

Lt. Commander Smith sat in the center seat while the captain and first officer were on their dinner break. Another escape pod had been located and Smith ordered it brought on board. Mr. Smith found the bridge crew to be experienced and easy to work with. All in all, it was not an uncomfortable shift.

"Mr. Smith." Lt. Mirek reported from the science station. Smith turned to the petite woman with short pale blond hair. It had not taken long for Smith to realize the second science officer was extremely efficient. "I have a small ship on sensors."

"One of the search vessels?" Smith asked.

"Not Starfleet. But she's dropping out of warp on our starboard side." Mirek frowned at her readings. Her frown turned to a smile when she received the ship's ID transponder signal. "It's the Valhalla."

"Valhalla?" Smith asked.

Before Lt. Mirek could elaborate, Lt. DuBois spoke up from the communications station. "She's hailing us."

"On screen." Smith said. He was surprised to see a beautiful Human woman with shoulder length ash blond hair sitting at the small ship's pilot's seat.

"Oh." Her wide-open pale blue eyes registered surprise. She smiled at him. "I was expecting Commander Chekov or Captain Sulu."

"They are both unavailable right now." He couldn't help but smile back. "I'm Commander Smith. How can I help you?"

"You can give me clearance to land on your shuttle flight deck, Mr. Smith." Cathy smiled and winked. "If that's your real name."

"It is." Smith's smile disappeared at her request. "And I'm afraid I'll have to get that clearance from the Captain. And I'm sure he will require an ID on the pilot."

"No, he won't." Cathy laughed.

"Mr. Smith." Lt. DuBois turned his chair at the communication station towards the center of the bridge. He was a slight man with a light brown complexion and a very serious expression as he explained. "The Valhalla always has clearance to land. Standing orders."

Smith leaned towards Lt. DuBois and asked quietly. "You're sure?"

DuBois nodded. Lt. Commander Gonzoles came off the turbo lift, computer padd in hand. Seeing Cathy on the view screen, Gonzoles came down to stand next to the command chair. "C.J., how are you?"

"Just fine, Rosita." Cathy said. "But I seem to be having trouble getting permission to come aboard."

"No problem." Gonzoles said. "Lt. DuBois, inform the shuttle bay that the Valhalla is cleared for landing and notify Commander Chekov."

"Aye Sir."

"Stand by for tractor beams, C.J."

"Standing by." Cathy nodded. "Thanks Rosita. Nice to meet you, Mr. Smith."

The main view screen returned to the original setting. Smith turned the command chair to face Gonzoles. "Lt Commander Gonzoles, I don't appreciate you coming in and issuing orders when I have the bridge."

"The last time I looked, I out rank you Mr. Smith." Gonzoles said calmly. "And I am well

within my rights to relieve you if I so choose. But I was not trying to undermine you. I was simply acting on standing orders that you were unaware of."

"Are there any other standing orders that I am not aware of?" Smith asked.

"I have a log of all standing orders. I'll send you a copy." Gonzoles said. She turned and walked over to the science station. "Lt. Mirek. Mr. Chekov wants a spectral analysis of the samples in the lab a.s.a.p. And he said anything else you can think of."

"Right away, Commander." Mirek nodded. She took the padd and went right to work.

"I'll be in sick bay if you need me." Gonzoles said to Mirek. "I have to try to make some sense out of these survivor statements."

After Gonzoles left the bridge, Smith turned back to Lt. DuBois. "C.J.? As in C.J. Vasco?"

"Yes Sir." DuBois nodded.

"And that would make her...."

"Mrs. Chekov." Lt. Mirek said.

"Great." Smith shook his head. There was nothing like denying access to the first officer's wife to start his record on Excelsior off right. "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Sensors show she did not come alone." Lt. Mirek said. "Experience says she brought their three sons."

"Kids? On a Starship? In a potential war zone?" Smith continued to shake his head. Captain Piazza would never have allowed it. "How old are these kids?"

"Um." Mirek thought. "I guess Peter is eight or nine. And the twins must be six by now. Don't you think, Phil?"

"If you say so." DuBois shrugged.

Commander Chekov hurried onto the flight deck. The Valhalla had already landed. His family was disembarking as he arrived. The three boys ran to him immediately, all yelling. "Daddy!"

Down on one knee, he hugged each one in turn. He took the time to listen to each boy's greeting and to answer his questions. Peter had grown several inches since Pavel had last measured him. Joey was still the more boisterous of the twins and almost knocked his father over. Jamie always let his brother take the lead, but hugged his father tightly when his turn came.

