

"Kim to Captain Sulu."

Sulu switched on the night light on his nightstand. He checked the time. He had been asleep for a little over four hours. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes as he answered. "Sulu here."

"We've reached the Potemkin, Captain." Kim said. "There has been a battle and she's taken heavy damage. Captain Mueller is waiting to talk to you."

"Give me a minute, Mr. Kim, then put her through." Sulu said. He called for the lights and made a quick trip to the bathroom. When he sat down at his desk, Captain Mueller waited on his view screen. She was in full uniform with her shoulder length light brown hair held back with a thin black headband. Sulu opened the audio line. "Captain."

"Did I get you up, Captain Sulu?" Ava Mueller allowed herself just the barest smile at Sulu's Starfleet issue pajamas.

"Not a problem, Captain Mueller." Sulu said. "Mr. Kim tells me you've taken heavy damage. What happened?"

"We located what was left of the convoy." Mueller reported. "All four ships were damaged beyond repair. Three small freighters were gutting the Wi-kar of computer components when we arrived. We ordered them to surrender. They started to comply but four ships appeared and attacked."

"Appeared?"

"There was asteroid belt with a heavy dust cloud." Mueller said. "The other ships were hiding in that cloud."

"Was the fighter among them?" Sulu asked.

"I did not recognize the configuration, but the ships were comparable in size and power to a Theta class cruiser." Mueller said. "Warp driven with disruptors, torpedoes, and a subspace field disrupter."

"So you couldn't call for help." Sulu said.

"Their size made them more maneuverable and their pilots made the most of it." Mueller said. "If all these pirates are this well equipped, we could have a problem on our hands."

"Pirates?" Sulu asked.

"For lack of a better word on an open channel." She shrugged.

"I see." Sulu said. "Have you destroyed the theta ships?"

"Two." Mueller said. "When the Tian Nan Men joined the fight, the other two left in a hurry. Captain MacLean pursued them. Our warp drive was off line."

"Did you talk to them at all?" Sulu asked.

"Not the Theta class." Mueller said. "However we did capture one of the freighters and with it eight of these pirates."

"If the Tian Nan Men joined you during the fight, you did not have a chance to talk to Captain MacLean at length."

"I did not, Captain Sulu." Mueller said. "What he did have time to say was cryptic. Perhaps you could clarify."

"Give me a few minutes to get dressed." Sulu suggested. "Then, with your permission, I will beam over so we can speak plainly."

"I await your arrival." She nodded. "Potemkin out."

The Potemkin was Excelsior class. It was built four years after the Excelsior and the changes were minor. Except for the different personnel, Sulu would have thought he never left his own transporter room. But when he materialized, it was not Captain Mueller who was waiting. It was a lieutenant.

"Permission to come aboard." Sulu said.

"Permission granted, Sir." The young man answered. "Captain Mueller apologizes, Captain Sulu. She was called to engineering just after speaking with you. She asked me to escort you to her ready room."

"Lead the way, lieutenant." Sulu followed the young man to the turbo lift although he could have found the ready room with his eyes closed. In the lift he looked at him closely. "Do I know you, Lieutenant?"

"Lt. Daniel Hoffman." The young man said. "I served on Excelsior just out of the Academy for eighteen months, Captain. Five years ago."

"Bio lab." Sulu nodded.

"Yes Sir."

"Better position open up?" Sulu asked.

"No Sir." Hoffman's neck reddened. His reasons had not been career oriented at all. "I asked for the transfer to be with my wife. She's a systems analyst here."

"I see." Sulu smiled. The lift stopped and Sulu followed Hoffman down the short corridor to Captain Mueller's ready room. The room was basically the same as Sulu's. Captain Mueller had added a sleek semi circular couch with a coffee table in the corner farthest from her desk. On the coffee table sat a china tea service.

Captain Mueller came in from the bridge. "I'm sorry, Captain Sulu. I hope I haven't kept you waiting."

"Not at all." Sulu said.

