that I can guarantee will not repeat itself."

"I will hold you to that, Mr. Smith." Sulu said. "Sit down."

"Yes Sir." Smith said and sat down.

"As you know, the primary position is head of the helm department. That of course includes scheduling and supervision of helm staff." Sulu said. "On Excelsior it also includes supervision of shuttle pilots."

"That's how it was on Lexington, Sir." Smith nodded.

"Good. As a member of the senior staff you will be on call at all times. As third officer,

you will be scheduled as bridge shift commander on a rotating basis." While Sulu was talking, Mr. Chekov came into the ready room from the bridge. "It will usually be third shift since Mr. Chekov is morally opposed to working third shift."

"Morally opposed?" Chekov chuckled.

"Lt. Commander Smith. This is our first officer, Commander Chekov." Sulu said. "I was beginning to wonder about you, Pavel."

"I was detained." Chekov said to the Captain. Turning to the new officer, he said. "Welcome aboard, Mr. Smith."

Smith stood and shook Chekov's offered hand. "Thank you, Sir."

Chekov turned back to the Captain. "There has been another raid along the Cardassian border. A convoy on route to our colonies has been attacked."

"A convoy?" Sulu asked. "How many ships?"

"The convoy was four tugs with fighter escort." Chekov said. "They were attacked by five ships of unknown configuration. All the fighters were lost. The tugs were taken."

"Casualties?"

"Ships in the area are still picking up escape pods." Chekov said. "At least twenty five dead. Over four hundred still missing. The numbers are very rough. I have increased speed to warp eight."

"Have we heard from the Cardassians?"

"Not to my knowledge." Chekov said. "Commander Rand is trying to get through to Ambassador Spock now."

"Good." Sulu stood up. "Mr. Smith, report to Dr. Patrick in sick bay. You'll find more details regarding your duties and Excelsior command codes in your mail file. Any questions?"

"No Sir." Smith turned and left the way he came. In the turbo lift he asked for sickbay. Excelsior was larger than Lexington. It would take him a little while to find his way around. But he found sickbay with no trouble. When he walked in there were no patients that he could see. Two med techs and a nurse were conferring at a wall mounted bio scan read out. Smith smiled. "Morning."

The nurse was a tall woman with brown facial markings that bordered her face and ran down her neck disappearing under her uniform. She smiled at him. "You must be Commander Smith."

"Yes Ma'am."

"I am Lt. Ighes." She pointed to a door across the room. "Dr. Patrick is in his office. He is expecting you."

"Thanks Lt. Ighes." He crossed the room and touched the door signal on the panel next to the door. It slid open. Smith walked in to see a lanky officer with blond hair slouched in his desk chair with a sketchpad propped on his knee. The office was cluttered with sketches and paintings. Smith stopped in front of the desk and said. "Lt. Commander Tomas Smith reporting as ordered, Sir."

"Very official." Dr. Tim Patrick looked up from his sketchpad. He held up the pad. "What do you think?"

"That depends." Smith looked at the sketch of an awkward looking bird. With wings outstretched and head down it looked like it was going to fall over. "What's it suppose to be?"

"Verrilian stink bird." Pat said. He looked at it again. "I can't get the head quite right. Sit down, Mr. Smith. Relax. Have you already checked in with the Captain?"

"Yes Sir." Smith sat down as indicated.

The Doctor continued making adjustments on his drawing as he talked. "I received your medical records from the Lexington. Anything changed that I should be aware of?"

"No Sir." Smith said. "I don't think so."

"Damn. That's not right." Patrick frowned at the sketchpad then put it down on his crowded desk top. He grabbed his medical tricorder off the top of several sketches and stood up. Smith was surprised by the doctor's height. Smith was slightly over two meters himself and rarely ran into any Humans as tall as himself. Patrick turned on the tricorder and scanned Smith for a couple of seconds. He closed the device and set it back on the desk. "Ok."

"That's it?" Smith asked.

"You had a full physical about three months ago. Right?"