Cathy stood by the ship waiting and smiling at them. Finally Pavel stood up and faced her. She was dressed casually in black slacks, a dusty rose knit top, and her favorite black bomber jacket that she always wore when piloting the Valhalla. Smiling, Cathy Vasco Chekov walked into her husband's arms.

"Catrina," He sighed as he hugged her. "What are you doing here?"

"I've lost almost a hundred employees." Cathy said. "I am here to find out why. I have to have some explanation for their families."

"Ah." Pavel nodded. He understood her problems, but she was making problems for him. "But we do not know what happened yet. And as the science officer I must spend all my time to find out. I do not have time for you to be here."

"I don't want to take you away from your work this time. I want you to find the answers."

I need you to." Cathy explained. Without giving him a second to object, she came right to the point. "Now, from what little information Starfleet was willing to give me, I understand that Captain Shah is here. Right?"

"In sick bay." Pavel nodded.

"I want to see him." Cathy said. She turned to the three young boys who were all poking into whatever equipment they could get their hands on while their parents were too busy to notice them. "Peter, Jamie, Joe. Each of you take a bag and put it in our cabin. Then you can go play in the gym."

As the three boys broke into a run for the bags, Chekov called. "Only the main gym. And stay out of everyone's way." He turned back to Cathy. "This was not a good time to bring the boys."

"Couldn't be helped." Cathy shrugged. They started walking arm in arm out of the hanger deck. "They were with me when I found out. I was taking them to the amusement park on Rigel Three."

"We were going to do that together." Pavel said.

"And you have canceled two of your last three leaves."

"I have explained that the situation along the Cardassian border has required Excelsior's presence on three separate occasions in the last four months." Chekov said.

"Yes, I know. But we promised the boys." Cathy shrugged. "How long was I suppose to make them wait?"

"It would not have hurt them to wait a couple of months. You should not have brought them here." Pavel said. "This is the most dangerous sector in the quadrant. A war could break out here at any time."

"We're safe here with you."

"I am glad you trust me so much." Pavel shook his head. "But I can not guarantee your safety."

With a knowing nod of her head, Cathy said. "And Hikaru is upset that I am here."

"He is not happy." Pavel acknowledged. Cathy had to laugh. To her, Hikaru Sulu was rigid and controlling. She liked to irritate him. Pavel sighed. "He is still the Captain. You can not just dismiss that."

"I'll be nice." Cathy promised. "Besides, he knows you have no control over me."

"Catrina!" Pavel's attempt at stern disapproval came out more as amusement. Cathy's attitude towards Hikaru was nothing new. There was nothing for Pavel to do but accept it. He stopped them in the hall, took her in his arms, and kissed her. "I am so glad to see you."

"Me too." She sighed contentedly. After a moment, Cathy stirred herself and asked. "Now can I see Captain Shah?"

"Yes." Chekov nodded and started towards the turbo lift again. "But let me warn you, he's been badly burned."

Cathy thought she had prepared herself. But when they walked into sickbay, she was shocked. The wounded were everywhere. On the beds, in chairs, laying on the floor. The smell of burning clothes and flesh hung in the air. Doctors, nurses and med techs rushed back and forth. Cathy stopped dead in the doorway.

"Are you all right?" Pavel whispered in her ear.

"Yeah." Cathy murmured. She hoped her horror at the scene was not obvious to her employees.

"Captain Shah is over here." Chekov led her carefully through the wounded. She tried to identify anyone who worked for her, but many of the burns were disfiguring. They stopped at a bed containing a badly burned patient. Chekov spoke softly. "Captain?"

The man on the bed had most of his face covered with an epidermic graft. The lack of pigmentation in the graft allowed doctors to gage the healing process, but it gave the patient an eerie appearance. He slowly opened his eyes and turned his head slightly towards the voice that had called him. Cathy managed a smile. "Amir. How are you feeling?"

Captain Amir Shah tried to smile, but the severe burns had damaged his facial muscles. His voice was raspy and his breathing seemed shallow to Cathy. "I've been better, Ms. Vasco."

"Do you know what happened?" Cathy asked. Chekov grabbed a computer padd from a passing tech to record the statement from Shah. He did not want the injured captain to have to repeat himself.

"There were five ships." Shah spoke haltingly with a great deal of effort. "They made short work of the fighters. Ship damaged. Shields gone. Bad plasma leak. The crew barely made it to the escape pods."

