

Lt. Commander Smith walked into engineering. A thin pale Lt. commander who was quite a bit shorter than Smith was in command. "Lt. Commander Yazdani?"

"Mr. Smith, right?" Yaz smiled.

"Right." Smith nodded. "I'm looking into this convoy and how someone might have sabotaged the emergency systems and controlled the shields remotely without alerting the crew. Commander Gonzoles suggested I talk to you."

"Ok." Yaz said. "So what have you got?"

"The lead ship, the Odessa, was in a commercial space dock in the Rigel system just prior to this trip." Smith said. "That is where the convoy was gathered. It made several stops from there. What I need from you is some idea of how these systems can be covertly bypassed."

"We'd have to know a little more about the ships. Commercial freighters and tugs are usually a hodge-podge of technology. I'd talk to the engineer." Yaz said. He walked away from Smith to an engineering station. "Yazdani to Gonzoles."

"Gonzoles here. What can I do for you, Yaz?"

"Gonzo, who's the top engineering officer from the convoy that we have on board?" Yaz asked.

"Tificate Hsahsa." Gonzoles said. "Systems analyst. She's assigned a cot in the gym on deck eleven. She's the only Orion there."

"Thanks. Yazdani out." Yaz turned back to Commander Smith. "Let's go ask the engineer."

While they rode together in the turbo lift, Mr. Smith said. "Yaz and Gonzo? I guess you two have known each other awhile."

"At least fifteen years, Mr. Smith. I've been called Yaz since I was a kid. I couldn't resist giving Gonzoles the name. She's just so damn serious." Yaz stopped himself. After all he did not know the new third officer. "If you know what I mean, Sir."

"I've known Lt. Commander Gonzoles for a day and a half." Smith grinned. "And I know exactly what you mean."

"Ms. Hsahsa?" Smith asked the muscular woman with the pale green skin and log honey colored hair. She sat on her bunk studying a computer padd.

"That's me." She answered without looking up. After a second she looked up at the two Starfleet officers. Tificate Hsahsa smiled. When she stood, she was as tall as Yazdani. "Call me Tificate."

"Gladly." Yaz smiled. "I'm Yaz, chief systems analyst on Excelsior. This is Mr. Smith, our third officer."

"Ah," She nodded to Smith but turned her attention to Yazdani. "An engineer. Did you come for business or pleasure?"

"Business first." Yaz said with a smile. "After that, who knows."

"We have a few questions for you, Ms. Hsahsa." Smith said. "There is a small room down the hall where we can talk. If you are willing."

"Of course." Tificate nodded. "Ms. Vasco wants to get to the bottom of things as quickly as possible."

Lt. Commander Smith led them to a small empty room. It was a backup control room for primary phasers. The walls were lined with engineering access terminals and weapons systems readouts. Two rolling chairs were secured to the duty stations. Yaz unlocked the chairs and offered one to Tificate before sitting on the other.

"You've spoken to Ms. Vasco?" Smith leaned against a relatively clear area of the station. "When was that?"

"This morning." Tificate said. "She came all the way out here to get the answers. Of course that doesn't surprise me."

"Why's that?" Smith asked.

"This entire trip was rush-rush." Tificate said. "And the family was pushing it from the beginning."

"Is that unusual?"

"It's not the first time." Tificate said. "But it is not business as usual either. You don't think Vasco is involved in the raid. Do you?"

"Of course not." Smith shrugged. "We just have to ask all the questions. What we really wanted to talk to you about was the problems with the emergency systems and the shields."

"What problems?"

"Well," Yaz took over. He leaned his elbows on his knees. "There's been a little problem with the investigation. None of the command logs were transferred to the escape pods. So we've got nothing to look at."

"The command logs are transferred automatically." Tificate said. "Captain Shah logged the abandon ship order properly."

"How do you know that?" Smith asked.

"I was in engineering." Tificate said. "Whenever we are on alert status I have the command log on screen. I am not about to wait for them to tell me what's going on. I need to know right away."

"What was going on?" Yaz asked.

"The shields were taking a beating from the attacker. I was trying to reinforce. I had shifted power from everything possible to the shield matrix." Tificate said. "It was a mess. Structural shields integrity on the bridge was taking a nosedive. The Captain called abandon ship just in time. Some of the bridge crew did not make it to the pod."

