

Captain Sulu walked into sickbay. It was still crowded but more organized than the day before. No patients were on the floor and all the wounds had been cleaned and dressed. Most of the patients had severe burns, but the burning plasma stink was gone. Sulu checked with the charge nurse. He directed the Captain to the Odessa's captain's bed.

Captain Sulu approached the resting man quietly. What was left of his once black hair was singed grey. The damage to his face was severe. The doctors reported he would heal but reconstruction of his face would be a long and difficult process. Sulu spoke softly. "Captain Shah?"

Shah opened his eyes and looked towards Sulu. He sighed and nodded with just the barest movement of his head. "That's me."

"I'm Captain Sulu. Are you able to talk about the battle?"

"Yeah." He took careful breaths between each word, trying his best not to cause himself any more pain. One of the doctors saw his distress and administered medication by hypo spray to a relatively unaffected area on Shah's chest. "I realize you need as much information as possible. I'll try to help."

"Good." Sulu pulled a chair up and sat down next to the bed. "I understand you lost several of your bridge crew during a hull breach. My condolences, Sir."

"Thank you Captain." Shah said. The medicine was starting to take effect. It was still not easy to talk, but he could manage. "The failure of the emergency bulk head shields bothers me most."

"Why is that?"

"Prior to this trip, the Odessa spent three weeks in space dock for a complete overhaul and systems upgrade." Shah explained. "Unless the system had taken a direct hit, it should not have failed."

"It hadn't taken a hit?" Sulu asked.

"No." Shah said. "Main shields themselves took a beating, but the control systems had not. Communications were out. Sensor and weapons were targeted."

"Communications were out?" Sulu raised his eyebrow. "Who sent the mayday?"

"Must have been one of the other ships in the convoy." Shah said. "It wasn't us."

"Captain Shah, did you realize that some cargo was transported off the Odessa either before or early during the attack?" Sulu asked.

"Shields were up." Shah said. "How was it managed?"

"I don't know yet." Sulu sighed. "Our investigation has been hindered by the lack of sensor, communication, and duty logs."

"Was the database on the escape pod compromised?" Shah asked.

"No." Sulu said. "The logs were never transferred."

"That's impossible." Shah almost sat up, but the pain kept him in his bed. "Unless... Someone must have reprogrammed the emergency systems."

"That was our thought as well." Sulu nodded. "Was there anyone new in the crew? Anyone you are not sure of?"

"Not really." Shah shook his head. He laid back against his pillow and closed his eyes. He had to take a couple of deep breaths before he could manage to look at Sulu again. "Most of the crew had been with Vasco for years."

"Most." Sulu nodded. "Vasco has provided the ship's employment records. We're checking into them now. Think back over the trip. If anything out of place comes to mind, please let me know."

"Of course." Shah closed his eyes again. Sulu was about to walk away when Shah opened his eyes suddenly. "Captain Sulu. Whoever sabotaged my ship must have tampered with the structural shields as well. Half my bridge crew was lost. Murdered. Find them!"

"I will do my best, Sir." Sulu assured Captain Shah. "Try to get some rest. I will keep you informed."

Shah nodded and closed his eyes again. He was asleep before Sulu left his bedside. Sulu was on his way out of sickbay when Gonzoles voice came across the ship's comline. "Captain Sulu to the bridge. Senior staff: report to the bridge."

"Bridge." Sulu said in the turbo lift. He opened the comline. "Gonzoles, report."

"Cardassian Galor-class Warship, Captain." Gonzoles reported. "Still on her side of the border, but approaching fast. Warp six. ETA four minutes."

When Sulu walked onto the bridge, Smith was taking over the helm station from Ensign Hoban. Gonzoles left the command chair for the navigation station. Chekov and Lt. Mirek got to the bridge minutes after Sulu. Ensign Levin had been manning the science station. Commander Chekov reassigned him to the third science station.

"Do we have an identification?" Sulu asked before sitting down.

"No Sir." Mirek answered. "The ship's transponder code does not match any Cardassian ship known to the Federation."

"Hail them, Rand."

"Channel open, Captain."

"Cardassian vessel. This is Captain Hikaru Sulu of the Federation Starship Excelsior." Sulu said. "Please identify yourself."

"This is the Cardassian ship Wolmof." A Cardassian man appeared on the Excelsior's screen. His skin tone was a paler green than most Cardassians Sulu had encountered before, but he had the characteristically long neck. "I am Gul Rowkant. I am here to offer help in your search. Our long range sensor array recorded the attack on the convoy."

"We have already recovered the survivors, Gul Rowkant." Sulu said. "Just what help did you have in mind?"

"If you have recovered all the survivors, why has your fleet not withdrawn from the disputed border area?" Gul Rowkant asked.

"There is the matter of the investigation of the raid." Sulu shrugged. "And Starfleet is not required to clear ship movements with the Cardassian military. In less than a minute you will cross the border into Federation space. Unless it is your intention to provoke a war, change your course."

"Who is to say where the border lies? This sector is in dispute." Rowkant said. "And you, Captain, have no authority over my ship."

"That may be true." Sulu acknowledged. "But I have four starships and eight smaller Starfleet vessels. You are only one warship. The odds are in my favor, Gul."