"Ok Amir." Cathy said. "Rest. Don't try to talk anymore. Don't worry about anything."

"My wife." Shah reached out for Cathy's hand. He winced at the pain the movement caused.

"She's waiting for my call." Cathy took his hand and gently laid it back on the bed. "I'll let her know you'll be home soon."

"Thanks." Shah laid back and closed his eyes

"Come on." Pavel led her away from sickbay. As soon as the door closed behind them, Cathy relaxed the muscles in her stomach that had tightened into a knot. "We just picked up the last escape pod less than a half hour ago. Only the worse cases are in sick bay itself."

"Where are the rest?" Cathy asked as they walked down the hall together.

"Triage and emergency treatment is in the secondary shuttle bay." Chekov said. "And Pat has set up a recovery ward in the gym on deck eleven."

"A half hour?" Cathy turned to him. "Then the list I got from Starfleet isn't complete. How many survivors?"

"Gonzoles is in charge of identifying the survivors and updating the list." Chekov said. "But it is not an easy task. You can access the current list from my terminal in our cabin."

Cathy had to smile. She didn't know how she would get through this situation without her husband's predictable behavior. "Is that a polite way of telling me to get out of your hair, Pavel?"

"Catrina, I have to get back to work." Pavel did not return her smile. He had to make her see how serious he was. "I don't like the boys running loose through the ship in this situation. I was very serious about the possibility of war."

"I will stay out of your way." Cathy promised. The Chekovs stopped in front of the turbo lift. "And I will put a leash on the boys."

"Late tomorrow or early the day after, a medical transport will rendezvous with us to relieve us of the wounded." Pavel said. "When they leave you will accompany them."

"Really Pavel." Cathy smiled. "It's not necessary."

"I am serious." Pavel gently ran his finger along her jaw line, stopping under her chin. He looked her in the eye. "I do not want you or the boys in harm's way. You will go home with the Starfleet escort. No arguments."

The gesture reminded Cathy of her father. That was not something she liked in her husband. "I'm not a child, Pavel. You can't just order me around."

"Yes, I can." Pavel insisted calmly. "You are a civilian on a military ship in a potentially dangerous situation. And if you do not obey my orders I will have you thrown in the brig."

"You wouldn't dare."

Pavel held her gaze. "Try me."

"I don't like it when you get that look in your eye, Pavel Andreevich Chekov." Cathy sighed and looked away. "It reminds me of the night you walked out on me."

"You have selective memory regarding that night, Catrina." Pavel said. "And don't try to change the subject."

"All right." Cathy gave in reluctantly. "I will take the boys and go home when the medical transport leaves. Happy?"

"Happy that you will be safe." He smiled. "But not happy that you are leaving."

Captain Sulu returned to the bridge and sent the second shift on their lunch break. Lt. Commander Smith and Lt Mirek got on the turbo lift together. She smiled up at him. He was at least a foot taller than Mirek.

"Don't let C.J. Vasco get to you, Mr. Smith." Mirek said.

"She could have identified herself." Smith grumbled.

"She should have." Mirek nodded. "But she's..."

Tomas Smith became more interested at Mirek's hesitation. "What?"

"Well." Mirek considered telling him about the war that had waged between the Chekov's before their marriage, but decided against it. "Let's just say she's used to being in charge and getting her own way."

"You don't like her, Lt. Mirek." Smith smiled. The lift doors opened and they walked down the hall towards the mess hall together. "Jealous?"

"Oh, you think because I work for Mr. Chekov that I'm a little possessive of him." Mirek laughed. "No. That's not the case here. C.J. is just not straightforward and I like people who are."

"I'll remember that." Smith said.

"Evening Mr. Smith. Ellen." Lt. Sareth stopped in the hall as they approached. They stopped as well.

"Hi Lek." Ellen Mirek greeted him. "What's up?"

"I've just been trying to figure out something Captain Sulu and Captain MacLean were talking about." Lek Sareth lowered his voice. "Maybe you know something."

"About?" Mirek asked.

"The CMO of the Potemkin." Sareth said. "They were joking about her. Glad she wasn't on their ships. Any idea why?"

"No." Mirek shook her head. "Don't think I've ever met her."

"Who?" Smith asked.

"I looked her up." Sareth said. "Her name's Dr. Stella Booyse."

"Don't know her." Smith shrugged. "If you will excuse us, Mr. Sareth. We don't have much time."

