

Lt. Commander Mel Johnson brought two of the Herlans to Captain Sulu ready's room. One was Terrel Lebner. The other man was shorter, fairer, and younger than Lebner. The younger Herlan looked around the room before settling his attention on the Asian Human sitting behind the desk. Lebner ignored his surrounding. He stopped in front of the desk and met Sulu's eyes with a steady gaze.

"Please, sit down." Captain Sulu said. Lebner did not move. The younger man started to sit down. He glanced at Lebner standing as still as a stone. Only his hands moved as they slowly curled into fists. The younger Herlan straightened to stand next to his comrade.

"How did you find the base?" Lebner asked. "What trick?"

"Dekka Two." Sulu said simply. "We followed her."

"How?" Lebner leaned on Sulu's desk and demanded. "Bara would never have led you to the base."

"The damage to the ship emitted a signal that could be followed at a discreet distance." Sulu explained readily despite Lebner's threatening posture, not because of it. "The Starship that followed was never in Dekka Two's sensor range."

"So now you have your fighter, Captain Sulu." Terrel Lebner's voice was hard. He felt he would choke on the words. "What else is there?"

"A future for your people." Sulu sat back in his chair and watched the two men calmly. "If you are interested in that, sit down."

The younger man sat down. He slapped Lebner's leg gently with the back of his hand and said softly. "Sit down, Terry. It can't hurt to talk."

"Are you sure, Adat?" Lebner asked. Adat shrugged. Lebner slowly sat down and faced Captain Sulu. "What do you care about my people?"

Sulu ignored Lebner's question and turned to Adat. "I am Hikaru Sulu, Captain of Excelsior. What is your name?"

"Adat Guid." The younger Herlan said. He pushed his unruly light brown hair out of his eyes. "Until recently I commanded the Intreykar."

"Intreykar?" Sulu asked.

"The fighter." Guid said. "I named her for the island where my parents were born. Where I should have started a family of my own. I am told it was wild and free. But I have never seen my ancestral home. I'll never stand in the circle of my family for the ceremony of life. Or death, for that matter."

"I'm not sure what that really means." Sulu said. "Except that your culture values your homeland. However, we need to talk about your base on the moon."

"Be careful what you say, Adat." Lebner warned. "Not all fragments are revealed here."

Adat Guid turned to Lebner and assured his friend. "There is nothing to say."

"Fragments?" Sulu noted Lebner's warning. The universal translator often had trouble with expressions. "Let me put my cards on the table."

"Cards?" Guid asked. Names and titles did not translate. And to the Herlans, Cards meant Cardassians.

"A Human saying." Sulu said. "I believe it might translate to all fragments revealed."

"The puzzle comes together." Guid suggested a Herlan alternative.

"Yes." Sulu nodded.

A disembodied voice interrupted the captain. "Chekov to Captain Sulu."

Without taking his eyes off the two Herlans, Sulu opened the comline to the bridge.

"Sulu here."

"Two Theta class cruisers on long range sensors, Captain." Chekov reported. "They are on course for the Herlan base."

Sulu pretended not to notice the look that passed between Lebner and Guid. "Coming from the border?"

"Yes Sir." Chekov said. "Traveling at top speed. ETA five minutes."

"Thank you, Mr. Chekov." Sulu said. "Have you located any possible planets?"

"Several." Chekov said. "I will need more specific parameters to narrow the search any further."

"Join us, Pavel. We'll try to get more specific." Sulu terminated the connection and turned to the Herlans. "Mr. Lebner, Mr. Guid. Let's get back to the business at hand. I am concerned that in locating your base, we've shown it to the Cardassians."

"It's not like they didn't have a general idea where we were." Guid said as Commander Chekov walked into the ready room. "They've come looking for us a couple of times."

"Really?" Chekov stopped next to the captain's desk. "That is something the diplomatic team would like to know."

"Why?" Lebner asked.

"Because the Cardassians have agreed to stay on their side of the border during negotiations." Chekov said. "By your accounts they have been violating this agreement."

"They never stayed long." Guid said.

"Did you ever take the fighter against them?" Sulu asked. Lebner and Guid looked at each other. "I need an answer to this question. Before we go any further."

"Why?" Lebner snapped. When Sulu did not immediately answer, Lebner added. "This is how you put it on the table, as you said?"