"The odds can change very quickly." Rowkant snapped and terminated the connection abruptly. He disappeared from the view screen. The large war ship slowed her approach.

Mr. Chekov studies the scanners. "The Wolmof is adjusting course. She is staying on her side of the border. But I don't think Rowkant is going anywhere fast."

"Cardassian pride." Sulu said. "Keep an eye on him, Chekov. No doubt he is calling for reinforcements right now."

"Aye." Chekov nodded.

"Rand, open a channel to the Tian Nan Men and the Potemkin." Sulu ordered.

"Aye Captain." Rand nodded. In a few moments Captain William MacLean and Captain Ava Mueller appeared next to each other on Excelsior's main view screen. Mueller was younger than the other two captains having just assumed command of the Potemkin two years before.

"Morning Captains." Sulu said. "I assume you were paying attention."

"It certainly took them long enough to respond." Captain Mueller said. "They had to know we had picked up all the survivors."

"Of course." MacLean said. "It just makes them nervous having this many Starfleet ships in the disputed area. The Cardasians just want us to know they are watching."

"I wouldn't write it off as all bluster, Mac." Sulu said. "And I would not be surprised if more Cardasian ships showed up. Have you learned any more from your investigations?"

"What we have learned so far does not make much sense." Mueller said. "There are accusations from the Verillian crew of sabotage and espionage. But there is absolutely no proof."

"But they may have a point." MacLean said.

"If you are referring to the lack duty logs," Mueller said. "It was a quick battle. The captain may not have had time to make the transfer. And without the logs who is to say if the transfer was ever ordered."

"According to the Vasco Company." Sulu said. "The transfer would have been automatic on their ships. It would seem someone has tampered with the ship's emergency systems."

"Have you found out any more about the cargo that was beamed off the ship?" MacLean asked.

"No." Sulu shook his head. "I'd like to talk to the convoy captains and as many of the bridge crew members as possible. All the Odessa bridge crew that made it to the escape pods are in very serious condition. But maybe someone from one of the other ships saw something."

"We've been taking survivor's statements." MacLean said. "We'll sift through them and see who was in a position to see anything."

"Thanks Mac."

"We should order the smaller ships to a safer position considering the Cardassian threat." Captain Mueller suggested.

"Good idea." Sulu nodded. "If you would, Captain Mueller, go through their survivors lists and transfer any bridge crew to Excelsior."

"Of course, Captain Sulu." She nodded. "My first officer has been studying the transmission from the Lapolis sensor array. And he believes he has a heading for the first ship that left the battle."

"Where?" Sulu asked.

"Into the Badlands." Mueller said. "And if he continued on that heading into Cardassian space."

"But once in the Badlands, the ship could have changed course." Sulu said. "It could be

anywhere by now."

"Worth investigating, don't you think?" Mueller said.

"Yes." Sulu nodded. "How many survivors do you have on board, Captain?"

"Ninety seven." Mueller said. "If I could transfer them to other ships for transport home, I would be free to patrol the Badlands. Perhaps flush the attacker out."

"Ok." Sulu nodded. "The smaller ships are full. See how many the Tian Nan Men and the Eagle can take. Excelsior will take the rest."

Mueller nodded. "Potemkin out."

As a department head, Mr. Smith had a small office on deck two. He left Ensign Sadat at the bridge helm station after the staff meeting. He had not had time to personalize the office in any way. Everything in it was standard issue.

At his desk computer, Smith called up all the information on the three transport companies involved in the convoy. Convoys of freighters were not unusual. The three companies had ships together in different combination on six previous occasions in the last year alone. Each had also been in convoys with others.

He accessed Rigel's large civilian space dock. Vasco's largest ship had spent three weeks there just before the convoy left for the colonies along the Cardassian border. But Vasco's other ship was not there. It had stopped at Starbase Twenty Three before meeting up with the convoy.

"Smith to Commander Gonzoles."

"Gonzoles here." She appeared on his screen. From what he could see of her office, it was decorated in bright colors with a collection of plants on a table behind her.

"I'm having no luck looking into this convoy, Gonzoles." Smith said. "As far as I can tell, these four ships were never all in the same place at the same time. No one had access to all four ships."

"Then what ever was done, must have been done during the trip." Gonzoles said.

"Without being detected?" Smith asked. "How?"

"I don't know." Gonzoles said. "If I was you, I'd talk to Yaz."

Smith smiled at her. "What's a Yaz?"

"Lt. Commander Yazdani." Gonzoles laughed. "He's second engineering officer. This is just the kind of puzzle he loves. He's like a bull dog, he will work the puzzle until he finds the answer."

"Great, I'll talk to him." Smith said. "Have you gotten anywhere with the statements?"

"Actually I am starting to make some progress."

"You sound surprised." Smith laughed.

"It seems the first officer of the Wi-kar was on sensors when one of the ships beamed cargo off the Odessa." Gonzoles said. "I'm having the entire bridge crew transferred over so I can talk to them in person. I may be able to get a heading or ID on the ship that left the fight early."

"Over achiever at work." Smith teased. "Thanks, Gonzoles."

"Any time, Smith."