"Sorry." Sareth said. "But if you hear anything..."

"See you later, Lek." Ellen called as she walked quickly down the hall. When Sareth was out of earshot, Mirek laughed. "Lek Sareth is the biggest gossip on this ship. Don't tell him a thing you don't want everyone else to know."

"Thanks for the warning." Smith chuckled. They walked into the mess hall together and had their lunch. "Maybe you can fill me in on a few others around here. In a straightforward manner, of course."

Lt. Mirek laughed. "Of course."

Lt. Commander Gonzoles was in the gym on deck eleven. It was one of the three smaller gymnasiums on Excelsior. Right now it was lined with bunks and full of transport personnel. Most had minor injuries. Some burns, a few broken bones, a lot of cuts and bruises.

"Hi." She smiled at a muscular young man sitting on the next bunk as she went down the line. "I'm Lt. Commander Gonzoles. What's your name?"

"Sherman Phelps." He said as he pushed a strand of his long light brown hair out of his face. His ponytail came half way down his back. "I am, or I guess I was, a laborer on the Odessa."

"Mind if I sit down?" She asked. He nodded and she sat next to him on his bunk. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm ok." Phelps said. "I had a broken collar bone, but the doctors have fused that. I had some smoke inhalation damage to the lungs, but they gave me something and I can breathe again. I got off lucky."

"I'm glad." Gonzoles smiled. "I'm taking statements from everyone trying to get an overall picture of what happened. Where were you when the attack started?"

"I was in the hold." Phelps said. "Some of the cargo was perishable and we were having some trouble with the environmental controls. So I was in the hold with a scanner and Marty was in the control room."

"Marty?"

"Marty Choi." Phelps said. "He's an assistant engineer. Anyway, we had no idea anything was going on until some of the cargo was beamed out. Then all hell broke loose. The ship was hit several times. I was thrown against the wall and some cargo fell on top of me. Guess that's how I broke the collarbone. I think I lost consciousness. The next thing I know, Marty is pulling on me. If it wasn't for him, I never would have made it to the escape pod."

"What was beamed out?"

"I'm not sure." Phelps said. "But it was almost the entire section B-32."

"It was beamed out before the ship was hit? You're sure?"

"Yeah." Phelps shrugged. "Why? Is that important?"

"Could be." Gonzoles said. "Was anyone else in the hold besides you and Marty Choi?"

"Not that I saw." Phelps said. "But I wasn't scanning for life signs and with all that cargo, if someone didn't want to be seen..."

"Thanks, Mr. Phelps." Gonzoles nodded. She stopped recording and left the gym.

When Gonzoles reached the bridge, Captain Sulu was in the center seat. Lt. Commander Smith was at the helm station. Next to him, Lt Briscoe manned Gonzoles's station. Sulu was reviewing a report. Gonzoles waited until he was done and had handed the padd back to Ensign Lantz.

"Yes Gonzoles?" Sulu asked.

"I've just taken a statement from Sherman Phelps." Gonzoles said. "He was in the hold of the Odessa when the attack started. According to Mr. Phelps some cargo was beamed out of the Odessa before he was aware of the attack."

"What kind of cargo?"

"He didn't know." Gonzoles said. "But it was in the Odessa's section B-32. Perhaps C.J. could access the Odessa's manifest and identify the cargo."

"You mean there is actually something good about her being here?" Sulu asked.

Gonzoles refused to say anything for or against that statement, except to raise one eyebrow as she had seen Ambassador Spock do so often. Sulu laughed at her silent admonishment. "You are right, Rosita. That was uncalled for. What else did your Mr. Phelps have to say?"

"He was knocked unconscious during the attack and was rescued by an assistant engineer named Marty Choi." Gonzoles reported. "Mr. Choi was evidently in the hold's control room when the attack began."

"That's it?" Sulu asked. She nodded. Captain Sulu opened the comline to Chekov's cabin. "Sulu to Ms. Chekov."

"Yes Captain?"

"Cathy, I have some questions about the Odessa's cargo." Sulu said. "Do you have the ship's manifest with you?"

"Of course."

"Could you please bring it to my ready room?"

"Sure."

"Thank you. Sulu out." He closed the comline. "Mr. Smith, you have the bridge. Gonzoles, you are with me."

Lt. Commander Gonzoles followed Captain Sulu into the ready room. He sat down at the desk and accessed the list of survivors on the Excelsior. "How many survivors are not yet identified?"