"What does it matter, Terry? We've lost. Isn't that the point?" Adat Guid sighed. He turned to Sulu and said. "We were saving the fighter for a special mission. The Cards haven't seen it, if that makes any difference to you."

"It does." Sulu nodded.

Chekov turned to Adat. "Did this special mission have anything to do with the guidance system taken off the convoy?"

Adat Guid wouldn't look at Lebner. They had argued many times over the direction the resistance should take. With his family to consider, Adat's priorities had shifted. Terrel remained inflexible. Guid chose to look at the floor instead of either Starfleet officer when he admitted. "Yes."

"And with the cruisers that are just now returning from the border?" Chekov asked.

"Why should you worry about the Cards knowing where we are?" Lebner asked before Adat could give away all the Herlan's future plans.

"Because the Cardassians record with rebellious civilian populations is not encouraging." Sulu said. "Their history suggests they would like to exterminate you."

"Or worse." Lebner added.

"Yes." Sulu nodded. "I would not like to think I left your families, your children, to that

fate. If you would agree, we could move all civilians to a safe planet. A place where they could start to live their lives again. A new homeland for your people."

"And this would ease your conscience?" Lebner asked.

"Don't worry about my motives, Mr. Lebner." Sulu said. "Do you want your base destroyed by the Cardassians with you in it, or not?"

"You said all civilians." Guid said. "What about the rest of us?"

"Give up the fight." Sulu said. "And I will consider you all civilians."

"Captain." Chekov turned his back on the Herlans to confront his CO. "Command will want someone held responsible for the theft of the fighter."

"Let me worry about Command." Sulu said. Normally, Chekov would have argued the point, but the Herlan's presence caused him to drop it until another time.

Guid and Lebner looked at each other. Neither spoke. Adat Guid pulled at his lower lip and waited for Lebner to make a move. Finally Lebner stood up and said. "We need to talk about it. It's not a decision we can make alone."

"Rand to Captain Sulu."

"Sit down, Mr. Lebner." Sulu said then tapped the controls with irritation. "What is it?"

"I have an incoming call from Starbase Twelve, Sir." Rand said. "They say it's important."

"Damn, I forgot." Sulu said quickly. He softened his tone considerably when he continued. "Yes, Commander Rand. It is important. Please tell them to stand by."

"Aye Sir."

With a hint of a smile, Chekov asked. "Brian's birthday?"

"Yes." Sulu said. "Mr. Johnson, put all the Herlans on board together in one room so they can talk things over."

"A secured room." Johnson clarified. "Aye Sir."

As Mr. Johnson started to escort the Herlans from the ready room, Sulu said. "Pavel, let me know if these incoming cruisers do anything other than land on the base. I'll join you as soon as I finish talking to Brian. And Mr. Lebner."

Chekov returned to the bridge. Johnson stopped at the ready room's other door with his hand on Lebner's shoulder. Lebner asked, "What?"

"Are there enough ships on your base to move your people if we come to an agreement?" Sulu asked. Terrel Lebner shrugged then gave Sulu one brief affirmative nod. Sulu reopened the comline. "Good. Rand, put my son through."

"Aye Sir."

As Lt. Commander Johnson started his charges out the door again, the Captain was smiling at his view screen. "Happy birthday, Brian. How does it feel to be seven?"

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After he finished his conversation with Brian, Captain Sulu returned to the bridge. Chekov was in the command chair. Chekov stood as the Captain approached, but Sulu made no move to take the center seat. "Report."

"The two Theta class cruisers came in and landed on the base as if we weren't here." Chekov said. "They appeared to have no battle damage."

"How's Mac?"

"His damage was minimal and the repairs should be complete by end of shift." Chekov said. "Although he is making noises about getting back to his own sector."

"I'm going to get a quick dinner." Sulu said. "Gonzoles and Smith should be back on duty tomorrow. I'll be back in half an hour so you can eat."

"Hikaru." Chekov said. "We should know more about the Herlans plans before granting any pardons to the resistance force. To say that we will just forget what has happened is not acceptable."

"You have a point, Pavel." Sulu shrugged. "But there are larger issues here."

"Over two hundred dead." Chekov said. "That will not just go away. The families of those killed will not let it."

