

"Launch bay shields are down!" Elea was too busy to look at her husband. She paid careful attention to all readouts as she urged him, "Go!"

Adat Guid pushed thrusters to one tenth and the fighter slowly moved towards the battle. "Sensors on short range, maximum detail."

"Hold position." Inda said as soon as they had cleared the landing bay. "Excelsior's main shield bubble at twenty meters."

"Their weapons?" Adat asked.

"Can't touch us here." Elea smiled at her duty station. She marveled that Adat's hastily put together plan was actually working. "Without tractor beams, there is nothing Captain Sulu can do."

"Fire the pulse cannon again." Adat ordered.

"Firing."

\*\*\*\*\*

"Damn it." Chekov said. "They are now attacking the main shields. Disrupted by twenty five percent. Stabilizing."

"Can you beam them out now?" Sulu asked.

"No." Chekov said. "All the fighter's shields are now up."

"Mr. Chekov." Lt. Mirek looked up from her station. "If they keep this up, we are going to lose the lower half of the shields. The disruption is spreading further with each shot."

"Rand, hail the fighter." Sulu said.

"Channel open, Captain." Rand said. Adat Guid appeared on the screen. He was sitting at the forward station on the Starfleet J class fighter.

"Mr. Guid." Sulu said. "Return to the landing bay. You are endangering the lives of everyone on the fighter and Excelsior."

"Lower shields, Captain." Adat countered. "Let us join the fight."

"I can not allow that ship into this fight." Sulu said.

"I don't think you have a choice in the matter." Adat smiled. "Your weapons can't touch us here. And your shields will collapse under my pulse cannon. If you don't want to be exposed to the Cardassians, lower your shields momentarily and we'll be gone."

"Mr. Guid." Sulu said. "My orders are not to let that ship into this or any other fight. If that means I must destroy you myself, I will. Return to the landing bay. For the sake of your crew, Adat."

Adat Guid stared at Sulu and simply said, "Fire." Then he terminated the connection.

"Gonzoles." Sulu said. "Get a tractor beam on that ship."

"Tractor beam is not responding, Captain." Gonzoles reported.

"Commander Chekov." Sulu said. Everyone on the bridge stiffened at the Captain's use of Chekov's rank. "Is it possible to destroy them while still within our shields?"

"Negative."

"Lower the shields for fifteen seconds." Sulu said.

"Captain." Chekov said. "Fifteen seconds is a long time. It will give the Cardassians ample opportunity to inflict severe damage."

"Noted." Sulu said. "Mr. Smith, fifteen seconds."

"Aye Sir." Smith nodded. "Shields down. Fifteen. Fourteen. Thirteen."  
"The fighter is moving out of our shield perimeter." Chekov said.  
"Ten. Nine. Eight." Smith counted.  
"Incoming!" Gonzales warned.  
"Clear?" Sulu asked.  
"Now!" Chekov nodded. "Clear!"  
"Shields!" Sulu ordered. But the torpedo got through just as Smith was raising the shields. The ship rocked to the starboard side. Sparks flew. The internal power grid blinked. The main view screen went blank. When the power came back, everyone scrambled to make sure the duty stations were working properly.  
Smith checked the shield status read out first. "Shields are up."  
"Damage report." Sulu demanded.  
"Hull breach on decks eighteen and nineteen." Chekov said. "Emergency power only in engineering. No response from any sensors."  
"Trying to bypass." Mirek said.  
"Helm is not responding." Smith said. "Control interface is burned out. Reconfiguring."  
"Phasers off line." Sadat said. "Torpedo control not responding."  
"Do you have an interface?" Smith asked Sadat. Sadat checked the station and nodded.  
"Then reinitialize and reconfigure to weapons."  
"Aye."  
Dr. Patrick leaned over Commander Rand's shoulder to get a report from sickbay.  
"What's going on down there, Ignes?"  
"Bumps and bruises." Lt. Ignes reported. "A few burns. Nothing we can't handle."  
"Warp drive?" Sulu asked.  
"On line, but not responding." Chekov said. "There seems to be a break down between here and engineering."  
The Excelsior rocked again as two more torpedoes hit in quick succession. Chekov just looked at Sulu and shook his head. Mr. Smith looked over his shoulder at the Captain. "Shields are still reading as up. I hope that's right."  
Lt. Commander Yazdani strode off the turbo lift to the bridge engineering station. He set his tool case on the chair and leaned over the station. "Computer, transfer all engineering command controls to this station. Authorization Yazdani omega Yaz."  
"Yaz?" Sulu asked.  
"Massive power surge went through all systems when the torpedo hit, Captain. Internal power grid overloaded." Yaz reported as he quickly took the systems through reinitialization. "Engineering got the worse. Blew out all the duty stations. We can't access anything down there."  
"Phasers show green." Sadat grinned as his station came back to life under his hands. "Torpedo control answering. But I have no readings for targeting computers."  
"Now we're back in business." Yaz smiled at his station. He ran a complete systems check on engineering. Once he found the effected areas, he could reroute data transmission through active pathways. "There's a lot of work to be done. But you should get better responses now."