"Thank you, Mr. Hoffman." Mueller dismissed the junior officer. He nodded and left. Mueller walked over to the coffee table. She tossed the computer padd she was carrying onto the couch. "Can I offer you a cup of tea? Or would you prefer coffee?"

"Tea, thank you." Sulu said. They sat down together while Mueller poured them each a cup of steaming tea.

"My grandmother is British." Mueller said as she handed a cup to Sulu. "Since I was old enough to sit at the table she insisted on tea every afternoon. I have never gotten out of the habit. And on long days like today, I indulge myself whenever possible."

"English breakfast." Sulu nodded after taking a sip. "One of my wife's favorites. Have you tried any off world teas? I particularly like Vulcan blends."

"Too bitter." Mueller wrinkled her nose in distaste. "But I do enjoy Betazoid celebration tea."

"Too sweet." Sulu shrugged. "Now, shall we get down to business?"

"Yes." Mueller said as she stirred half a spoonful of sugar into her tea. "What is this about terrorist and a j class fighter?"

"According to Ambassador Spock a group that has been fighting the Cardassians for a generation have stolen one of the prototypes of the j class fighter." Sulu said. "They call themselves the Herlan Resistance Force. It seems that one of their members, a woman named

Cros Ripti, struck up a relationship with a crewmember of the convoy. Probably stole his access codes to make the attack easier. Also a company called Ripti shipped the cargo that was transported off the Odessa during the attack. Looks like it was a guidance system for some kind of torpedo, mine, or bomb."

"Why would these Herlans attack a convoy after shipping something on the convoy?" Mueller asked. "Why not just claim their cargo?"

"I don't know." Sulu said. "We are obviously still missing some key information."

"I wonder where these theta class cruisers come in."

"The ships weren't Bolian or Tellerite?" Sulu asked.

"No." Mueller shook her head. "The configuration was totally alien to me. Elliptical main section with two nacelles above and to the rear of the hull. Each had a dish antenna on the forward section that sent out a signal that disrupted our subspace transmissions. I guess they are Herlan."

"The Cardassians took anything of value the Herlan system had to offer." Sulu said. "I would assume that included technology."

"They must have other resources." Mueller shrugged. She put her teacup down and picked up the computer padd. "You said Ripti. Right?"

"Yes."

"I have a Grun Ripti among the pirates that was ripping parts off the Wi-kar." Mueller consulted her padd. "A young man. No more than twenty-five by our standards. Non-responsive to interrogation."

"Mind if I talk to him?" Sulu asked.

"Of course not." Mueller said. "Let's go down to security's briefing room. I don't want to give any prisoners run of the ship with so many key systems off line."

A large security guard brought Grun Ripti into the small briefing room. Captain Sulu and Captain Mueller waited at the table. The guard put the slight young man into the seat across the table from them. He looked from one captain to the other but did not say a word.

"Mr. Ripti." Mueller said. "This is Captain Sulu."

"You are Grun Ripti." Sulu said. "Correct?"

Ripti shrugged. Sulu watched him intently and waited. The young man shifted in his seat. Finally he mumbled, "Yeah."

"Any relation to Cros Ripti?" Sulu asked. The surprise registered in the man's eyes. He tried to look away from Sulu, but kept glancing back at this new captain. "Your mother? Sister? Perhaps a cousin?"

Grun looked at Mueller. "I thought you were the captain."

"I am captain of this ship, the Potemkin." Mueller said. "Captain Sulu is captain of the Excelsior and fleet captain for this sector."

"What's that mean?" Grun asked.

"For your purposes, that means you have to answer my questions." Sulu said. "I am aware Cros Ripti was involved in the raid on the convoy. She was working on Rigel and became

involved with a man who was working on the Odessa. She broke into the Odessa files. She either took or altered the security codes. Making it impossible for the convoy to defend itself and making it possible to transport the guidance system off the Odessa."

Grun's mouth hung open. "You can't know..."

"But I do." Sulu said. "What is your relation to Cros Ripti?"

"She's my sister." Grun said.