"You told Lt. Commander Gonzales that the shields weren't responding to commands from engineering." Smith said.

"Right."

"But you just said you were working on the shields in engineering." Smith clarified. "How is that possible?"

"I by passed the effected control systems." Tificate said.

"Just like that?" Smith asked.

"I've worked for Vasco for eight years. I've been systems analyst on the Odessa for over three." Tificate told Smith. "I know every millimeter of that ship. I could by pass those controls with my eyes closed."

"Who else could?" Yaz asked.

Tificate stopped and looked at him. "You think the ship was sabotaged."

"That would be kind of hard to prove without the command logs." Smith observed. "So who is capable of getting rid of those logs without anyone knowing about it?"

"I could probably do it, if I thought about it long enough." Tificate said. "Maybe Kertell could have. No body else that I know of on the ship has the knowledge."

"Who is Kertell?"

"He was our first officer." Tificate said. "He did not make it off the bridge."

"What kind of shield matrix were you using?" Yaz asked.

"Cadillac 850."

"And the structural sub?"

"Just upgraded." Tificate said. "It was Korn 30Pi."

"Top of the line." Yaz noted. "But I didn't know Korn and Cadillac were compatible."

"The command protocols were custom made in the Edge environment." Tificate said.

"We also have subroutines by Nakamora, Tre'petar, and Raye just to name a few. We can make just about any program talk to any other."

"What about the other ships?" Smith asked. "Who could have remotely sabotaged the convoy?"

"Well," Tificate thought about it. "The ships in the convoy maintained an open comlink during the voyage. So anyone who knew what they were doing could jack into the link. Choose the right frequency and no one would notice."

"Maybe E band." Yaz suggested.

"That or microbar six." Tificate nodded.

"Microbar six?" Smith asked.

"It's the grid the comlink is built on." Yaz said. He glanced up at the new officer. "I'm surprised you didn't know that, Mr. Smith."

"If I knew everything, you wouldn't have a job." Smith shrugged. He stood up. "Mr. Yazdani, explore every possibility with Ms. Hsahsa. Let me know if you find any way that all four emergency systems could be compromised without being detected. I'll report to the captain what we have so far."

"Aye Sir." Yaz nodded. "That is if Tificate doesn't mind helping."

"Anything is better than sitting on that cot doing nothing." Tificate said. She smiled at Yaz. "I'd love to see Excelsior's warp engines."

"Let me know, Yaz." Smith said on his way out.

"Sure thing." Yaz nodded.

"Sure thing?" Tificate laughed. "Is that a military term?"

"It will do." Yaz nodded.

"Excuse me, Captain." Mr. Smith said from the door of Sulu's ready room.

"Come in, Mr. Smith." Sulu looked up from his computer screen. Commander Chekov was leaning on the desk, looking over Sulu's shoulder. He straightened up when Smith came into the room. "Do you have some information on the sabotage?"

"I have Mr. Yazdani talking to the Odessa's systems analyst about how it might have been

accomplished and who would have the knowledge to do it." Smith said. He hesitated before adding. "She did say something I thought I should report."

"What?" The Captain asked.

"Ms. Hsahsa said that the entire trip had been a rush job and that the Vasco family was pushing hard." Smith said. "More than normal."

"Did she know why?" Chekov asked.

"No Sir." Smith said. "But she had spoken to Ms. Vasco here on the ship."

"She did?" Sulu said. "About what?"

"Ms. Hsahsa just said that Ms. Vasco wanted to get the answers as soon as possible." Smith looked at Sulu and tried not to look at Chekov. "Based on that she is cooperating with our investigation."

"Well, I didn't tell Cathy she couldn't speak to her employees." Sulu said. "Thank you, Mr. Smith. Dismissed."

"That was a hasty retreat." Chekov said after Smith had left. "He's not having much luck when it comes to my wife, is he?"

"Who does?" Sulu smiled. "He reported what he heard. What else could he do? So do you know anything about this rush job?"

"Cathy tells me about Vasco business, but I don't know anything about this convoy." Chekov said. "Perhaps I wasn't listening. But I will ask her about it."

"I assume you are planning on having lunch with the family." Sulu said. Chekov nodded. "Afterwards, bring Cathy back here. We'll talk about it and bring her up to date on the investigation."

