

When Captain Sulu walked into the transporter room, Lt. Commander Johnson was already waiting. Mel Johnson was a big man with very broad shoulders and a thick neck. No one had trouble believing he was head of security. Of course the Excelsior captain knew him to be a gentle and soft-spoken man off duty.

"Captain." Johnson said. "I would prefer a regular security detail."

"I understand, Mel. But I am trying to keep this low key." Sulu said. "Terrel Lebner has assured me he will be unarmed. I think we can handle it."

"He is a terrorist." Johnson said. "You can't trust him."

Sulu turned to Chief Yancy at the controls. "Level two precautions, Chief."

"Aye Sir." The chief nodded. "Whenever you are ready, Captain."

Captain Sulu nodded. Chief Yancy quickly went through the familiar sequence of commands. The sparkling energy beam materialized into Terrel Lebner. He was cleaned up with a fresh shirt. His full head of hair was now neatly combed and looked several shades lighter than before. When he started to step off the pad, Sulu held his hand up to stop him. "Chief?"

"No weapons or chemicals." Yancy said. "He is carrying a communications device, but that's all Captain."

"Release the force field, Chief." Sulu said.

Lebner stared at Sulu without moving. "Are you quite sure I'm not dangerous?"

"No. I'm not." Sulu said. "But I am sure you are not armed. A precaution. This is Lt. Commander Johnson, my chief of security."

"Lt. Commander Johnson." Lebner nodded slightly from the transporter pad.

"Are you satisfied, Mel?" Sulu asked.

"For now." Johnson said. "He should not be alone while on board, Sir."

"Agreed." Sulu said. "Mr. Lebner. Please, come this way."

Slowly Lebner came off the pad. Captain Sulu turned and walked out of the room. Lebner followed with Johnson close behind. Lebner looked all around as they walked. He followed the captain into a turbo lift. "Where are we going?"

"My ready room." Sulu said after ordering the turbo lift on its way.

"What's a ready room?"

"It's an ancient term from my home world." Sulu explained. "It is a room located directly off the bridge to be used by the shift command officer as needed. It also serves as my office."

"All right." Lebner tried not to be obvious as he studied the Starfleet officer. He had no real idea what to expect from this meeting. His mind raced with thoughts of truth drugs and torture.

"Terrel Lebner." Sulu said. "Is that your name or is Terrel a rank?"

"We don't use ranks." Lebner said. "If you lead it is because the others trust you. Not because some arbitrary chain of command."

"Arbitrary?" Johnson asked in his deep soft voice as the turbo lift stopped.

"Hardly."

Sulu got off the lift and walked into his ready room without a backward glance. Johnson followed closely behind Lebner. The captain sat down at his desk and

immediately accessed the bridge communications station. Johnson steered his charge towards the chair in front of the captain's desk and stationed himself behind the Herlan man.

"Put him through as soon as possible, Rand." Sulu said. He turned back to Mr. Lebner. "Now, I have a few questions."

"What about your ambassador?" Lebner asked.

"I have a call into him, but he's a busy man." Sulu shrugged. "He'll get back to us as soon as he can."

"That's direct access?"

"We are a long way from home." Sulu shrugged. "Ambassador Spock and I have discussed the Herlan situation."

"Really?" Lebner sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. He would not give away any information. They would have to drag it out of him.

"Yes." Sulu said. "He believes you are raiding both sides of the border in an attempt to pit Starfleet against the Cardassian Forces. If you could start a war, it would weaken if not destroy the Cardassian Union."

"It's a good plan." Lebner smiled. "Maybe we should try it."

"Are you going to deny striking at the Federation colonies in this sector?" Sulu asked. "And strikes on the Cardassian side of the border?"

"I'm not denying a thing." Lebner shrugged.

"Good." Sulu said. "Maybe we can make some progress."

"Bridge to Captain Sulu."

"Sulu here."

"Captain Mueller is sending a subspace transmission." Rand reported.