"Where is she?" Sulu asked.

"I don't know." Grun smiled at Sulu. This time he met Sulu's intense stare. "I just don't know."

"Then when was the last time you saw her?" Sulu asked. Grun dropped his eyes and shrugged. "Was it before the attack or during?"

"I wasn't there." Grun said.

"So it was your ship's job to come in after and strip the captured ships?" Sulu said. Grun shrugged again. "Is that because your sister didn't trust you in battle? Because you can't take it?"

"No!" Grun yelled suddenly and jumped to his feet. The guard quickly stepped forward and grabbed Grun Ripti by the shoulders. He sat him forcibly back in his seat.

"Then what is it?" Sulu asked quietly.

"I follow orders." Grun stared at the captain with open defiance. "Just like any other soldier."

"You're a soldier." Sulu raised his eyebrow at the young man. Grun nodded. "Then what is your rank?"

"It's not like that. Everybody is the same." Grun said. "We all have the same goal. We would do anything to achieve it. Even die for it."

"That's not a soldier, Mr. Ripti." Sulu said. "That is a zealot. Perhaps a revolutionary. Just what is this goal?"

"Perhaps we can help." Mueller suggested.

"Starfleet?" Grun laughed. "I don't think so."

"We are not fond of the Cardassians either, Mr. Ripti." Sulu said. "But we don't appreciate other interests trying to force us into a war. We like to make the decisions of who we fight and why we fight ourselves."

"We could help your people." Captain Mueller said. "Bring your cause to the attention of the Federation Council."

"That didn't help last time." Grun shrugged.

"Last time?" Sulu asked.

"I never saw my homeworld. I did not have a chance to try to save it." Grun said. "But my father went to the Federation. Evidently our cause was against your rules."

"Our rules?" Mueller asked. "You mean the prime directive."

"Herla was conquered before the Federation made first contact with Cardassia. The council must have considered it an internal matter." Sulu said. "Where is your father now?"

"Captured. Tortured. Murdered."

"I see." Sulu said. "How many of these theta class ships do your people have?" Grun just stared at his questioners. "Where are your people located? Do you have a base of operations? Or do you exist in your fleet only?"

"It would be in your best interest to answer our questions, Mr. Ripti." Mueller said. But he said nothing.

"Return Mr. Ripti to his cell." Sulu ordered. After the guard took the prisoner away. Sulu said. "Reminding him of his father was a mistake. He was starting to cooperate before that."

"His father was obviously a martyr to the cause." Mueller said. "How could you know that?"

"Leave his father out of it as much as possible. It is the relationship with the sister that could help us." Sulu said. "He feels she doesn't trust him."

"She is probably just trying to keep more of her family from getting killed." Mueller said.

"Yes, but he is young." Sulu said. "He could be looking for a way to prove himself. Work on that angle the next time you talk to him. Grun Ripti still has a lot to tell us."

"I will." Mueller nodded. "What about the fighter?"

"If this resistance group has it, we'll only find it by finding their base." Sulu said. "When will you have warp drive back?"

"Another hour." Mueller said.

"I'm going to go look for Mac." Sulu said. "Ambassador Spock has sent me all the information he has on the Herlans. Maybe there is something in there that can help. Let me know if you get anything more from these prisoners."

"I'll continue to questions them." Mueller said. "And I'll join you in the search as soon as I am able."

When Captain Sulu returned to Excelsior, he ordered the ship to follow the course the Tian Nan Men had taken. The computer informed Sulu that his first officer was in Chekov's office on deck two. Sulu leaned in the door and said. "I thought you were going to get some sleep."

"Lt. Kim informed me when you left the ship." Chekov said. The Captain came the rest of the way into the office and sat on Chekov's couch stretching his legs out in front of him. "Aren't you supposed to do that?"

"I guess so." Sulu shrugged. He yawned and leaned back with his hands behind his head. "Sorry. I assume you are going over the information Spock sent."