"Right." Smith nodded.

"And you say nothing has changed. Right?" Pat asked. Again Smith nodded. Pat leaned against his desk and folded his arms comfortably across his chest. "Then this is merely a formality. You aren't a raw recruit. You don't need the lecture on life on a starship. So unless there is something on your mind, I'm done."

"No." Smith hesitated. "I guess there's nothing on my mind."

"You guess?" Pat asked. "You realize of course that anything you say in this office is strictly confidential. No need to censure yourself."

"I understand that, Doctor." Smith said. "It's just a little odd being on a new ship. New people. New captain. I was on Lexington for seven years. I'll get used to it."

"I'm sure you will." Pat nodded. "Just what did you think of Captain Sulu?"

Tomas Smith took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he decided just how much he could say to the doctor. "I thought he was true to his reputation."

Dr. Patrick tried not to smile. "What's his reputation?"

"Hard as trillium and by the book." Smith answered immediately. "I've heard he hasn't broken a reg since he faced court martial with Kirk fifteen years ago."

"Don't believe everything you've heard, Mr. Smith." Now Pat smiled. He added more seriously. "I take it he brought up your record."

"It was two years ago and my record has been first rate before and since." Smith explained quickly. He was tired of defending himself. "But he still wanted an explanation."

"And you resented that?"

"I just thought I was finished explaining that." Smith sighed. "But I guess he had a right to ask."

"So what did you tell him?" Pat asked.

"That it was a personal problem." Smith said. "And that it wouldn't happen again."

"I'm sure that was all the Captain needed to hear." Pat said. "Was he satisfied?"

"I think so."

"I was just thinking about a lunch break." Pat said. "You want to join me?"

"I haven't had a better offer." Smith smiled. "Sounds good."

"Captain." Commander Rand turned her chair to face the center of the bridge. "I have Ambassador Spock."

"On screen." Sulu said. The Excelsior's main screen changed to Spock's image. Sulu noted that Spock hadn't changed much since he had left Starfleet. Although it had taken years for Sulu to get used to the traditional Vulcan robes instead of a standard Starfleet uniform. Sulu smiled. "Good morning, Ambassador. It's good to see you again."

"And you, Captain." Spock inclined his head in a slight bow of acknowledgment. It was a traditional Vulcan sign of respect. "I understand you are on course for the Cardassian border."

"Yes Sir." Sulu said. "Rescue operations are still underway. We'll be there in twenty minutes. Have you been in contact with the Cardassian Ambassador?"

"I have." Spock said. "The Ambassador is not entirely forthcoming. However, it is the Cardassian position that independent pirates are responsible for the raids."

Chekov left the science station and joined Sulu at the center of the bridge. "Pirates do not attack convoys with an Argosian fighter escorts."

"Agreed, Mr. Chekov." Spock said. "However we have no evidence that the Cardasians are the aggressors here."

"Not yet." Chekov said.

"Mr. Spock." Captain Sulu said. "What about the previous raids? As far as I know the identity of the raiders has remained unknown. Is there any other evidence we should be aware of?"

"This last attack is a departure from previous raids." Spock said. "The three previous raids were on lone ships out of the main shipping lanes. The attackers had two ships. The cargo was transported out and the ships disabled. No one was killed until today."

"That sounds more like pirates." Chekov said.

"Indeed." Spock raised his eyebrow. "Are you aware of the ships involved?"

"Just that it was four tugs and the fighter escort." Sulu said. "Why?"

"Two of the tugs belonged to Vasco Enterprises." Spock said.

Everyone on the Excelsior bridge turned to look at Commander Chekov. But he was unaware of them. His thoughts were filled with his wife and her family. All he could manage to say was. "Damn."

"Thank you Ambassador." Sulu said. "We will keep you informed of our investigation."

"I look forward to your report, Captain. Spock out."

Lt. Commander Gonzoles picked up her lunch tray and looked around for a seat. The dining hall was always crowded this time of day. Dr. Patrick waved her over. She joined him and the new guy, Lt. Commander Smith. They were finished eating, but each had a cup of coffee.