"Perhaps." Sulu said. "But the immediate problem is to get the Herlans out of here. These people consider themselves freedom fighters and amnesty is not an unreasonable offer."

"I doubt that Vasco sees them that way." Chekov said.

"I'm sure you're right." Sulu said. "But this is not Vasco Enterprise's decision. It is mine."

Chekov sighed and shook his head, but smiled. "You are not an admiral yet, Hikaru."

"I'll be back in half an hour." Sulu said and left the bridge.

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"Captain." Gonzoles said with her tray in hand. The mess hall was busy but not overly crowded. "Can I join you?"

"Please." Sulu nodded towards the chair next to him. She sat down and quietly placed her napkin on her lap. Sulu watched as Gonzoles arranged her small salad and iced tea on the table. "That's not much of a dinner. Something bothering you, Rosita?"

"I am trying to evaluate the conversation with Lebner, Captain." Gonzoles did not bother to mention that she had eaten in sickbay and was only using the meal as an excuse to speak to the Captain informally. "It did not go well."

"Not every interrogation does." Sulu resumed eating. "Confronting a terrorist with one of his victims is a risky strategy. But sometimes you shake something loose."

"I just thought that Mr. Choi would want to know more about his lover." Gonzoles picked at her dinner. "I did not expect him to verbally attack Mr. Lebner. And he left without even asking about her."

"Who knows what Mr. Choi was thinking." Sulu shrugged. "It was a short term affair. And she used him. I'm not surprised he was angry."

"Maybe. Marty Choi aside, I let Mr. Lebner annoy me." Gonzoles admitted. "And that shut down the exchange of information."

"What was so annoying?"

"It's just that everything was so black and white with him." Gonzoles did not hide her frustration from Sulu. "He had his cause and the hell with everybody else."

"And you wanted him to look at the situation logically?" Sulu asked with a hint of a smile. "To be open to an intellectual dialog?"

"Ideally." Gonzoles insisted. She shook her head, angry at herself for the mistake that

was so obvious to her captain. "It turned from a conversation to an argument very quickly. I lost control of the situation."

"There is nothing you could have done differently." Sulu dismissed the problem. "I don't think it would have worked even if Mr. Choi had cooperated."

Gonzoles stared Sulu. If he thought it was a bad idea, why did he let her do it? She replayed the conversations with Choi, Lebner, and on the bridge when she suggested the ploy in her mind. There must be something she was missing. "Then why?"

"Sometimes it is useful to switch the interrogator and the methods." Sulu said. "Lebner was looking for a trick of some kind from us."

"So you let me try to trick him." Gonzoles said carefully. Sulu had stressed that she tell Lebner the idea was hers not his. "After it didn't work, was he supposed to trust you more because the trick was my idea?"

"That would have been one benefit." Sulu nodded. "Unfortunately, he didn't believe it was your idea."

"He did not believe a thing I said." Gonzoles frowned.

"His loss." Sulu said. But Gonzoles was still replaying the conversations in her mind looking for the things she should have said. He could see it was not the time to tease her about it. "Rosita, let it go."

She closed her eyes for a second and forced herself to relax. "Yes Sir."

After years of similar conversations, Sulu knew Gonzoles would have to work out her feelings of failure in this situation in her own time. He changed the subject. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes Sir. Pat has certified the three of us fit for duty." She was glad to be off the subject of her conversation with Terrel Lebner even though she had brought it up. "I've logged my report on the battle and I sent a message to Ensign Nichol's family. All in all, it's been a pretty bad day."

"Agreed." Sulu smiled at her understatement. "I've talked to Mr. Lebner and to Adat Guid since I saw you in sick bay."

Gonzoles finally started eating her meal. Between bites she asked. "Who is Adat Guid?"

"He was commanding the fighter when you beamed in." Sulu said.

"So he's the one who shoved his shoulder into my stomach." Gonzoles almost smiled. "He moves fast."

"He was also a little more willing to listen than Mr. Lebner." Sulu said. "I suggested to them that the Cardassians may now know the location of their base and now would be a good time to evacuate."

"Where would they go?" Gonzoles asked.

"If they agree to give up fighting the Cardassians and anybody else that comes along." Captain Sulu said. "We will relocate them to a planet where they can live peacefully."

"They agreed?"

"They're talking about it." Sulu shrugged and drank his tea.