"Yes." Chekov nodded. "This resistance force has been biting at the Cardassian's heels for quite awhile now. Their raids have been small with months, sometimes years, between attacks. But the raids have all been well planned. The Cardassians have never been able to catch them."

"You're sure?" Sulu straightened up.

Chekov rechecked his information. "They managed to catch one or two of the group over the years. But it did not slow the Herlans down. As a matter of fact, the attacks increased after the capture and presumed execution of members of the group."

"Martyrs." Sulu said.

"Yes." Chekov nodded. "Spock also sent us the details on the J class. Impressive

machine."

Sulu got up and turned Chekov's computer screen toward him. All the information of the classified ship was there. Sulu scanned the stats. "She should be fast."

"Pilots." Chekov laughed. "Yes, she's fast. Too small for torpedoes but she has six state of the art phaser cannons which can be fired simultaneously. Shields draw their power directly from the warp core making them harder to take out."

"It also means you take out shields and warp power is gone." Sulu said.

"But how do you take the shields out when she's flying circles around you?" Chekov asked. "Can't use torpedoes at close range. And a ship this size could easily avoid our phasers ports while still attacking us."

"You are assuming a pilot trained in fighter techniques who knows our ships as well as his own." Sulu said. "When to stay close. When to bob and weave."

"Know your enemy." Chekov shrugged.

"I'm hungry." Sulu said suddenly. "We still have time before the staff meeting."

"Breakfast." Chekov got up. "Sounds good."

In the mess hall they sat down with their meal. "So, how come you aren't asking me about the Potemkin?"

"I already spoke to Commander Dynarski." Chekov said.

"Potemkin's first officer." Sulu nodded. "So you heard about the battle."

"And the theta cruisers and the unresponsive captured freighter crew." Chekov attacked his breakfast with relish. "We are following the course Mac took. The Potemkin should have warp drive within the hour. They will follow us."

"And Grun Ripti?" Sulu asked. "Did you hear about him?"

"Another Ripti?" Chekov looked up from his meal.

"Cros's little brother." Sulu said. "He didn't give us much, but I think we have a crack in his unresponsive shell. Captain Mueller is going to keep working on him."

Sulu and Chekov walked into the briefing room. The rest of the ship's senior staff was already sitting around the table in their customary spots. Smith had automatically taken Lee's old chair next to Gonzoles. The oblong table took up most of the space in the room. A full computer interface with wall mounted view screen was against the wall and could be controlled by a small panel embedded in the table at each place.

"I hope everyone got a good night's sleep." Sulu said. "The Potemkin found what was left of the convoy. Some of the Herlans were gutting one of the tugs of computer components. When Captain Mueller attempted to arrest them, they were attacked by four theta class cruisers."

"Tellerite?" Smith asked.

"Unknown configuration." Sulu said. "The Tian Nan Men joined the fight. Two of the ships were destroyed. Captain MacLean gave chase, while Captain Mueller took prisoners and made repairs. We are now following the course MacLean took."

"I take it this is a different ship than the stolen fighter." Dr. Patrick said.

"Yes." Sulu said. "To give you a frame of reference Pat, the Tellerite theta class ships

have a crew of one hundred and seventy five, carry grade two photon torpedoes, type three phasers, and are capable of warp seven point eight."

"And this fighter?" Pat asked.

"She can go as fast as we can." Chekov said. "She carries a crew of twenty five. Her shields are warp powered and her phasers are top of the line."

"Warp powered shields?" Gonzoles asked. "What about the phased nutating distortion?"

"They adjusted the frequency rotation." Chekov shrugged. "Powering it through the nacelle's subspace field generator."

"But what's to stop an enemy from transporting through the shields?" Commander Williams asked.

"Willie?" Sulu asked.

"By analyzing the warp signature, it should be possible to ascertain the shield frequency rotation." Williams said. "Then by adjusting the transporter frequency it would be possible to transport through the shields as we did with the Breen ships a few years ago."

"That was more than just a few years ago, Willie." Sulu said. "Pavel, you've studied the stats. What do you think?"