"Have Mr. Chekov talk to her and report to me in person." Sulu said.

"Mr. Chekov has been called to engineering, Sir." Rand said.

"Gonzoles then. Sulu out." Sulu answered quickly and closed the comline before Rand could acknowledge the order. "Mr. Lebner, I'm sure you know what I am looking for. There is an experimental ship that is missing. Starfleet intelligence reports suggest that the Herlans have it. We want it back."

"This is not what I came to talk about." Lebner said.

"Maybe." Sulu said. "But the Federation is not going to listen to your problems until we have our ship back."

"That could work both ways." Lebner said. "We won't talk about your ship until your government does something about our problem."

"I see." Sulu said. "Let's clarify your problem."

"The Cardassians have destroyed our homeworlds. Killed billions of people. Drove billions more from their homes." Lebner said. "What else is there to clarify?"

"What do you expect the Federation to do?" Sulu asked.

Terrel Lebner wanted to laugh. He knew Starfleet would do nothing. But if Sulu wanted to know, Lebner would tell him what the resistance wanted. "Throw the Cardassians out of our system. Help restore the planets to their natural condition. And bring the refugees home."

"That's quite a list." Sulu smiled. "You are talking about all out war."

"Talking about it?" Lebner shrugged. "I've been living it."

Lt. Commander Gonzoles came into the ready room from the bridge. She stopped just inside the door. "Excuse me, Captain."

"Yes, Commander." Sulu stood up and walked over to her. Keeping his back to Lebner, he very quietly said. "Report."

"Captain Mueller reports that the fighter is at the Herlan's main base." Gonzoles leaned close to Captain Sulu and spoke as softly as she could. "The Ripti boy was not willing to give her the exact coordinates, but it is on a N class moon orbiting a gaseous giant in a single star system in the Badlands."

"Possibilities?" Sulu asked.

"Four." Gonzoles said. "But the Tian Nan Men's course rules out two of those."

"Good work." Sulu nodded. "Contact the Tian Nan Men and relay the message. Tell Captain MacLean to stay out of sight and wait for us."

"Aye Sir." Gonzoles nodded and returned to the bridge.

"Pretty." Lebner said as Sulu returned to his desk. "Your first officer?"

"Second, actually." Sulu said. "Just where did you send the Dekka Two?"

"Does it matter?" Lebner asked.

"Yes." Sulu said. "You are asking a lot. You have to give as well. And the first thing you need to give is information."

Terrel Lebner stared at Sulu. Did this captain honestly believe that the Federation would come to the Herlans rescue after all these years? Or did he think Lebner was stupid enough to betray secrets for possibilities? "What do you want to know?"

"The location of your base." Sulu said. Lebner sighed and looked away. When he did not answer, the captain continued with a quick list of questions. "I also want to know what the guidance system was for? Where Cros Ripti disappeared to? How you managed to steal the j class fighter? And why that particular ship? I could go on."

"Do you think I will just turn my comrades over to you?" Lebner leaned forward. "There are a lot of people depending on those of us with these ships. I can't let those families down. Too much has happened to them already."

"So there are refugees at your base?" Sulu asked.

There was no point in denying that. They were all refugees. "Yes."

"Grun Ripti did not mention that." Sulu sat back and watched for a reaction.

Terrel Lebner leaned forward, his green gray eyes watching Sulu intently. He hesitated a moment before asking. "Then he's alive?"

"Yes." Sulu said. "As are the rest of the crew of that freighter."

"Good." Lebner nodded. "Can I see him?"

"He's on the Potemkin." Sulu said. "What's so special about the Ripti boy?"

Lebner shrugged and forced himself to sit back and at least appear relaxed. "He's a friend of the family."

"Bridge to Captain Sulu." Commander Rand called. "Ambassador Spock is transmitting, Sir."

"Put him through." Sulu turned to his desktop view screen and accessed the visual

communication mode. Spock's image replaced the Starfleet emblem. "Ambassador. Good to see you again."