"Captain." Gonzoles said slowly. "What if they take your offer and then continue to fight after we've gone?"

"At least we'll know where they are." Sulu shrugged his shoulders again.

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Lt. Commander Gonzoles stepped off the turbo lift onto the security deck to be greeted by two armed security guards. She stopped abruptly and confronted the two men. "Sanchez. Epstein. Problems?"

"The captain is letting the prisoners have a conference." Lt. Sanchez explained. "Mr. Johnson has tripled the usual guards on duty. We're taking no chances."

"Where is Mr. Johnson?" Gonzoles asked.

"Outside the briefing room." Sanchez said. "Putting them all in there together is a security nightmare. We are only moving a couple at a time."

"I don't know what the captain is thinking." Ensign Epstein said. "This is just giving them a chance to try something."

"You don't need to know what the captain is thinking." Gonzoles reminded the young man. "You just need to follow orders."

"Our orders are no one comes or goes without Mr. Johnson's say so." Sanchez called on his communicator. "Sanchez to Mr. Johnson. Lt. Commander Gonzoles coming on deck."

"Acknowledged."

Gonzoles nodded to the two security guards and walked down the short hallway to the briefing room. Mel Johnson stood outside with two more armed guards. The big man with the dark brown skin turned towards her and sighed. "What's up, Rosita?"

"I'm just sticking my nose in." Gonzoles said. "The Captain told me what he is proposing to the Herlans. I am just wondering how the conversation is going."

"I don't even have them all together yet." Johnson said. "I don't trust these terrorist. And I am not going to give them free run of the ship."

"You don't trust anybody, Mel." Gonzoles smiled. Two armed guards brought three Herlans down the hall towards them. The escort guards checked off the names with the door guards and transferred possession of the prisoners.

"Just a few hours ago they nearly killed you." Johnson pointed out. "Are you going to tell me you trust them?"

Gonzoles watched the three Herlans enter the room. They were quiet and subdued. She recognized one woman from the fighter bridge crew. "It would be pushing it to say I trust them. Let's just say I understand them."

"Do you?"

"Maybe." Gonzoles shrugged. "Is Lebner in there?"

"He is." Johnson nodded. "And that other commander, Mr. Guid."

The guard from the door turned to the chief security officer. "They're all in there now, Mr. Johnson. Lebner, the fighter crew, and Ripti."

"Grun Ripti?" Gonzoles asked

"The captain had him transported over before we left the Potemkin in charge of Dekka One." Johnson nodded. "He's been in isolation until now."

"Captain Sulu thought he might be useful in interrogating Lebner." Gonzoles said. "I guess that's no longer necessary."

"Nothing left to do now but wait." Johnson said.

They passed the time with meaningless conversation. It was about twenty minutes later when the briefing room door opened. The two security guards instantly had their phasers aimed at the petite woman standing in the doorway. Adat Guid stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders in a gesture of protection.

The woman spoke calmly as she faced the four Starfleet officers. "I wish to speak to your captain."

"Of course." Gonzoles nodded. "I am Lt. Commander Rosita Gonzoles, second officer of Excelsior. Your name?"

"Elea Guid." The young woman with short brown hair, hazel eyes, and an olive complexion answered readily.

"And are you the leader of this group?" Gonzoles asked.

"In this." She nodded. "Yes."

"This way, Ms. Guid." Gonzoles nodded towards the turbo lift. After she stepped into the hall, one of the guards put his hand up to stop Adat Guid from following.

"Where she goes, I go." Adat said.

"I believe we met on the bridge of the fighter." Gonzoles faced the man. "At least your shoulder met my stomach. Adat Guid?"

Adat nodded briefly and repeated himself. "I will not let Elea go alone."

"You have no say in the matter." Mr. Johnson said.

"Mr. Johnson is correct. But I am sure Captain Sulu will speak to you both. Let him pass, Ensign." Gonzoles said. The guard stood back and Guid stepped into the hallway.

"Commander." Johnson said. "Lt. Sanchez and Ensign Epstein will accompany you."

"Very well, Mr. Johnson. Inform Captain Sulu we are on our way to his ready room." Gonzoles said and started down the hall followed by the two Herlans. The two guards at the lift joined them. Gonzoles ordered the lift on its way. "Deck one. Ms. Guid, you say you are the leader in this. Does that mean your leadership is compartmentalized? Or are you saying the leadership changes?"