"There is an offset involved." Chekov said. "Without knowing the phase transition factor you could not identify the proper frequency. And each fighter would theoretically have a different phase transition factor."

"Do we know the phase transition factor for this particular ship?" Sulu asked.

Chekov smiled. "Is Spock Vulcan?"

"So if we can find the damn ship, we can take it." Sulu said. Chekov nodded. "You couldn't have told me this before?"

"You weren't on the ship, Captain." Chekov shrugged.

"Well." Sulu turned to the rest of the staff. "I've heard a lot about your piloting skills, Mr. Smith. Ever flown a fighter?"

"It's been a few years, Captain." Smith said. "But I remember how."

"If and when we find this fighter, a security force will beam on board and take control." Sulu said. "You will be in command of that force, Gonzoles."

"Aye Sir." Gonzoles nodded.

"Kim to Captain Sulu."

"Sulu here."

"We have the Tian Nan Men on long range sensors, Captain." Lt. Kim reported. "She's under attack."

Captain Sulu stood up. "ETA?"

"Present speed, ten minutes." Kim said.

"Sound red alert. Increase speed to warp nine." Sulu turned and left the briefing room. The rest of the staff followed. On the bridge the senior staff relieved the third shift. The captain waited while each station reported status to new officer. He sat in the command chair. "New ETA?"

Gonzoles consulted her control board. "Two minutes, Captain."

"What have you got, Pavel?" Sulu asked.

"Three ships." Chekov studied the sensor readings. "The Tian Nan Men and two theta

class cruisers. One of the cruisers is heavily damaged. Warp drive off line. The healthy cruiser is attempting to draw the Tian Nan Men's fire."

"A starship shouldn't have any problem with two of these cruisers." Pat said. "Right?"

"Shouldn't." Sulu nodded. "But we want to capture not destroy. We have to find the fighter. And these cruisers are our only lead."

"Except for the prisoners on the Potemkin." Pat said.

"Right." Sulu nodded again. He looked over to the science station. "Pavel?"

"Coming on screen now." Chekov said.

"Coming up on coordinates in thirty seconds." Gonzales said.

"Reduce speed." Sulu orders. "Full impulse. Come around to heading 030 mark 10. When we are behind them circle around. Let's see if we can herd them back together."

"030 mark 10." Smith answered. "Aye."

"The furthest cruiser has minimal shielding." Chekov reported. "She is vulnerable. Recommend phasers only."

"Coming into position." Smith reported. "Circling."

"She's firing phasers." Mirek said. "Direct hit to our port shield. Section delta six. Minimal damage. Her phaser power reads at only 60 per cent."

"Hold your fire." Sulu said. "I don't think they have much fight left in them."

"The Tian Nan Men has changed course to circle as we are." Chekov reported. "The cruisers have slowed to point thirteen impulse. They are effectively surrounded."

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

"Aye." Rand said. "Coming on screen."

"About time." Captain MacLean said. His bridge was busy with the battle, but the captain sat in the command chair apparently at ease. Sulu could hear reports of phaser hits from the Herlans. Like the Excelsior, the Tian Nan Men was holding fire. "These Herlans of yours are quite stubborn."

"Oh?" Sulu asked.

"They have sensors." Mac said. "They can see I could have destroyed them both by now. But they refuse to surrender."

"Zealots." Sulu said.

"Indeed." Mac agreed. "Suggestions?"

"Have they answered your hail?" Sulu asked.

"Sure." Mac sighed. "But it was just a ploy to buy time and assess the battle situation. They are nonresponsive at best."

"Nonresponsive?" Sulu smiled. "That's Mueller's word."

The less damaged Herlan ship fired a torpedo at the Tian Nan Men. They scored a direct hit on the star ship's forward shields, rocking the bridge momentarily. "Return fire with phasers."

Captain MacLean ordered. The phasers impacted on the cruiser's shields and reduced their shield strength by fifteen per cent. He turned back to the screen. "That's their response."

"I see." Sulu said. "Do we have names for either ship or their captains?"

