

Lt. Commander Gonzoles exchanged uneasy looks with Lt. Commander Smith. Each stood with phaser in hand on the transporter pad, waiting. They had been waiting no more than a few minutes, but it seemed an eternity. Ensign Ito and Ensign Nichols stood behind them. Both junior officers had been on Excelsior for two years. Both were able young men who had proven themselves on several previous away missions. The waiting was not easy on any of them.

No one said a word. Finally, they felt the transporter begin to dematerialize them. Gonzoles could hear the commander yelling orders before she was fully materialized on the bridge of the J class fighter. The layout was standard Starfleet with a forward station, central command station, and duty stations lining the walls.

"Roll!" The young man in front of the command station yelled at his pilot. "Get us out of it!"

"Intruder alert." The computer warned and repeated itself. The commander turned to see Gonzoles with a phaser pointed at him. Before she could speak or fire, he bent over and plunged his shoulder into her stomach. She was knocked back into the chair of another duty station.

Smith grabbed the shirt of the commander and pulled him around to land his fist squarely on the young man's chin. The commander went down and Smith shouted to Gonzoles. "That's one!"

A large burly man smacked into Smith's back to send him head first over the command chair. Gonzoles fired her phaser at the attacker. The large man crumpled to the deck with the stun force. She quickly looked around the rest of the bridge. Ensign Ito had stunned two Herlans along the far wall. Ensign Nichols had pulled the pilot away from her station and thrown her on the floor. As she got up, Gonzoles stunned her. Nichols then stunned the last Herlan on the bridge who also tried to attack him.

Holding his knee and complaining loudly, Smith got up and limped into the pilot's seat. Gonzoles put her phaser away and walked up behind him to look over his shoulder. "All stop." She ordered then whispered in his ear. "I got two."

"All stop." Smith put his phaser down on the station to free his hands to follow the order. Gonzoles located and accessed the science station. It only took a few seconds. The Herlans had changed operating codes but Starfleet override codes were still in place. Ito and Nichols physically pulled the five stunned Herlans to a central point next to the command chair while Gonzoles checked the internal scanners.

"I read eighteen more people on board." Before she could contact Excelsior, the Herlans made a counter attack on the bridge. Eight attackers burst in through the two secondary gangways and two came from the turbo lift. With weapons drawn, they started firing immediately. Smith grabbed his phaser and fired. He and Gonzoles both dropped to the floor using the duty stations and chairs to provide limited cover. Security guards Nichols and Ito had nowhere to hide. They fired phasers and stunned the first few Herlans that emerged from the passageway. Two Herlans dropped to one knee and fired some kind of pulse weapon. One hit Nichols on the chest just above heart. He screamed and fell to the deck. Ito took advantage of the distraction of the piercing scream to dive behind the command chair.

Weapons fire was hitting station readouts and input terminals all over the bridge. Sparks and smoke seemed to fill the air. Gonzoles almost dropped her phaser as she grabbed it off her belt. She cursed her arrogance at having put it away. Smith and Ito were firing at will. Stunned bodies littered the bridge. The two that came off the lift were a few seconds late and were

stunned before the door closed for their tardiness.

"Damn!" Smith yelled in pain.

"You ok?" Gonzoles yelled as she fired. The Herlan she had aimed at ducked behind a bulkhead support.

"Banged my head." Smith yelled his explanation and fired again. "Where the hell are the reinforcements?"

Suddenly the four remaining Herlans yelled a long wordless war cry and charged the Starfleet officers. Gonzoles rolled a chair into the one coming at her with all her might, but he deflected it and fired his weapon at her at close range. She turned and the energy pulse hit her in the shoulder. She screamed at the searing burning pain.

"Alive!" Someone yelled. "Take them alive!"

Gonzoles vainly tried to raise her phaser at her attacker. He shot again. This time the pain was in her upper leg. She fell to the deck, trying not to scream. The phaser was ripped from her hand. Trying to look around, Gonzoles called out. "Smith." But she lost consciousness before hearing any answer.

Gonzoles sat on the fountain's edge surrounded by her mother's plants in large terra cotta pots. The bright sunshine warmed her face. She could hear her mother in the distance calling her to dinner, but she couldn't move. Gradually she became aware of her own breathing plus some other sounds that did not belong on her mother's patio. Her mother called again, more insistently. "I'm coming." Gonzoles called softly.