"Six. They are the severe cases from the last escape pod." Gonzoles stood next to his desk and reported. "Once the doctors give their ok, I'll talk to them. Do a DNA scan if necessary."

"What about the dead?"

"We have thirty seven on board." Gonzoles said. "We have identified them through DNA scan. Most were too badly burned for a visual ID."

"What about the other search parties?" Sulu asked.

"I last reported to Captain MacLean when we picked up this last pod." Gonzoles said. "There were six hundred thirty two crew members in the convoy. Five hundred and ninety three have been accounted for. Confirmed dead stands at one hundred sixty eight."

"How many of those are Vasco employees?" Cathy stood in the door way with a computer padd in her hands. She had left her bomber jacket in the cabin.

"I don't have that break down, C.J." Gonzoles turned towards her. "But I'll find out for you."

"Thank you, Rosita." Coming the rest of the way into the Captain's ready room, Cathy took and briefly squeezed Rosita's hand to let her know how grateful she was. "I have a lot of family members waiting for word."

"Sit down, Cathy." Captain Sulu got directly down to business. "Is that the manifest?"

"Yes." Cathy nodded and handed over the padd before settling in the chair across the desk from the captain. "You can download it if you like."

"Thanks." Sulu nodded. "Computer, scan padd. Copy ship's manifest into Excelsior file Odessa 1."

"Working." The computer replied. "One file copied."

"Display Odessa 1." Sulu said. The manifest came up on his terminal screen. He checked it against the padd just to be sure the data had not been corrupted. Once he was satisfied, Sulu handed the padd back to Cathy. "Gonzoles, what was that hold section number?"

"B-32." Gonzoles said.

"What's going on?" Cathy asked.

"One of your employees, Mr. Phelps, has reported that some cargo was beamed out of the hold before the attack." Captain Sulu said. "He did not know what it was but he knew it was in section B-32. Any ideas?"

Cathy looked at her computer padd. "It says spare computer parts."

"I see that." Sulu had already checked his copy of the manifest. "What kind of computer?"

"We are a transport company, Hikaru." Cathy explained. "We are required to scan cargo for illegal goods and contraband. And we do. What we scan has to match what is on the manifest. And I'm sure it did. But computer parts can be almost anything. We are not required to open it up and look."

"I wish you had." Sulu said. "In order for something to be transported out of the Odessa's hold, the shields had to be down and they had to know where it was."

"On a freighter you can lower global shields from the bridge. But specific shields can be lowered from several different locations. It makes loading and unloading easier." Cathy explained.

"What locations?" Gonzoles asked.

"Main engineering." Cathy turned her chair to face Gonzoles. "And each of the hold control rooms."

"How many control rooms on the Odessa?" Gonzoles asked.

"Six." Cathy said. "One for each section of the hold. Generally each control room just deals with its own section but it would be possible to control all sections from one room. In case of break downs."

"If you were in the control room for this section, B-32, and someone else was trying to override your control, would you detect it?" Sulu asked.

"If you were familiar with the controls, of course." Cathy answered without hesitation.

"And Marty Choi is familiar with the controls?" Gonzoles asked.

"Marty? Sure." Cathy nodded. "He's been working the tugs for four, no five years. You think Marty was somehow involved?"

"According to Sherman Phelps, he was in the control room at the time." Sulu said. "How long has Phelps worked for you?"

"I don't know." Cathy shrugged. "I've never met him. Laborers come and go. I'll get his employment record from the home office. And Marty's too."

"Thank you. I'd like those records before talking to the crewmen involved." Sulu nodded.

"Now, who would know where any particular cargo was stored for the trip?"

"Any member of the crew could check the computer records." Cathy said. "It's not exactly confidential information."

"Any one else?" Sulu asked.

"Well, I suppose dock crews at any one of the facilities where the Odessa took on cargo." Cathy said. "She made eight stops before leaving New Providence Colony."

"That's a lot of stops." Sulu said.

"That's our business." Cathy shrugged.

"Where was the cargo in B-32 loaded?" Gonzoles asked.

Cathy looked at the information on her padd. "It was picked up on Beltane Nine. A lot of cargo was exchanged there."

"Who shipped it?" Sulu asked.

Commander Chekov came into the ready room from the bridge. He stopped and surveyed the three of them gathered around the Captain's desk. "Cathy, I thought you were in our cabin. What are you doing here?"

"Answering questions." Cathy smiled at him. When she turned back to Sulu, she was all business. "The Deneb Transport Company."

