

"Nice of you to join us, Mr. Chekov." Sulu said when Chekov came out of the ready room. Sadat and Briscoe manned the forward stations. While the Captain was bringing him up to date, Chekov circled the upper bridge to the science station. "We've got two more Galor class warships joining the Wolmof. Still five minutes away."

"Then I had plenty of time." Chekov said without a glance towards the center of the bridge. He was staring at the sensor readouts. The Excelsior and the Tian Nan Men were both at full alert with shields up and weapons systems powered.

"The Eagle is escorting the smaller ships to the rendezvous point at warp one." Lt. Mirek reported. "The Potemkin is on the edge of short range sensor net. She will disappear in to the Badlands before the two Cardassian ships drop out of warp."

"Hail the Tian Nan Men. Secured channel, Rand." Sulu ordered. Rand nodded and Captain MacLean appeared on the Excelsior's main view screen. "Looks like it's just us, Mac."

"Well, as long as they are paying attention to us," MacLean said. The two captains had known each other a long time and had worked together before. They were thinking along the same lines. "The others are safe. And we are not married to this position."

"I'd rather not leave the Potemkin's back exposed." Sulu said. "We'll hold position as long as possible."

"Agreed." The captain of the Miranda class starship nodded. They were both Fleet Captains, but this was Sulu's sector. He was in command. "Of course, general order 87 is still in effect."

"I know." Sulu said. He did not intend to fire the first shot. And he would avoid a firefight if at all possible. "We'll do our best."

"As always." Mac smiled. "Tian Nan Men out."

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Lt Commander Gonzoles walked briskly into her office. She had left the Verillian first officer there working on his sensor \contact by memory. The ship was at alert and she did not have much time before she would be needed on the bridge. "How's it going, Soble?"

"I believe this is as close as I can get it, Commander." Soble frowned at the computer screen. He tapped one of the control pads to rotate the silhouette of the mystery ship. "But it is not quite right."

"I've never seen anything like this." Gonzoles studied the screen. She reached over Soble's arm and opened the senior staff comline. "Gonzoles to Smith."

"Smith here."

"Mr. Smith, could you come to my office?" Gonzoles asked. "I need your opinion on a fighter configuration."

"I was just on my way to the bridge." Smith explained. "I don't feel comfortable leaving Ensign Sadat at the helm during the alert with the Cardassians so close at hand."

"I understand." Gonzoles said. "I checked with the bridge. The Cardassian ships are still four minutes away. This shouldn't take that long."

"Aye Commander." Smith answered. "I'm on my way."

"Mr. Smith is an expert?" Soble asked.

"He's a pilot." Gonzoles said. "And he has just transferred from another star ship. So

maybe he's seen something I haven't. And I've never met a pilot that didn't just love to show off his knowledge of rare vessels."

"It's a joke?" Soble laughed.

"I suppose." Gonzoles shrugged. With the red alert, she wasn't much in the mood for jokes. The Cardassians were not always predictable and the political climate along the border seemed to get worse every year.

"Yes." Soble nodded and laughed again.

Soble was a likable person, although Gonzoles wasn't sure of his gender. Verillians all looked the same to her. She forced herself to relax while waiting for Mr. Smith. "You got a first name, First Soble?"

"Sim." Soble said. "And you, Mr. Gonzoles?"

"Rosita." She said. She wasn't sure if Soble used mister as a military term or because he was as confused by Human genders as she was about the Verillians. Of course, it could just be a glitch in the universal translator. Smith walked into the small office. "Mr. Smith, this is the first officer of the Wi-kar. First Sim Soble."

"I was First." Soble shrugged. "Now I am just Sim Soble."

"Nice to know you, Sim Soble." Smith nodded, but did not offer his hand. While Verillians had a reputation as a passionate people, they kept all physical contact between family members only. "You're the one who saw the ship that left the battle. Right?"

"Right." Gonzoles answered. "Sim has pulled on every memory or shadow of a memory to put together the readings and come up with this silhouette. What do you think?"

"Fighter." Smith said. Sim pushed his chair back from the desk to let Smith have a better look. Smith used the controls to manipulate the fighter into different attitudes. He turned it around and over. Finally Smith stopped. He closed one eye. "Couldn't be..."

"What?"

He squinted to let the image slide in and out of focus. "It is!"

"What?" Gonzoles and Soble demanded with one voice.

Lt. Commander Smith straightened up and looked Gonzoles in the eye. "We've got to tell the captain. Now."