"Very well." Chekov nodded.

"Captain Sulu." Lt. Commander Gonzoles conducted the introductions in the Captain's ready room. "This is Captain Yaj Orm of the Verillian ship Wi-kar. And this is First Soble."

"Captain. First." Sulu nodded. Verillians thought physical contact was too intimate for casual handshakes. "Please sit down."

The two Verillian officers towered over the Human officers. Both were of muscular build but of different races. The Captain had a reddish brown complexion with short red hair. The First was a lighter tan color with thick hair only slightly darker than his skin. Their company uniforms were a casual olive tunic over matching skin tight leggings.

"Captain Sulu." Captain Orm said after all were seated around Sulu's desk. "We have given our statements to Mr. Gonzoles. How else may we serve?"

"I understand First Soble saw the ship that left the battle early." Sulu said. "I need to know every detail you can remember."

"I understand." First Soble said. "I was on sensors. The battle had just begun. I had monitored the destruction of two fighters. One ship was of a different configuration than the others. It was unknown to me and to our data banks. This was the ship that left."

"Was there a transport off the Odessa?" Sulu asked.

"Yes." Soble said. "Just before the unknown ship went to warp."

"And you informed Captain Orm?" Sulu asked.

"Yes."

"I attempted to contact the Odessa." Orm said. "A large section of shielding was down. I asked if they needed evac. The Odessa did not answer our hail. It was then that our shields failed and hull breeches were experienced through out the ship. I sounded abandon ship."

"Did you transfer command logs to the command escape pod?" Sulu asked.

"Of course." Orm nodded. "I understand from the repair crews of the Potemkin that the logs were lost. However the transfer was ordered."

"First Soble, how much of that unknown configuration do you think you could recreate?" Captain Sulu asked.

"With the proper computer access," Soble said. "I should be able to put something together that may help."

"Commander Gonzoles." Sulu said. "Please assign our guests quarters and work with First Soble to identify the unknown ship."

"Aye Captain." Gonzoles nodded and started for the door.

"Captain Orm." Sulu said. "If I could have a moment alone?"

"Of course." Orm remained seated while Gonzoles and Soble left. "What is it, Captain Sulu?"

"All the information I am getting points to sabotage of the convoy." Sulu said. Orm nodded. "Is there anyone in the crew that you are unsure of? Anyone new? Anyone acting differently? Anyone with a personal problem that they did not have before?"

"No one immediately comes to mind." Orm said. "But I will think about it, Captain Sulu."

"Thank you." Sulu stood up to escort the Verillian Captain out of the ready room.

Orm stopped him as he came around the desk. "There is Tona."

"Tona?"

"Deto Tona." Orm explained. "An assistant engineer. A Lenarian."

"Lenarians are not known for their love of the Federation." Sulu said.

"We do not hire crew members according to their politics, Captain." Orm said. "He is a good engineer and that's what we needed at the time."

"All right." Sulu nodded. "Do you mention Tona because he is Lenarian? Or is there something else?"

"Tona used an excessive amount of com time and other computer time." Orm reported. "His supervisor had submitted a report on it the day before the attack."

"Did you talk to him?"

"I received the report during his sleep period." Orm said. "Once the ship was taken, it hardly seemed important."

"Thank you for your help, Captain." Sulu said. "I will look into it and keep you informed."

"Ok, I'm here." Cathy said. "Now can we end the mystery?"

"Mystery?" Sulu asked.

"The mystery of why you want to see me." Cathy sat down in the chair in front of Sulu's desk. "Pavel said you wanted to give me an update."

"She doesn't believe me." Chekov shrugged.

"If there was any real news you would have told me by now." Cathy said to her husband. "So there is something else. Something to do with that red alert this morning?"

"That was a Cardassian warship." Sulu said.

"Here?" Cathy asked. "What happened? Did you destroy it?"

"Had we been in a battle you would have known." Chekov said.

"Gul Rowkant did not like the odds." Sulu said. "He retreated to his own side of the disputed area. Reinforcements are no doubt on the way."

"How long?"

"Don't know." Sulu shrugged. "But the quicker we are done here the better. I do have a few questions."

"Ah ha." Cathy grinned at Pavel.