"You didn't have to look that up." Sulu noted.

"One of our biggest customers." Cathy said. "Anything that goes outside their own system, they ship through us. But it could have come from anybody."

"Beltane Nine is not in the Deneb system." Gonzoles said.

"That's true." Cathy nodded. "And it was unusual to pick cargo up from them there. But that's what we did this trip."

"What happened?" Chekov asked.

"According to a crewman on the Odessa," Sulu explained to Chekov. "Cargo was beamed out before the attack"

"Fifteen years I've done business with Deneb." Cathy sighed sadly. She didn't know what she was going to say to Semar at Deneb, but she knew she had to make that call. "This is the first time we lost their cargo. I need to call them."

"Not yet." Sulu said.

"But I could ask them what it was and who shipped it." Cathy said.

"No." Captain Sulu turned to Chekov. "Pavel, what do you have?"

"These were no pirates." Chekov said. "The fighters were destroyed quickly. The tugs were hit to kill the crew and keep the cargo intact. There were two types of weapons used. Type three military grade phase disruptors and military grade phasers."

"Phasers?" Sulu asked.

Chekov nodded solemnly. "State of the art."

"Who has that besides Starfleet?" Cathy asked.

Her husband ignored her question and continued his report. "There is at least one crew member of the Rigelian tug, the Terhara, now on board the U.S.S. Eagle who swears there was a spy on board."

"Who?" Sulu asked.

"The accused spy was DOA." Chekov said. "A Valerian who had only been on the tug for a few months. But there is no proof."

"Why would a Valerian help the Cardassians?" Cathy asked.

"Who said anything about Cardassians?" Sulu asked her.

"Is there someone else who doesn't want Federation colonies along this border?" Cathy turned to Sulu. Did he think she was stupid? "Someone I don't know about? The Valerians certainly don't care."

"We can not jump to conclusions." Chekov said. "We need proof."

"I believe we will need the records of everyone on your ships, Cathy." Sulu said.

"I just need to talk to my office, Captain." Cathy said. "And I'm going to need extensive communication access to inform the families of my employees and to reassure my customers."

"Why did they beam something off the Odessa?" Chekov asked. The other three looked at him blankly. He explained. "They took the convoy quickly. There was no question about the outcome of the raid. They took the whole ship. Why beam something off it?"

"That's a good question." Sulu said. "Do we have anything else on the attack itself?"

"I am waiting for a transmission from the sensor array at Lapolis." Chekov said. "It's a long shot, but we should have it any time now."

"Mirek to Commander Chekov."

Chekov walked over to the Captain's desk and opened the comline. "Chekov here."

"Mr. Chekov, we have received the transmission you were waiting for." Mirek reported. "And I think you should look at it, Sir."

"I'll be right there. Chekov out." Chekov answered. He turned to his wife. "But first I will walk you back to our cabin, Cathy."

"Cathy and I need to have a discussion regarding just what can and can not be said to anyone off this ship." Sulu said. "Keep me informed, Pavel."

Chekov hesitated, then said "Aye." And returned to the bridge.

"Is there anything else you need, Gonzoles?" Sulu asked.

"No Sir." Gonzoles started towards the door. She knew a dismissal when she heard one. "I'll get back to the survivors statements."

After Lt. Commander Gonzoles left the ready room, Sulu and C.J. faced each other. Cathy smiled. "I'm glad we have a minute alone, Hikaru."

Sulu raised one eyebrow. He and Cathy rarely sought out each other's company. "Why is that?"

"I wanted to ask you what orders you've given Pavel regarding me." Cathy said.

"I don't follow."

"About me being here."

"You mean since you arrived earlier today?" Sulu leaned forward on his desk, studying her. Cathy nodded. "I haven't given Pavel any orders."

"None?" Cathy asked.

"What were you expecting?"

"I guess I read him wrong. Never mind." Cathy shrugged off the topic and gave Hikaru her most charming negotiation smile. "Now about this gag order you are preparing to impose on me... "

The Captain considered asking what she meant, but he doubted she would tell him. So he got on with business. "As you can see we don't know what we are dealing with here. I simply want to be sure that you don't make the wrong people suspicious."

"I was only planning to talk to family members of the crew and my normal business contacts." Cathy said.

"I understand." Sulu nodded. "However your transmissions may be monitored. And especially in your dealings with the Deneb Transport Company you have to be careful."