"Visual." Sulu ordered.

Gonzales tried but shook her head. "No response, Captain."

Yazdani grabbed his tool case and ran around in front of her station. Working quickly, he pulled a lower panel off. With tricorder in hand, he scanned the circuits while inserting a universal probe. "Break in the optical connection. It will just take a minute."

That minute seemed to last forever. Sulu turned towards the science station. "Pavel?"

"We are getting sensors readings now." Chekov said. "The battle continues. I am only reading eighteen of the two man ships still flying. Two theta class ships are adrift. Another is working with the transport to continue attacking the Wolmof. The fighter is flying circles around the other Cardassian ship."

"Any damage on the fighter?" Sulu asked.

"Shields holding at eighty five percent." Chekov said. "They must have gotten a few direct hits."

"Try it now, Gonzo." Yaz said from under and behind the panel.

The Excelsior's main view screen came blinked and faded before settling on the view of the battle. Remnants and debris of destroyed Herlan vessels littered the area between the Excelsior and the Cardassian vessels. The integrated transport fired phasers and pulse cannons as it flew by the Wolmof.

"Ensign Sadat. Target the fighter." Sulu said. "Fire one and two."

"Captain." Patrick came back to the center seat. "You can't be serious!"

"The orders are clear." Sulu said.

"Targeted." Sadat said. "Torpedoes away."

"Elea Guid is pregnant!" Dr. Patrick said.

Sulu turned his chair to the doctor. He sighed and rubbed his eyes briefly with both hands. "I didn't know that. But it makes no difference."

"No difference?"

"Direct hit on the fighter." Mirek said. "Her shields are down to seventy six percent."

"Three and four, Sadat." Sulu said.

"Aye Sir." Ensign Sadat nodded. "Torpedoes away."

"The fighter has been hit by a Cardassian torpedo, Sir." Mirek reported. "Aft shields are down to fifty percent. Forward holding at seventy."

"Hail the fighter." Sulu ordered.

"Aye Sir." Rand said. "Responding in audio only Captain."

"Adat!" Sulu said. "Return to Excelsior. We will transport you to safety."

"I'm too busy for this now, Captain." Adat answered and terminated the connection. The fighter came around the Cardassian ship and fired all weapons as it pitched and rolled.

"Torpedo three, a glancing hit. No further damage to fighter's shields." Lt. Wong reported. "Torpedo four, a direct hit. Aft shields dipped to ten percent. Back up to twenty five. They will collapse with the next direct hit."

Sulu opened the comline. "Transporter room, stand by. Monitor the battle. The nanosecond the fighter's shields fail; beam all life forms onto Excelsior. Shield control at your discretion. Override all safeties."

"Aye." Chief Yancy answered.

"Another hit to the fighter by the Cardassians, Captain. On her port side." Lt. Wong reported. "Her aft shields are barely maintaining integrity. The Cardassian's shields are globally at sixty eight percent."

"Weak spot, Lt. Wong?" Sulu asked.

"Port nacelle, Captain." Wong said. "Shields at only twenty nine percent."

"Torpedoes to the port nacelle, Mr. Sadat." Sulu ordered.

"Aye Sir." Sadat said "Torpedoes away."

"The transport is inflicting severe damage on the Wolmof." Chekov reported. "Port shields collapsed, but have been reconfigured. Globally holding at fifty five percent. While the shields were down, the transport got three good shots in. I am reading no output from the Wolmof's impulse engines. And there at least two hull breeches."

"Direct hit on the port nacelle. Shields down." Wong reported. The crew watched as the second torpedo Sadat had launched followed the first into the nacelle. The torpedo impacted directly on the nacelle sending a chain reaction through the warp drive engines. A large portion of the nacelle broke loose and went flying through space on fire. "Her warp drive is off line."

"You have a gift for understatement, Wong." Dr. Patrick said.

"Hail the Wolmof." Sulu ordered.

"Fighter shields are collapsing." Mirek called out. The crippled Cardassian warship fired sustained phasers at the fighter. "They are targeting her warp engines."

Sulu banged the control to the comline with his fist. "Yancy!"

"Energizing." Yancy answered as the ship exploded into a large fireball.

"Our shields are down." Smith reported.

"Yancy." Sulu said. "Did you get them?"

For a moment there was no answer. In a very subdued voice, Yancy answered. "No Sir."