Elea Guid cocked her head to one side as she considered the question. "I don't know what you mean, Commander. All Herlans are equal. Each gives what he can."

"I see." Gonzoles said. Before she could rephrase her question, the turbo lift door opened. Gonzoles led the way to the ready room. She stationed Sanchez and Epstein outside the door and took the Herlans in. "Captain Sulu, Elea Guid and Adat Guid have asked to speak to you."

"Ms. Guid." Sulu got up from his desk and came around to meet them. He extended his hand towards her. She did not understand. The Captain took her hand and explained. "It is an old Human custom. A sign of respect and friendship."

"Captain Sulu." Elea Guid acknowledged him formally.

Sulu offered his hand to Adat Guid. Adat slowly took the offered hand. Sulu smiled. "Is Guid a common name? Or is there a family relationship?"

"We are married." Adat said carefully. Sulu manner seemed very different to him than when he was in this room with Lebner.

"Please sit down." Sulu returned to his desk chair. The two Herlans sat down in the chairs facing him. Commander Gonzoles stationed herself near the door. "I assume you talked

over my proposal."

"We are not in agreement." Adat said. "But Elea's points have the most support."

"When you said you were a leader in this, it was because the majority agreed with your position on the proposal made by Captain Sulu?" Gonzoles asked. Elea nodded. "Very democratic."

"And what are your points, Ms. Guid?" Sulu asked.

"The danger from the Cardassians knowing where we are is great." Elea said. "If you let us return to our base, I will speak to the ruling council and urge them to comply."

"Us?" Sulu asked. "You mean you and Adat?"

"I mean all Herlans held on this ship." Elea said.

"I would like to speak to this ruling council myself." Sulu said. "If you would access the proper communications channel, perhaps we could come to an agreement."

"While we are held as your hostages?" Adat scoffed. He turned to his wife. "You see. Terrel, Rica, Grun. They have a point."

"They are living in the past." Elea dismissed the other Herlans point of view. "I am concerned with the future."

"I share that concern. You know that." Adat said. "But what is our future without our past? Without our traditions? Without our home?"

"It is a homeland you and I have never even seen. It is time to start again, Adat." Elea said gently as if she was explaining to a child. Husband and wife held each other's gaze for a minute. It was obvious they had had the same discussion before. She turned back to Sulu and took on a more businesslike tone. "Give me access to your communications, Captain. I will navigate the security system."

"This way, Ms. Guid." Sulu got up and took Elea Guid to the bridge. Glancing at Gonzoles, Adat jumped up to follow. When Gonzoles made no movement to stop him, Adat relaxed and took advantage of being on the Excelsior bridge. He took in every detail he could. The configuration was similar to the Starfleet fighter the controls on the duty stations were very familiar.

"It is not so different from our own ship." Adat whispered in his wife's ear.

She nodded. "Just bigger."

Commander Chekov was in the center seat. He turned the chair towards Sulu. Seeing the Herlans and the way Adat was looking around, he asked. "Is this a good idea?"

"We'll see." Sulu said and turned to the communications station. "Commander Rand. Open a channel to the base."

"They still don't answer the hail, Captain." Rand said.

Elea Guid studied the communications station to be sure that it was the same as on the stolen fighter. She pressed a series on controls and said. "Send that with your hail, Commander."

Rand sent the encryption code. After a minute she said. "The Herlans are responding with a visual signal, Captain."

"On screen." Sulu ordered and walked down to the command station. Chekov returned to the science station and called up all the information he had on the Herlans. An empty grey room appeared on the screen. The only thing the bridge crew could see was a long bare table.

Two men and a woman came into view and sat at the table facing the view screen. The man who sat in the middle was probably double the age of the other man and the woman. "I am Captain Hikaru Sulu, commanding the Federation Starship Excelsior. I wish to speak to the ruling council."

"The committee will have to do." The older man snapped. "What do you want?"

"I want to end the fighting without any further lose of life." Sulu said. "I have discussed a proposal with your people here. Elea Guid has agreed to speak to your council about it."

"While she remains you hostage?" The older man asked.

"Where I am has never changed my words." Elea Guid walked down to stand next to Captain Sulu. "We have spoken often of moving to a safer location. The time is now."