"You don't take this very seriously, Cathy." Sulu noted.

"I take the death of my employees and the loss of my ships very seriously, Hikaru." Cathy said, turning her attention back to the captain. "Anything I can do to help, I will. Ask your questions."

"Was this convoy special?" Sulu asked.

"Special?" Cathy asked. "In what way?"

"One of your employees said the family was pushing this trip." Sulu said.

"The colonies were getting desperate for supplies." Cathy said. "Several ships were lost in this area. When they called on us, they needed delivery right away."

"And they were willing to pay extra?" Chekov asked.

"Yes." Cathy nodded. "The extra paid for the fighters that were suppose to protect the convoy. If Starfleet had bothered to send an escort, none of this would have happened."

"Did you ask for an escort?" Sulu asked.

"Yes." Cathy nodded. "I assumed you knew. Don't they tell you anything?"

"Who did you speak to?" Chekov asked.

"Some minor official in the civilian outreach department." Cathy shrugged off the questions. "He said the orders came down from Admiral Hahn. Who ever that is. They wouldn't even let me talk to him."

"Her." Sulu said.

"That's how close I got." Cathy said. "I had no idea. Anyway, I got zero cooperation from Starfleet regarding this trip."

"Is that why you were pushing?" Sulu asked. "Zero cooperation?"

"I was pushing because of the contract." Cathy said. "There was a bonus for quick delivery."

"And a penalty for missing the deadline?" Chekov asked.

"Pavel, you've been listening." Cathy smiled at him. "I thought when your eyes glazed over you were off on some world I've never been to."

"The penalty?" Sulu asked.

"Yes, there was a monetary penalty for late delivery. It was a good deal. Vasco jumped

at it, as did Kella and Pu-atrem." Cathy said. Sulu and Chekov looked at her blankly. "The other two transport companies."

"Oh." Sulu nodded. "Is this normal business?"

"Normal?" Cathy shrugged. "Not really. But incentives are not uncommon for difficult jobs."

"Who proposed these incentives?" Sulu asked.

"Vasco was approached by the administrator's office of New Lima Colony." Cathy said. "After I had trouble getting a Starfleet escort, I told the administrator and colonial council of the problem. They approved additional money for the escort and the incentives. I think they were getting desperate."

Yaz opened the senior officer comline from engineering and said, "Yazdani to Commander Smith."

"Smith here."

"Could you meet me in engineering, Mr. Smith?" Yaz asked. "I have a couple of possibilities."

"On my way." Smith said. Yaz closed the comline and turned to Tificate.

"This is beautiful, Yaz." Tificate Hsahsa said as she studied the controls of the main engineering station. "I've never worked with anything like it."

"What have you got?" Mr. Smith asked when he walked in only moments later.

Yaz pointed to a large screen against the wall. He worked a few controls on the station directly under it. Computer generated graphic of four ships appeared on the screen. Each ship was connected to the other by a line. "We've put together a model of the convoy. The energy beam connecting the ships represents the comlink."

"Ok." Smith nodded. The largest ship was in the lead. It represented the Odessa. The last ship was the spherical Verillian vessel. Below the ships was a detailed graphic of the comlink. It showed each frequency and the direction of the energy flow. "How did you put the breakdown of the comlink together?"

"Most of it is standard stuff." Yaz said. "Any of the custom configs, Tificate provided from memory."

"Good." Smith nodded. "So what do you think?"

"The way the link is set up." Tificate Hsahsa said as she worked a couple of controls to change the comlink display. "Someone could have sent computer viruses through the microbar grid that were targeted to the emergency systems. The link kept contact with all four ships in the convoy at all times. It was not always an audio visual link, but it was always a full systems link."

"Who could do something like this?"

"Vasco emergency systems have tight security encryption codes. I'm sure the other ships do as well. You are talking about a high-level computer expert. Fifteen or sixteen." Tificate said. "We didn't have anyone like that on Odessa."

"Do we have anyone at that level?" Smith asked.

"Mr. Chekov." Yaz said. "Lt. Mirek. Probably a few others in the science department. I'm level thirteen overall, sixteen on warp systems."

"We all know our own systems best." Smith nodded. "So we have a model of what could have happened but no evidence of who or when."

"If only we had those logs." Yaz said.