"Shields are back up." Smith said.

"Gul Rowkant is standing by, Captain." Rand broke the silence on the bridge.

"On screen." Sulu nodded. The Cardassian bridge was smoke filled and dark. Dim emergency lights revealed repair crews working feverishly of damaged stations. Gul Rowkant came forward until his face filled the screen. "Rowkant. Withdraw. Take your ships and go home."

The transport fired on the Wolmof again. "Sulu, call off your dogs."

"Commander Rand. Send to the transport to cease fire." Sulu said. "Unfortunately, I have very little control over these Herlans. But I am relocating them to a safer region. There will be no more problems along the border."

"That's it?!" Rowkant blustered. "Where is the famous Federation justice? Where are the trials? The punishment? The retribution?"

"That is not your problem." Sulu said.

"We hold Starfleet responsible for this outrage." Rowkant said. "You should have destroyed this base when you found it and taken all these terrorist prisoners. Your lack of action is the direct cause of lose of Cardassian life and property."

"I will include your outrage in my report to command." Sulu said. "I will also include the circumstances that motivated these people to take the actions they did. Now, Gul Rowkant. Set course for Cardassian space. Excelsior out."

"The Cardassians are withdrawing." Chekov said. "Slowly. Very slowly."

"Hail Kem Lebner." Sulu ordered.

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

Kem Lebner was in the control center of the transport. The Staffleet officers still weren't sure if that was located in one of the pilot ships or elsewhere on the transport. "Mr. Lebner, my condolences on your losses."

"Condolences?" Lebner scoffed. "You fired on the fighter! Their deaths are on your head, Sulu."

"I gave Adat Guid and his crew every opportunity to live." Sulu said. "I told him I would have to destroy that ship if he persisted. He was not willing to listen. And I tried to transport them off the ship when the shields collapsed. There simply wasn't enough time."

"We hold Starfleet responsible for the deaths of our people." Kem Lebner said.

Sulu sighed. Let them blame him. It would not change the situation. "When will you be ready to leave for the new colony?"

"I don't even have a confirmed casualty list." Lebner said. "My people will need time to grieve."

"We'll stick to the original schedule." Sulu said. He could not let Lebner usurp his authority. "Be ready to leave orbit at ten hundred hours tomorrow. Excelsior out."

When the connection to Kem Lebner was terminated, Captain Sulu sat back in his chair and sighed. The rest of the bridge crew was busy with repairs. Dr. Patrick leaned against the railing watching him.

"Captain." Commander Rand said. Sulu turned towards her. "Mr. Johnson reports he has all the Herlans back in the brig and under control."

"Good." Sulu laughed. "I had forgotten all about them."

"I could use a break." Dr. Patrick said to Sulu. "Do you suppose Mr. Whitney has left us a pot of coffee in your ready room?"

"If not, I know where a bottle of Saurian brandy is stashed." Sulu got up and left the bridge.

"So do I." Dr. Patrick followed him. A thermal coffeepot with several mugs sat on a table against the wall. Pat poured them each a mug and handed one to Sulu. "You are going to have to give Mr. Whitney a promotion."

"If I do that." The Captain sat down at his desk. "I will have to break in a new yeoman."

"That could be a problem." Pat smiled and sipped the steaming hot drink. "How many Herlans were lost in the battle?"

"I don't know. I'd say each pilot ship would require a skeleton crew of twenty or so." Sulu shrugged. "Of course, there could easily be double that on each ship. Seven of those were damaged or destroyed. And twenty-four of the two manned ships were out of the battle. Unless some of those returned to the base while we did not have sensors or view screens, they're all destroyed. And, of course, the six on the fighter."

Dr. Patrick leaned back in his chair and tried to sound casual when he said, "The Cardassians fired the final shot."

"The fighter should have never left this ship." Sulu sat back and put the mug down. "Security should have been tighter with the fighter on board. I should have ordered guards

around the fighter as a back up to the guards around the Herlans."

"I'm surprised Mel didn't."

"Mr. Johnson was concerned that security wasn't sufficient." Sulu said. "I told him on more than one occasion that it was."

"Hindsight." Pat shrugged.

"Yes." Sulu knew that every commander made errors in judgment. He had learned to live with that fact long ago. It was his misjudgment of Guid that bothered him most. "But I thought we were getting through to Adat Guid."

"You trusted him."

"With limits of course." Sulu nodded. "But Adat and Elea were at least willing to listen. And he was the most flexible. He was trying to balance the two opposing sides. At least he seemed to be."

"So you think he was trying to deceive you?"

"Isn't that obvious?" Sulu asked.

"He was honest when he asked to take Dekka into the battle." Pat observed. Sulu nodded. "So, I guess he trusted you to some extent also."