"Relax." A soft deep voice said. "You are safe."

The tropical garden melted away as Rosita Gonzoles fought to open her eyes. She forced her eyes to open just a crack to see Captain Sulu standing next to her bed. She vaguely wondered what he was doing in her cabin.

"About time you woke up." Dr. Patrick said from across the room.

Gonzoles turned towards the voice and with effort brought the doctor into focus. She mumbled. "Sickbay."

"Where did you think you were?" Pat asked. He was now standing across the bed from Sulu and scanning her with a hand held medical instrument.

"Home." She said. "How long?"

"We brought you back from the fighter five hours ago." Captain Sulu said. "Once you stopped the ship, we were able to beam in and take possession. Because of the battle and the number of people involved in the small space, we could not beam directly onto the bridge. But Lt. Destino took the rest of the ship and then the bridge. The three of you were unconscious by then."

Gonzoles nodded and closed her eyes. It seemed a long time ago. Suddenly she opened her eyes again. "Nichols?"

Sulu shook his head. "He did not make it."

"Damn." Gonzoles sighed.

"I've already informed his family." Sulu said. "Parents and a brother."

"And a fiancée. Richard was a good officer." Gonzoles nodded. "I'll send along my condolences as soon as I'm out of here."

"Captain, we need to finish the evaluations." Dr. Patrick said. "And these three will require some rest before returning to duty."

"And I'm in the way." Sulu smiled and started backing away from the bedside. "I'm going, Pat."

"Captain." Gonzoles stopped him. "Now that we have the fighter, what happens to the Herlans?"

"The brig is full of those that were on the fighter." Sulu turned serious again. "We will return them to a Starbase for trial for the theft of the ship. If they are smart, they will use that as an opportunity to bring their cause to the attention of Federation authorities."

"But we're not going to do any more about it." Smith said from the next bed.

"What would you suggest, Mr. Smith?" Sulu asked.

"If I was a Cardassian Gul stationed on the border, I would be paying a lot of attention to Starfleet's investigation." Smith said. "It must be hard to stay on their side of the border when these raiders run for Federation space. I wonder how long they've been looking for this base."

"Interesting." Sulu said. "According to Terrel Lebner, there are a lot of refugees on that base. Civilians. Families."

"Have we left the area, Sir?" Gonzoles asked.

"Not yet."

"Excuse me." Pat said. "I think I already said I have work to do."

Captain Sulu returned to the bridge. Excelsior and Tian Nan Men had withdrawn from the moon that was the Herlan base, but were still in orbit around the planet. The starships stayed on the edge of the Herlan base's sensor net. The Herlans knew they were still there.

Captain Sulu stopped at the science station. "Status?"

"All repairs complete." Chekov said. "Captain MacLean reports the same. The theta class cruisers have all returned to base. A few of the two man patrollers are still flying."

"Got to keep up a brave face." Sulu said. "What about Cardassians?"

Chekov raised his eyebrow at the sudden change of subject. "No sign of them. Why?"

"Mr. Smith pointed out that they might be looking for this base and that we may have shown it to them." Sulu said. "Just how good are their long range sensors?"

"I'm not sure." Chekov said. He brought up a tactical map of the area on his station view screen. "If they have stayed on their side of the border, a ship's sensor would not be very helpful."

"But?"

Chekov pointed out two stationary sensor arrays inside Cardassian space. "These two installations are relatively new. To my knowledge, we have not ascertained the full extent of their capabilities."

"I don't like the idea of leaving civilians exposed to a Cardassian threat." Sulu said.

"Civilians?" Chekov asked. "This is guerilla warfare. There are no civilians."

"There are children."

"There are species that would sacrifice their children for a cause." Chekov said. "It has happened in our own history when people are desperate enough. And these people seem very desperate to me."

"I am not that desperate." Sulu said.

"What about Command?" Chekov asked.

"I don't know." Sulu said. "But I am going to at least talk to them about it."

"Ok." Chekov shrugged.