"Thanks, Pat." Gonzoles immediately picked up her sandwich. "I've only got fifteen minutes today."

"How come?" Patrick asked.

"Over achievers don't leave time for lunch." Smith joked.

"In fifteen minutes we'll reach the sight of the latest raid near the Cardasian border." Gonzoles said. "A convoy was hit and they are still picking up survivors. I imagine you'll be busy this afternoon, Pat."

"They are getting brave." Pat sipped his coffee. "Hitting a convoy."

"Ambassador Spock thinks we are possibly dealing with more than pirates this time." Gonzoles said between bites. "And two of the ships belonged to Vasco."

"Really?" Pat asked.

"What is that suppose to mean?" Smith asked.

"Never heard of Vasco Enterprises?" Dr. Patrick asked.

"Sure. Who hasn't?" Smith shrugged. "They are probably the biggest transport company on Earth."

Gonzoles nodded, but her mouth was full. Pat added. "That and C.J. Vasco is married to Commander Chekov."

"Interesting." Smith nodded.

"Slow down, Rosita." Pat said. "You are going to make yourself sick."

Gonzoles downed her glass of iced tea before saying. "You worry too much, Pat. Got to go."

Just after Lt. Commander Gonzoles relieved Ensign Hoffman, the Excelsior arrived at the sight of the raid. Several other ships were already engaged in rescue operations. The first search ships Excelsior contacted were the science vessels Yosemite and Tolstoy and the Miranda class starship, Tian Nan Men.

"Hail the Tian Nan Men." Sulu said.

"Aye Sir." Rand answered. "Coming on screen now."

The bridge of the Tian Nan Men appeared on the Excelsior's main screen. A compact man with dark brown skin and only a ring of hair just above his ears occupied the center seat. Sulu smiled. "Mac. It's good to see you. Thanks for handling things until I could arrive."

"I'm glad you're here, Hikaru." Captain MacLean nodded. "We are still missing at least fifteen escape pods. I am transmitting the search grid. If you will take grid sections eighteen through twenty eight, that would help."

"Of course." Sulu nodded. "Do you have any further information on the attackers?"

"Not yet." MacLean said. "I have one of the tug pilots on board but she is still unconscious. We are taking what statements we can, but information is sketchy at best. And of course the search for survivors is top priority now."

"Agreed." Sulu said. "When we've finished searching, we will regroup. Excelsior out."

"I have the search grid, Captain." Gonzoles reported. "Present position on the edge of section seventeen. Search pattern laid in."

"Ahead dead slow." Sulu said. "Thrusters only. Sensors on maximum sweep."

"Aye Sir." Lt. Sareth said from the helm station. "Aft thrusters at one half. Ahead dead slow."

"All sensors on maximum." Chekov reported. The first two sections were empty. But as Excelsior slowly edged into section twenty, the sensors came into contact with two metallic objects. "Definitely two escape pods, Captain. Life signs are weak."

"Can you raise them, Rand?" Sulu asked.

"No response, Captain."

"Tractor beam, Mr. Sareth." Sulu ordered. "Bring them aboard."

"Aye Sir."

"Inform Dr. Patrick." Sulu nodded to Rand.

"Aye Sir."

"Captain, I am reading a concentration of debris." Chekov reported. "Radiation levels consistent with type three disruptors."

"One of the fighters?" Sulu asked.

"That would be the most logical conclusion." Chekov nodded. "I would like to bring a sample on board for further study."

"All right." Sulu nodded. Chekov called the transporter room from the science station to arrange the transport of the debris into a safe area.

"Patrick to bridge."

"Sulu here." The captain opened the comline.

"Twenty two survivors. Five D.O.A." Patrick reported. "All survivors are suffering from plasma burns ranging from first degree to third degree. Many have other minor injuries."

"Do we have IDs on the survivors, Doctor?" Sulu asked.