"And once in the battle he was committed to it one hundred percent." Sulu sighed. He could understand Adat's actions. "He was someone we could have dealt with. A voice of reason."

"What about this Lebner character?" Patrick asked.

"Reason is not the first thought that comes to mind for either Lebner." Sulu had to smile at the thought. "The father is the better commander. He will bow to the inevitable and move them but he is never going to willingly give up this fight."

"And the son?"

"A hot head." Sulu shrugged. "But he showed some command abilities when he gave himself up to save the injured under his command. But he won't stand up to his father with an opposing opinion."

"If he's allowed to have an opposing position." Pat smiled

"Right." Sulu nodded. He sipped his coffee and let his thoughts wander over the events of the last couple of days. "Maybe I should have listened to Gonzoles."

"What did she suggest?" Pat asked.

"That we disarm the Herlans." Sulu said.

"That would have kept the battle between the Cardassians and us." Pat nodded. "Do you think the Herlans would have appreciated sitting by and watching?"

"I doubt it." Sulu said. He knew what to expect from Patrick. The Doctor and Captain had similar conversations following other missions. "I know, Pat, I know. There is no point in second-guessing. And the Herlans probably would have blamed me for denying them the right to die for their cause."

"Probably." Pat agreed. "They seem good at placing blame."

"Well. Back to business." Sulu straightened up in his chair. "I have to report the lose of the fighter and the results of the battle."

"I better check on sick bay." Pat nodded and went back to work.

\*\*\*\*\*

After sending a full report to Admiral Reese at Starfleet Headquarters, Sulu asked Rand to make the connection with Ambassador Spock. It would take a few minutes to make the real time connection. The Excelsior captain poured himself another cup of coffee while he waited.

Commander Chekov came in without signaling and helped himself to coffee. As he stirred sugar into the steaming black liquid, Chekov reported. "Repairs are under way. Engineering is up and running again. I've ordered diagnostics on all major systems to be sure the overload of the grid did not leave any hidden damage."

"Good." Sulu nodded. "How long?"

"It will not affect our schedule." Chekov sat down. "Most of the work will be completed by the end of shift."

"And the Cardassians?" Sulu asked.

"Still on course for home." Chekov said. "Still moving very slowly."

"Captain." Rand appeared on his desk view screen. "I have Ambassador Spock."

"Put it through, Commander." Sulu turned towards the screen. Rand's image was replaced by Spock's. Captain Sulu bypassed the normal conversational pleasantries.

"Ambassador, I regret to report that I had to destroy the J class fighter."

Spock raised his eyebrow. "Your last report indicated you had the fighter in your possession, Captain."

"Yes Sir." Sulu nodded. "Two Cardassian warships crossed the border to try and arrest the leaders of the Herlan Resistance. When I would not allow them to execute their arrest orders, a battle ensued. The Herlan fighter crew broke out of the brig and managed to take the fighter to join the battle. When I could not get them to return to Excelsior, I had to destroy them."

"Did the Cardassians recognize it as a Starfleet vessel?" Spock asked.

"Unknown." Sulu said. "I did not discuss the fighter with Gul Rowkant. Damage to his ship was substantial. He was only concerned with repairs and placing blame on Starfleet for his losses."

"You will send me the records of the battle, Captain." Spock said.

"Of course." Sulu answered.

"What is your present status?" Spock asked.

"The two damaged Cardassians are on their way back to their own space. It will take them awhile." Sulu said. "The Herlans have lost most of their two manned patrol fighters and almost all of the theta class pilot ships that are not integrated into their transport. Their transport itself appears to be in good shape. The damage to Excelsior is minor and will be repaired by end of shift."

"Pilot ships?" Spock asked.

"That's what they call them, Mr. Spock." Chekov spoke up for the first time. He turned the desktop screen so that Spock could see both officers. "A theta class cruiser that docks with the transport which is a little more than a barge. The pilot ships provide shields, weapons, and engines. For the battle, ten of these pilot ships integrated into the transport to make it a formidable ship."

"Interesting." Spock said. "Your plans from here?"

"We will escort the integrated transport to Arneb III." Sulu said. "We are scheduled to leave at ten hundred hours."

"Thank you, Captain Sulu." The Ambassador said. "Spock out."

After the view screen reverted to the Starfleet Command insignia, Chekov put down his coffee. "I think we may have made Mr. Spock's job harder."

"I'm not sure that anyone can accomplish Mr. Spock's job." Sulu said. "There won't be any real peace with the Cardassians."

"Oh well." Chekov sighed and stood up. "Now for the hard part."

"What?" Sulu looked up at his friend.

"I must call Catrina and tell her of the amnesty."

"Good luck."