After Dr. Patrick had finished evaluating the injuries of the away team officers, they were told to eat and rest. While they were eating, Smith suddenly said to Gonzoles. "How many?"

"How many what?"

"You know." Smith said. "The bet. I got seven."

"What?" Gonzoles sat up straight and scolded him. "Do you think you got them all? Try again Mr. Smith!"

"The one when we beamed in." He counted off on his fingers "And the big one."

"The big one was mine." Ensign Ito joined in.

"Ah ha!" Gonzoles laughed. She started counting. "Two when we beamed in. During the fire fight, three maybe four."

"Maybe three." Smith corrected her. "I got the woman with the short hair and the man with the facial tattoo."

"I got the one with the beard." Gonzoles smiled. "And the short one with the very dark skin."

"I think it's a draw." Ito said. The other two shrugged and ate their lunch. After a few moments of silence, Ito asked. "Do you think they are having the same argument in the brig?"

"I don't know." Gonzoles said. "The one that got me should get two points. Because that's how many times he shot me."

"He shot you three times." Smith corrected her. "You were just about out the last time he got you."

"That's when they started yelling about hostages." Ito said. "And not killing us."

"I never saw the one who got me." Smith said. "When he got me, I was laying on the floor aiming at the guy standing over you, Gonzoles."

"It was a woman that got you, Mr. Smith. Shot you square in the back." Ito said. "You went out almost immediately."

"What was that weapon anyway?" Gonzoles asked. "It hurt like hell."

"Felt like being hit by lightning." Smith said

"Is that something you've experienced, Mr. Smith?" Gonzoles asked.

"Some kids aren't smart enough to come in out of the rain." Smith grinned. "I always have been too stubborn for my own good."

"You are all a like." Dr. Patrick said from the doorway of the recovery ward. The three officers stopped their discussion to turn towards the tall lean doctor. He looked at the security guard. "I always thought it was just command officers, Mr. Ito. But you are just as bad."

"Maybe I want to be a command officer." Ito grinned.

"Aren't any of you angry at being shot at and injured?" Patrick asked. "At listening to some one decide if they are going to kill you? How do you do that?"

"Training." Smith shrugged. "You have to keep a clear head."

"And we do have to make reports on the battle." Gonzoles added. She glanced at Smith

and winked as she added. "You can't let a little thing like some one trying to kill you get you mad."

"And we did beam onto their ship." Smith added. "If aliens beamed onto our bridge, I'd certainly try to kill them."

"You take these things too personally, Doctor." Ito jumped in.

"Never mind!" Pat turned and left the room. He was shaking his head as he went and trying to ignore the roar of laughter from his patients.

"You just might make a good command officer, Takashi." Gonzoles laughed.

"Thank you, Sir." Ito smiled. "I'll put in a request for transfer."

In the captain's ready room, Sulu explained the Herlan's situation to Admiral Reese. The Admiral listened patiently to Sulu's report. Reese had heeded Jim Kirk's advice when putting Sulu in command of Excelsior years ago and he had never regretted it. When the appointment of fleet captain had come up, Reese had suggested Sulu for the Cardassian border assignment based on his own experience with the Captain.

"You have a point, Hikaru." Reese said. "The Cardassians can be ruthless with civilian populations. However if we help these people, the Cardassians could take that as a hostile act."

"They may not like us helping their enemy." Sulu argued. Maintaining peace along this border was one of the top priorities of Sulu's assignment as Fleet Captain for this sector. "But if we move the Herlans it will take them out of the fight."

"Where would you take them?"

"Out of the Badlands for a start." Sulu said. "I'm sure we can find a suitable planet that could use a bunch of farmers."

"Would they agree to stop fighting?" Reese asked.

"I don't know." Sulu said. "But I have one of their leaders on board. I could try."

"All right Captain." Admiral Reese said. "Try."

After signing off with the Admiral, Sulu returned to the bridge. "Pavel, if we were going to relocate these people to another planet. What are our choices?"

Chekov thought about the question and shrugged. "Are you talking about a friendly under populated planet they can join or a uninhabited planet suitable for a Ag colony?"

"I'm not sure." Sulu said. "I don't know how many of them there are or if they are willing. Get me some possibilities. I'm going to try to talk to them."

"Aye." Chekov nodded.