"Elea." The woman at the table spoke up. "Your thoughts on this are well known. But your situation is not unique and we can not let personal circumstance take precedence over the cause."

Chekov quietly walked over to the Captain. Sulu turned away from Elea Guid to let Chekov whisper. "I believe the woman is Cros Ripti."

"Are you sure?" Sulu asked in equally hushed tones.

"As sure as I can be without a DNA scan."

"Kem." Elea ignored Cros Ripti's statement. "Terrel has said the long range ships have returned from their mission. Is it as we feared?"

"Then you've seen my son?" The older man asked quickly. "Is he well, Elea?"

"He is, Kem." She nodded.

"It has been reported that he gave himself up to save the injured." Kem Lebner said. "I had feared the worse."

"Rand, have Terrel Lebner brought to the bridge." Sulu ordered.

"Aye Sir." Rand acknowledged.

"The mission, Kem." Adat spoke from his position near the communications station. "The sensor array?"

"It is as we've feared." Kem nodded. "And worse."

"Meaning?" Elea asked.

"It is not to be discussed here and now." Kem said.

"Captain Sulu had offered to relocate us to a safe planet unknown to Cardassia in return for our giving up the fight for Herla." Adat said. Security guard Konick came out of the turbo lift with Terrel Lebner. Seeing the group discussion, he stopped Lebner by the lift and waited for further orders. "This is not a decision we can make here. The entire council must vote on it."

"Adat." Cros said. "I thought you were with us on this."

"I am of two minds on this." Adat admitted.

Kem Lebner stood up suddenly when he spotted his son in the background on the Federation ship. He came out from behind the table as if getting closer to his screen helped him see his son better. He could barely choke out the words. "Terry? Are you well?"

"Yes, Ga." Terrel shook off his guards hand and came forward to see his father better. "There have been a few tricks, but no physical abuse."

"What do you think of this Federation proposal, Terrel?" Cros Ripti asked.

"Rectee-o!" Terrel said. The Herlans all laughed at the word that did not translate on the

universal translator. "I think we've fought too long and too hard to let the Federation come in here and dictate how we will live our lives."

"Or die our deaths." Elea said.

"If need be." Terrel said.

"And what of the sensor array?" Elea asked. "We can not survive if Cardassia know where we are."

"There are ways..." Terrel started.

"We no longer have the fighter!" Adat cut him off. "The plan will not work without it."

"This is all very interesting," Sulu said. "But it is getting us no where. Who is in charge? Who is the head of the ruling council?"

"Head?" Elea asked. "You mean ruler?"

"Yes."

"There is no one head." Elea said to Sulu. "All Herlans are equal."

"Someone must make a decision." Gonzoles said. "How do you get on the ruling council? Is it a vote?"

"We are all on the ruling council." Adat explained.

"All?" Gonzoles asked.

"All adults Herlans." Adat said. "All have a voice. All have a vote."

"How many adults on the base?" Gonzoles asked Adat.

He shrugged. "Maybe twenty five hundred."

"How does it work?" She asked. "Without a representative government how do you get anything done?"

"You pilots are certainly well organized." Sulu turned to Terrel Lebner while Gonzoles continued to question Adat Guid about politics. "They fly with enviable precision. Who is in charge of your military?"

"My father." Terrel said.

"Kem Lebner." Sulu stepped forward to address the commander in chief of the Herlan forces. "I think we need to talk privately. If you will transport aboard my ship, I will guarantee your safety and your freedom."

"If you are so anxious to talk, Captain, release my son and come to my base. I will guarantee your safety and freedom."

"Captain!" Chekov turned to face Sulu. "That is out of the question."

"Relax, Pavel. I have no intention of leaving Excelsior." Sulu smiled at his friend. "I am afraid I must bow to my first officer's objections."

"You don't trust us, Captain." Kem Lebner smiled.

"Command protocol require that I stay on my ship at this time." Sulu sidestepped Lebner's statement. "However I believe this situation will only be resolved if you and I speak privately. My invitation stands."

"And when I leave your ship, my son goes with me." Kem Lebner said.

"It's a trick, Ga." Terrel Lebner warned his father. "Don't trust him."

"Don't worry, Terry." Kem said. "Is it agreed, Captain?"

"Agreed."