Cathy frowned at him. He could not honestly believe Deneb had anything to do with it. The system had been part of the Federation for almost two centuries. They were a cheerful and peaceful people and Cathy liked them a lot. "I've known those people for years."

"But you don't know who may have access to their communication logs." Sulu said. "So don't mention the cargo that was beamed off the Odessa. Or the possibility that espionage was involved."

"Ok, I can see your point." Cathy said. "Can I say that Starfleet is investigating?"

"Of course. That's only reasonable."

"And you will tell your communications officer to give me the access I need?" Cathy asked.

"I will tell them to give you as much time as possible." Captain Sulu said. "And I'd appreciate if the first call you make is to your office for those employment records."

"No problem." Cathy stood up. "I'll put Sam right on it."

Lt. Commander Gonzoles returned to the gym on deck eleven. The members of Odessa crew quartered there were beginning to feel better. They were moving around, talking and playing games to pass the time. A Ja'kar man grabbed her arm. He was of average height for his species. The top of his head was almost level with her shoulder. His skin had the characteristic blotchy bluish green markings and he had a small patch of dark blue hair on the very top of his head.

"Commander." He looked up at her. "When are they going to feed us? Ja'kar must eat every three standard hours. Our metabolic rate is very high."

"I understand." Gonzoles assured him. "I'll talk to the doctors and make sure we get some food in here right away."

"Thank you, Commander." He nodded formally. Gonzoles continued through the various species that made up the Odessa crew. She found Sherman Phelps still sitting on his bunk. He was playing a computer puzzle game. The three dimensional holographic puzzle floated a few inches above the computer pad he used to manipulate the pieces.

"Mr. Phelps." Gonzoles smiled.

"Yeah?" Phelps did not look up from his game.

"You told me Marty Choi helped you to the escape pod." Gonzoles said. "Do you know where he is now?"

"He was in that bunk about an half hour ago." Phelps nodded to the empty bunk next to him. "Haven't seen him in awhile."

"Thanks." Gonzoles turned around to survey the room. All she had from Captain MacLean was the list of names. No pictures. She didn't want to seem too interested. So after speaking to the doctors about the Ja'kar's food, she went back to taking statements. But Gonzoles kept her eyes on the crowd around her. Looking for someone who might be watching her or someone who spent time with Phelps.

Gonzoles took the statement of an Orion woman from the southern mountain region of the planet. The skin color of the Orions from that region was a faint green and their eyes were large and set wide apart. When they were first encountered, it was thought that they were a different species than Orions from the northern hemisphere of their planet. But DNA scans proved the difference to be minimal, merely a racial difference.

"So you were the systems analyst on the Odessa, Ms. Hsahsa?" Gonzoles asked after the Orion woman had invited her to sit down on the bunk. "Is that department head or assistant or what?"

"Transport ships rarely have more than one systems analyst, Commander." Tificat Hsahsa smiled. "There is a chief engineer and two assistants per shift. But as far as ship's integrated systems go, I was it."

"How long have you worked for Vasco?" Gonzoles asked.

"I guess about seven standard years." Hsahsa gathered her light honey colored hair in a pony tail to get it off her neck. "Hot in here. Ms. Vasco, herself, hired me."

"Where were you when the attack began?"

"Main engineering." Hsahsa said. "There were some unusual problems with the environmental controls. I was trying to find out what was wrong."

"What was wrong?" Gonzoles asked.

"We had just started the analysis." Hsahsa began braiding her long hair as she spoke. "I hadn't even been able to rule anything out. Except that the shields weren't responding. And that had nothing to do with the problem at hand. So I just noted it and put it on my list."

"Was your list long?"

"The Odessa was well maintained. I've been on many freighters in much worse shape." Hsahsa said. "But there were always things to do. And there were a few problems with the upgrades. Nothing we couldn't handle."

"Was this the same problem that Mr. Phelps and Mr. Choi were working on?" Gonzoles asked.

"Yes." She nodded. "I sent Marty down to check it out from the control room. Phelps

must have been on duty in the hold at the time. Marty was just beginning to send me some readings when the attack began."

"Did Marty Choi realize the shields were down?"

"The shields were up." Hsahsa said. "They just weren't responding to commands from engineering. If I had found the shields were down that close to Cardassian space, I would have informed the bridge immediately."

"I've already spoken to Mr. Phelps." Gonzoles said. "Have you seen Mr. Choi lately? I haven't gotten his statement yet."