"And you, Captain." Spock nodded slightly.

"He's Vulcan!" Lebner stood up suddenly and leaned on Sulu's desk. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I had no idea it would make any difference to you." Sulu said.

"Well it does." Lebner walked away from the desk. "Damn Vulcans are as much to blame as the Cards."

"I am sorry, Ambassador." Sulu turned back to Spock. "I don't understand."

"Perhaps I can explain." Spock said. "When the Herlans came to the Federation Council thirty two years ago, the Vulcan ambassador spoke against interfering in the internal affairs of species we knew so little about."

"Ambassador Sarek?" Sulu asked.

"Among others." Spock said.

"Mr. Lebner, Spock was not one of the ambassadors that spoke against your cause. He was not in that position at the time." Sulu said. "I can not promise that he will agree with your point of view. But I can promise that he will listen with an open mind."

"They worship logic." Lebner sneered. "Rigid heartless logic. Logically we should all be dead by now. Well, we are not! The Vulcans said that logic demanded that we talk out our problems with the Cards! We say logic be damned!"

"Captain." Spock said. "I believe we should speak privately."

"Agreed. Mr. Johnson, secure Mr. Lebner in a cabin." Sulu said. He waited until Johnson had taken the Herlan out. "Sorry Spock. Up until this point Lebner was secretive but reasonable. I thought we might be able to work something out."

"What about the fighter?" Spock asked.

"Through interrogation of other Herlans, we know the fighter is at the Herlan's main base. But we don't know the specific location of the base itself yet." Sulu said.

"Captain MacLean is now covertly following a damaged ship. He will report to me before taking any action."

"Good." Spock said. "The Cardassian Ambassador is complaining loudly of your attack on their ships on the border."

"My attack on them?" Sulu asked. "I have forwarded all logs and records of the incident to you."

"Yes." Spock nodded. "I have already reviewed them. Your actions have not helped the peace initiative, however you have stayed within stated policy."

"Just barely." Sulu smiled.

"Indeed." Spock nodded. "The line is fine. Be aware that the Cardassians are taking a dim view of the incident. Avoid any further contact with them."

"We are still in the disputed area." Sulu said. "And we haven't had any sensor contact with them since the incident. But I'm sure they are not far away. I'll do my best not to start a war."

"Good." Spock almost smiled. "Keep me informed. Spock out."

Captain Sulu returned to the bridge to find Commander Chekov in the center seat.

"Everything ok in engineering?"

"Yes." Chekov got up to turn over command. "Willie wants to take the warp engines off line to fine tune repairs made after the battle. It can wait."

"Good." Sulu sat down. "Because negotiations with the Herlans are going nowhere. Mr. Lebner will not talk to Vulcans."

"Why?"

"He blames them for the Federation's policy of noninterference regarding their situation with the Cardassians for the last thirty years." Sulu said.

"Well." Chekov shrugged. "It was their idea."

"Granted. But that doesn't change our orders. We must get the fighter back." Sulu said. "Any news from the Tian Nan Men?"

"Not since they acknowledged the information from the Potemkin." Chekov said. "What do you want to do with the Dekka and Terrel Lebner?"

"I'm not sure." Sulu sighed. "I don't want to just let them go. He knows what we want and would not hesitate to use it against us."

"We can hold them on the attack on the Potemkin." Chekov said.

"True." Sulu said. "Where is the Potemkin?"

"On route here." Chekov said.

"Terrel Lebner was very concerned about the safety of Grun Ripti. Claimed he was a friend of the family, but it seemed more personal than that." Sulu said. "Perhaps we should let them talk."

"Captain." Gonzoles turned her chair towards them. "If Lebner knows Grun Ripti, perhaps he knows Cros. Marty Choi may want to ask about her whereabouts and health."

"Good idea, Gonzoles." Sulu smiled. "Put them together. Very informal. Be sure they both know this is entirely your idea and that I am not involved."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles grinned to herself as she got on the turbo lift.