"Not yet." Patrick asked. "I'll get to it as soon as I can."

"Ok Pat." Sulu closed the comline. "Gonzoles, get down to sick bay. Try to ID the survivors and get statements if any of them are up to it. And check the bodies. We'll need IDs on those too."

"Aye Sir." Lt. Commander Gonzoles nodded and left the bridge.

"Another escape pod on sensors, Captain." Chekov reported.

"Life signs?" Sulu asked.

"Yes. But weak." Chekov said.

"Tractor beam, Lt. Sareth." Sulu said. "Sulu to sick bay. We have another escape pod coming in."

"We are overloaded down here, Captain." Patrick said. "I'll send Dr. Ghali and a team to the secondary shuttle bay to set up a triage center."

"I'll see if any other ships in the search party have any room in their sick bays." Sulu said.

"Sulu out. Rand, hail the Tian Nan Men."

"Aye Sir." Rand nodded. "Coming on screen."

"Mac." Sulu said. "We've recovered three escape pods so far and my sick bay is now at capacity. Are any other ships in the area capable of taking on some of the wounded?"

"Every ship is near or at capacity now." Captain MacLean said. "All together we've recovered over two hundred survivors. I've called in medical transports, but they are three days away."

"Ok, we'll make due until then." Sulu nodded. He smiled as he added. "I'll just have to put up with Patrick's whining about the lack of space allotted to the medical staff."

"Pat's a pussy cat." Mac laughed. "Be glad you are not on the Potemkin."

"I am." Sulu laughed. "Believe me, I am."

"Continue search through grid section thirty five. And keep me informed, Captain." Mac

signed off.

"Will do." Sulu nodded. "Excelsior out."

After the screen had returned to standard view, Lt. Sareth leaned towards Lt. Commander Gonzoles and whispered, "What's so bad about the Potemkin's CMO?"

"I don't know." Gonzoles leaned towards the helm officer that reminded her just a bit of a cuddly bear and shrugged. "I've never met her."

The afternoon wore on. Excelsior rescued three more escape pods. Dr. Patrick called in all off duty personnel to help tend to the wounded. He moved the worse cases to sick bay and commandeered every extra bunk on the ship for the triage and treatment center in the secondary shuttle bay.

At the shift change, Lt. Commander Smith reported for his first shift on Excelsior's bridge. Captain Sulu and Commander Chekov stayed on duty. Lt. DuBois took over communications. Lt. Briscoe manned navigation. Lt. Mirek joined Chekov at the science station.

"More debris, Mr. Chekov." Mirek reported without looking up from the sensors. "Evidence of phase disruptors."

"Same as the other debris?" Chekov asked.

"No Sir." Mirek looked up. "The phase shift is off by a differential of point six three."

"Six three?" Chekov asked. She nodded. Chekov walked down to the lower bridge. "Captain, we should beam a sample of this debris on board to compare with the other sample."

"We know there were five attackers." Sulu said. "So this ship was destroyed by a different ship than the last one. That's not a big surprise."

"True." Chekov nodded. "But point six three is a large differential. It is possible that we are dealing with different kinds of ships. The comparison may help us identify the attackers."

"All right, Pavel." Sulu nodded. "What ever you need."

"Have a sample of the debris transported to the science lab, Mirek." Chekov said. "A level three containment field."

"Aye Sir." Mirek nodded.

"Leaving search grid section thirty for grid section thirty one." Smith reported.

"Sensors?" Sulu asked Chekov.

"Clear." Chekov said. "Hungry?"

"Yeah. Ready for a dinner break?" Sulu asked. Chekov nodded. "Mr. Smith, you have the bridge. We'll be back in half an hour."

"Aye Sir." Smith nodded.

In the turbo lift, Sulu asked. "What do you think of Smith?"

"Seems fine." Chekov shrugged. "You asked him about the incident on his record?"

Sulu nodded. "A personal problem. Isolated incident. Won't happen again. Standard explanations."