"That's Dekka One and Dekka Two. Two is the more heavily damaged." Mac said.

"Terrel Lebner is in charge. I'm not sure if that's a name or a title. He's on Dekka One."

"Maybe they will be more realistic now that there are two starships facing them." Sulu

said. Captain MacLean shook his head slightly. "Stand by, Mac. Hail the Dekka One, Commander Rand."

"Aye Sir." Rand answered. MacLean's image was replaced by a much younger and taller humanoid man. His sleeve was torn at the shoulder and his face was smudged with grime. He ran a dirty hand through his thick dark hair. A dark grey smoke and the eerie glow of the amber emergency lighting hid most of the Dekka One's bridge from the view of the Excelsior.

"Terrel Lebner." Sulu said. The tall man nodded with the slightest movement of his head. His grey green eyes were unblinking as he stared at this new Starfleet captain. "I am Captain Hikaru Sulu of the Federation Starship Excelsior. Power down your weapons and lower your shields."

Terrel Lebner studied Sulu. Slowly he smiled. Then he laughed out loud. "And if I don't?"

"I will be forced to take actions that may injure or kill some of your people." Sulu said. "Regrettable, but necessary."

"Go ahead and try." Terrel Lebner stopped laughing. Another crewmember came out of the smoke, spoke in his ear, then disappeared again.

"You have sensor equipment Terrel Lebner?" Sulu asked.

"I do." Lebner shrugged.

"Then you must know that one starship is capable of destroying both your ships. You now face two." Sulu said. "You can not win."

"We managed to inflict damage on your other ship." Lebner said. Slowly the smoke started to dissipate. Two crewmembers working on damaged stations could be seen behind Lebner. "We weren't supposed to be able to do that."

"And two of your ships are destroyed. All hands lost." Sulu said. "You can't continue your fight if you are dead."

"I can't continue if I surrender." Lebner said.

"That's not necessarily true." Sulu said. "You have a problem with the Cardassians. Why not bring your case to the Federation? Try approaching us as allies instead of enemies."

"It's been tried." Lebner said.

"There is an ancient saying on my home world that is taught to young children." Captain Sulu said. "If at first you don't succeed, try again."

"I am not a child."

"I have direct access to a Federation ambassador." Sulu said. "Come on board the Excelsior. Talk to me. Talk to him. I will guarantee your safety and the safety of your ships while you are here."

"And I should trust you?" Lebner asked.

"Are you willing to sacrifice your crew's lives before trying all other options?" Sulu asked. "That doesn't say much for you as a commander."

"We live by our own rules here, Captain. Not yours." Lebner said. He took a moment to look around his ship before adding. "I will come on board your ship if you allow Dekka Two to continue on its way. They need to make repairs and care for the injured."

"I have a full medical crew." Sulu said. Chekov circled the upper bridge to the communication station and leaned down to whisper to Rand. "I can transport your injured here."

Or send my doctor to you if you wish."

"No." Lebner said. "I will not invite Starfleet on my ships. Nor will I give you any more prisoners of war."

"As you wish." Sulu shrugged. "Send the Dekka Two on its way. Then transmit your transporter coordinates and lower your shields."

"First I will transport the injured from this ship to Dekka Two." Lebner said. "I will signal when I am ready."

"Fine." Sulu nodded. "Excelsior out."

Chekov walked down to the command chair. "The Dekka Two is badly damaged. They now have warp power back on line. However with their other systems failures, I do not believe they will be traveling at high speed. Warp two, maybe. There are problems with her EPS taps."

"That's to be expected." Sulu said.

"Yes." Chekov nodded. "But because of an intermittent failure in the power transfer conduit, when the electroplasma system draws power off the taps there is a readable fluctuation."

"Readable?" Sulu asked. "Trackable?"

"Yes." Chekov smiled. "I spoke with Commander Newmar, the science officer on Tian Nan Men. They can stay out of normal sensor range and still track the Dekka Two. In the condition she's in, they have to be heading for a base. And they will never know we are following."

"Good."