"Let's go. See you later, Sim." Gonzoles nodded to the Verillian first officer and hurried after Smith who was already heading for the turbo lift at a dead run. "What's the big deal? What kind of ship is it?"

"Bridge." Smith said when the lift doors had closed. "A class J fighter."

"Can't be."

"A Starfleet class J fighter!" Smith nodded.

"But how?" Gonzoles asked. "They aren't in use. As far as I know only the prototypes have been built."

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"We are being hailed by the Wolmof, Captain." Commander Rand said.

"On screen." Sulu said and faced the bridge's main view screen. "What can I do for you, Gul Rowkant?"

"Captain Sulu." Rowkant smiled. He had the upper hand on the Federation ships and he

would use it. "How goes your investigation?"

"It's moving along." Sulu shrugged. He walked over to the command chair and sat down. "We are exploring all possibilities."

"And the ship that just went into the Badlands." Rowkant said. "Is it seeking out the pirates? Or attempting to enter Cardassian space unnoticed?"

Sulu's calm deep voice betrayed no hesitation or fear. "As I said, we are following up on all possibilities."

"If a Federation Starship enters Cardassian space," Rowkant said, "We would consider that an act of war."

"Really?" Sulu asked. "I see there has been a change in the diplomatic situation. I am surprised that I have not yet been informed."

"The situation hasn't changed." Gul Rowkant smiled. "But the odds have."

"Three to two." Sulu shrugged. He let just a hint of a smile cross his face. "Seems like a fair fight to me. If that's what you're looking for."

Gul Rowkant studied the human captain. He seemed at ease with the possibilities. While the Excelsior had been observed on the Cardassian-Federation border many times, the Wolmof had just been recalled from the other side of the empire to face the Federation threat. Rowkant had never encountered Humans before. All he had to go on were intelligence reports. But this Human did not seem to fear combat. He would have to put the brave face to the test. "Now, Captain, it is time for you to withdraw from the disputed area."

"Not just yet." Sulu said. "I am not finished my investigation."

"Recall your ship from the Badlands." Rowkant demanded.

"Captain." Gonzoles said as she and Smith came off the turbo lift onto the bridge. Sulu turned the command chair towards them. "We have something."

"Excuse me, Gul Rowkant." Sulu said. Rand cut the audio connection to the Cardassian ship and nodded to Sulu. "What is it?"

"The ship that left the battle." Smith said. "It was a Starfleet fighter. J class."

"Not possible." Chekov walked over to the command station. "It is still experimental."

"How did you come up with this?" Sulu asked.

"First Soble put together all the readings he could remember,." Gonzoles said. "I did not recognize the silhouette. I asked Mr. Smith to look at it."

"It seemed familiar when I first saw it." Smith said. "Mr. Soble's silhouette was crude, but it closely matched the j class fighter."

"Closely matched?" Sulu asked.

"Captain, I had to close one eye to see it." Smith said. "But I saw the fighters at Vega Three about a year ago. It's the same ship."

"Thank you. Stations." Sulu nodded. Smith and Gonzoles relieved their junior officers at the forward stations. The captain turned to his first officer. "What do you think?"

"I think we better find out." Chekov said. "Admiral Malkovich or Admiral Reese would know."

"I'm sure." Sulu nodded. "But we're more likely to get a straight answer from Ambassador Spock."

"What about the Cardassians?"

"All three have powered weapons systems and locked on targets." Smith reported. "Just in case we forgot about them."

"Rand." Sulu said. Commander Rand reestablished audio communications with the Wolmof. "Gul Rowkant. Where were we?"

Gul Rowkant had been talking to a junior officer. He whipped his head around to stare at the view screen. His eyes were wide with anger. Impudent human. "You, Captain Sulu, were withdrawing your ship from the Badlands."

"No, that wasn't it." Sulu almost laughed, but that would insult the proud Cardassian. "The Potemkin has orders not to violate Cardassian space."

"And, of course, Starfleet officers never disobey such orders."

"It is frowned upon." Sulu said. "I invite one of your ships to patrol the Badlands with the Potemkin. Perhaps we could flush the attacker between us."

"This attacker is not my problem." Rowkant's refusal to help was a direct insult in Cardassian society. "Your ship has four hours to complete its patrol. Then you will leave or be destroyed."

"Excelsior out." Sulu said.

"One of the new ships is moving towards the Badlands." Chekov said. "Staying on their side of the border."

"Rand, send a copy of the discussion with Rowkant to Captain Meuller on the Potemkin on a secured channel." Sulu ordered. "Then contact Ambassador Spock. I need to speak to him as soon as possible."

"Aye Sir."