"Um..." Hsahsa looked around the crowded room. "That's him. Over in the corner. See him? He's the one with wavy black hair that looks like it needs to be cut."

"I see him. Thanks." Gonzoles got up and walked over to Marty Choi in the corner. He was reading something on a computer padd. "Excuse me, Mr Choi?"

He looked up at her from his chair in the corner. "Yeah?"

"I'm Lt. Commander Gonzoles." She smiled. "I am taking everyone's statements regarding the attack. And it's your turn."

"I don't know what I can tell you." He shrugged and turned off his padd. "I was in the hold at the time."

"I'm just trying to get an overall picture of what was happening." Gonzoles said.

"Why?" Choi stood up to face Gonzoles. He eyed her suspiciously. She was just an inch or two shorter than Marty Choi.

"Because Captain Sulu ordered me to." Gonzoles shrugged and smiled. "Why else?"

"I hear you." He smiled for the first time. "Ok. We had wide temperature variations and some of the cargo was temperature sensitive. So Tificat Hsahsa asked me to go check it. I was in the control room. I sent Sherman Phelps out to scan the cargo. The ship was hit. The whole thing rocked. Cargo was coming loose all over the place. I lost contact with Sherm so I went to find him. The call came to abandon ship, so we headed for the nearest escape pod."

"When you were in the control room, were the shields up or down?"

"Up." Choi said. "There had been pirates in the area and Cardassians. The shields were up the whole trip. Why? Was there a problem with the shields?"

"Maybe." Gonzoles said. "If they were down it would make the Odessa much more vulnerable. You're sure they were up?"

"Yeah. I mean, I can't remember specifically looking at the shield controls." Choi said. "But I think I would have noticed any change."

"Ok." Gonzoles nodded. "Thanks."

"When are we going to go home?" Choi asked.

"I understand there is a medical transport on its way." Gonzoles said. "Anyone not needed for the investigation will be sent home. Probably tomorrow. Maybe the next day."

"Who is going to be needed for the investigation?" Choi asked.

"I don't know if anyone will." Gonzoles shrugged. "It's not my decision. And my shift was over quite awhile ago. I'm going to finish these statements tomorrow. Good night."

When Captain Sulu returned to the bridge Commander Chekov and Lt. Mirek were still conferring. They had watched the transmission from the Lapolis sensor array several times and had put the long range sensor readings through every computer analysis they had.

Sulu walked around the outer circle of the Excelsior bridge to the science station.

"Well?"

"The sensor array was scanning in that direction at the time of the attack. But it is a long way." Chekov reported. "We have enhanced it as much as possible."

"Did you find anything?"

"There is an energy surge at the beginning of the battle which could be the transportation from the Odessa's hold."

"Could be?" Sulu asked.

"Yes Sir." Chekov frowned. He did not like indefinite answers. "Could be. But right after the energy surge, one of the warp signatures of the attackers disappears."

"One of the attacking ships left the battle?"

"Yes." Chekov said. "And if that energy surge was a transporter beam, what ever they took from the Odessa they were not taking any chances with it."

"What could be that important?" Sulu asked.

"I don't know." Chekov shook his head. "Weapons? New technology?"

"You got everything that you can out of the readings from Lapolis?" Sulu asked.

"I'm afraid so." Chekov said.

"Then go home." Sulu ordered. "See your family."

"You are sure?"

"I'm sure." Sulu turned back to the command station. Without looking at Chekov, he added. "How many times have I taken advantage of you when my family was on board? Go."

When Lt. Commander Gonzoles reached the bridge, Captain Sulu was in the center seat. He turned to her. "Aren't you off duty by now?"

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles said. "But I got a few more statements from the Odessa crew recovering in the gym. According to the systems analyst, the shields were up but not responding to the controls in engineering. I also spoke to Marty Choi who was in the hold control room. He also says the shields were up the entire time. And he did not mention any cargo being transported out of the hold. So I did not bring it up."

"Interesting." Sulu said. "What kind of feeling did you get from Mr. Choi and the systems analyst? Are they lying?"

"It's possible, Sir." Gonzoles thought about it for a minute. "But while Ms. Hsahsa seemed forthcoming, Mr. Choi did seem overly concerned with what happens next. Although he did not contradict himself, I trust him less than Ms. Hsahsa."

"Good work, Commander." Sulu nodded to her. "Now, go home. I'll see you on first shift."

"Aye Captain." Gonzoles turned to go. "Good night, Sir."