"Mirek is looking into the backgrounds of the Vasco crews." Smith said. "Maybe she'll find a laborer with an advanced degree in computer programming."

"Right." Yaz laughed.

"What about the other crews?" Tificate asked. "Just because Vasco put the convoy together doesn't mean the saboteur was one of ours."

"With Ms. Vasco being on the Excelsior, we have ready access to Vasco records." Smith said. "The other crews are being checked. Yaz, could this virus method be used to compromise the structural shields as well?"

"Sure." Yaz nodded. "If the saboteur could break one security code, why not all."

"Would the systems on the Odessa warn of unauthorized access?" Smith asked.

"The code was authorization." Tificate explained. "The computer had no way of knowing if you had a right to the code or not."

"Of course." Smith said. He silently reminded himself not to ask the engineers stupid questions. "What about the shields that were down when the controls said they were up?"

"That could be accomplished by virus." Yaz nodded. "It's a little more difficult. The freighters had three different types of shields. I'm not sure how closely the virus would have to be targeted."

"So we are looking for a computer expert who either has or can break the security codes of all the ships in the convoy." Smith said. "I'll report to the captain. If you think of anything else, let me know."

When Smith went back to the ready room, Cathy Vasco Chekov was there with Commander Chekov and Captain Sulu. Sulu waved him in.

"You have something new, Mr. Smith?"

"A theory at least, Captain." Smith said. "However no evidence at this point."

"Ok, what's your theory?"

"A comlink kept the ships of the convoy in touch at all times." Smith said. "It is Lt. Commander Yazdani's opinion that a targeted computer virus could have been sent by microbar transmission to the emergency systems of all four ships without being detected. This method could also account for the corruption of the structural shields and the false control readings of the hold shields."

"Pavel?" Sulu asked.

"It is possible." Chekov said. "But it would require very sophisticated computer work. Breaking the security codes. Targeting the viruses to only particular files and systems. And doing all this without anyone noticing the large amount of computer time."

"Thank you, Mr. Smith." Sulu said. Smith turned and left the ready room.

"Who could do that?" Cathy asked.

"You mean besides Mr. Spock?" Chekov said. "A Starfleet level sixteen tech. A handful of civilian computer experts. This is not something the average person can do."

"You could do it." Sulu noted.

"Yes." Chekov nodded. "I probably could. But not without a lot of thought and a lot of computer time."

"What if someone gave this person the security codes?" Cathy asked. "Would that make it easier?"

"Of course." Chekov said.

"Have you had security problems before this?" Sulu asked.

"There may or may not have been unauthorized access to our computers when the Odessa was in the space dock at Rigel." Cathy said. "All security codes were changed as a precaution."

"Did you change the algorithms the codes are based on?" Chekov asked.

"I was told it wasn't necessary." Cathy said. "And there wasn't time."

"Who said it wasn't necessary?" Sulu asked.

"Their security chief." Cathy said. "Mr. Gan Nurr."

"I will speak to Mr. Nurr. Find out how much of a security breach there was." Chekov said. "And if there were any suspects."

"Good." Sulu nodded. "Look into a Lenarian named Deto Tona. He was an engineer on the Wi-kar that used a lot of computer time."

"Finally." Chekov said. "A possibility."

"Damn." Cathy shook her head sadly. "If I changed those algorithms, all those people would still be alive."

"It's not your fault." Captain Sulu said. "We are only working with a theory. There is still a lot we don't know."

Cathy sighed. "Will we ever really know?"

"Red alert." Lt. Briscoe called on the ship-wide comline from the bridge command chair. "Captain to the bridge."

Captain Sulu left the ready room without a word. Chekov was following him, when Cathy stood up and stopped him. "Pavel, what is it?"

"Don't worry." Chekov stopped and faced her. "Get the boys and return to our cabin. I will let you know what happens."

He turned to go. His expression was serious. His mind on the business at hand. But her hushed tone stopped him again. "Pavel."

"I must go."

"I know." Cathy reached out to lay her hand on his arm. Pavel allowed himself to soften and turn towards his wife. Her pale blue eyes seemed liquid with unshed tears. "I love you."

"I love you too." Chekov took her in his arms and kissed her quickly. With a tight hug, Pavel whispered. "Please, go to the boys."