"Maybe it was a fight in a bar over a girl." Chekov chuckled as he reminded Sulu of an incident report on the captain's own record from nearly twenty years ago.

"Funny." Sulu raised his eyebrow at Chekov. "The rest of his record is first rate. But I don't need a discipline problem. If it wasn't for Captain Piazza's recommendation.... "

"He'll be fine." Chekov shrugged again.

Sulu looked at his friend carefully. "What are you worried about?"

"Cathy." Chekov sighed. "I do not look forward to telling her about this."

"I guess not." Sulu said. "But there is no point in telling her anything until we have the casualty lists."

"You're right." Chekov nodded. They got their dinner and found a table. "As soon as we finish eating, I'll start on the analysis of the samples."

"What do you hope to find?" Sulu asked.

"I'm not sure." Chekov thought about the readings that had sent alarms going off in his mind. He wasn't sure what it was, but something wasn't right. "But the readings we have from the debris so far do suggest military grade weapons."

"Different than what we saw when we investigated the first raid?"

"Yes." Chekov said. "The disruptors fired on the transport in the first raid were consistent with the types of weapons available from the Della Mir to non military customers. As far as intelligence knows the Della Mir Community has honored the treaty regarding the sale of weapons systems."

"So either this attack was carried out by a different group or the original pirates have radically upgraded their weapons systems." Sulu said.

"Uh-huh." Chekov said. "Although I'd bet on a military operation."

"You mean the Cardassians." Sulu said. "It makes sense but we will need more proof than we have. You know the orders."

"Yes, I know." Chekov sighed. "Don't fire unless fired upon. Don't cross the border. Don't rock the boat. Basically hands off."

"Yep." Sulu nodded. "The only way relations can get any worse between the Federation and the Cardassians is all out war. And command does not want us to fire the first shot."

"It's only a matter of time." Chekov said. He nodded towards the door. Lt. Commander Gonzoles had just come into the dining hall.

"I know." Sulu shrugged and ate his dinner. "We need to be very sure of our facts. Gonzoles. Join us."

"Thank you, Captain." Gonzoles sat down.

"How's it going in sick bay?" Sulu asked.

"I've made positive identification of about half of the survivors now on board." Gonzoles sampled her soup. "And I've taken a few statements. But there isn't much information."

"How come?" Sulu asked.

"All of the survivors I've talked to were on Vasco's ship the Odessa." Gonzoles said. "The bridge took a direct hit after the shields went down. The plasma leak was the least of their problems. Emergency bulk head reinforcements failed. Half the bridge crew were sucked out into space. The half that held on and made it off the bridge were burnt by the plasma. And non bridge crew had no idea what happened except that the ship took several direct hits."

"Do we have the Odessa's captain?"

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles nodded. "But he's in bad shape. I haven't even tried to talk to him yet. Dr. Patrick has him heavily sedated. He suggested we talk to Captain Shah tomorrow."

"What was the other Vasco tug?" Chekov asked.

"The Ibadan." Gonzoles said. "There was also a Rigelian tug called the Terhara and a Verillian tug called the Wi-kar. Captain MacLean has sent us a crew list for each ship."

Sulu looked at Chekov. "Cathy name all her tugs after cities on Earth?"

"The largest ones." Chekov nodded. "It is a tradition that Big Joe started when Vasco first expanded beyond the solar system."

"Big Joe?" Gonzoles asked.

"His father-in-law." Sulu grinned with a nod towards Chekov. He had only met the man everyone called Big Joe once, but it had left a lasting impression. "And if you met him, you'd understand."

"Ok." Gonzoles continued eating. "If I may ask, Mr. Chekov, why did Vasco send their tugs into such a dangerous area?"

"I am sure they thought they would be safe in the convoy." Chekov said. "And the colonies need supplies."

"I think Starfleet would provide a better escort than Argosian fighters." Gonzoles said. "After all, they are Federation colonies."

"You would think." Chekov agreed.

"Perhaps now Command will reevaluate its stand on escorting commercial freighters." Sulu said.