

When first shift was over, Smith and Gonzoles got on the turbo lift together. It had been a long day. Gonzoles unclipped the barrette at the nape of her neck and shook her hair free. Smith rubbed the back of his neck and ordered the lift on its way. "Deck two."

"Deck two?" Gonzoles straightened up and opened her eyes wide in surprise. "You just pulled a double shift and you are going to your office? And you call me gunho."

Smith laughed softly. "It wasn't work I had on my mind."

"Oh?"

"We had a tradition for after a battle on the Lexington." Smith explained. The turbo lift door opened. Smith held the door open with his hand. "Want to join me?"

"I don't know." Gonzoles studied him. He stood in the doorway smiling at her. His deep brown eyes sparkled with mischief. "Why does it sound just a little bit dangerous to me, Mr. Smith?"

"Only one way to find out. Come on." Smith grinned. She returned his smile but still hesitated. "I dare you."

Gonzoles laughed and stepped out of the lift. "You are just like my cousin Carlos. Since we were ten, he's been daring me to do this and that. When we were teenagers, he got me in a lot of trouble."

"But you did it anyway." Smith observed as they headed down the hall towards his office together.

"Yeah." She nodded. "I looked up to him. I wanted to be him."

"Where is he now?"

"Now?" Gonzoles smiled. "He is a professor of botany at the University of Panama City. He is married and has five kids. Extremely...."

"Boring?" Smith asked as they went into his office. It was devoid of any decoration. There was a desk with a computer station and three chairs. Smith opened a panel in the wall and took out two glasses and a bottle.

"Predictable." Gonzoles shrugged. "What is that?"

"It's called Hiuldre." Smith poured them each a small portion of the amber liquid. "A whiskey I picked up on shore leave on Simiko III."

"Tomas!" Gonzoles said. "This is against regs."

He put the top on the bottle and returned it to the compartment in the wall. He held the glass out to her. "It is a tradition."

"What kind of tradition?" Gonzoles asked. He stepped closer to her with the glass still extended towards her. She took the glass from his hand.

"A toast." He held up his glass. She raised hers as well. "To those who did not return today."

"And to those who did." Gonzoles nodded. They both drank the whiskey down. Gonzoles smiled. "That's not bad. So that's it? That's the tradition?"

"Well, on the Lexington, several of us would sit around and go over the battle." Smith sat down at his desk. "Tactics. Strategies. That sort of thing."

"This was your first Excelsior battle." Gonzoles sat down across the desk from him. "What did you think?"

"A lot of people died." Smith noted. "So why was Pat so damn concerned about the six

on the fighter? Because the woman was pregnant?"

"With Pat, it was probably because he had treated the fighter crew after our battle." Gonzoles smiled. Straight hard liquor always went right to her head. Even though the portion had been small, she was sure that was why she couldn't help but think about how handsome Tomas Smith was. "Just wait until you re-injure something he has treated. It always puts him in a snit."

"Oh yeah?" Smith smiled. He wondered if she realized she was twisting a stray strand of her jet-black hair. She seemed to be unaware of the gesture as they relaxed in his office. "I find it hard to picture Pat in a snit."

"Give it time." Gonzoles smiled. "I don't know why there wasn't a guard on that fighter. The prisoners should have never been in the battle. They were safe here on Excelsior."

"Really Rosita." Smith looked her in the eye. Her bring brown beautiful eyes. "If it had been you? If your comrades were putting it on the line? Would you have chosen safety or the battle?"

"It was a suicide mission." Gonzoles said. "The captain told them he couldn't let the Cardassians have the fighter. The only way for them to survive would have been to return to Excelsior."

"What difference does that make?"

"None." Gonzoles admitted. She couldn't help watch his fingers glide through his neatly trimmed beard as he rubbed his chin. "I would have moved heaven and earth to join the battle. Maybe that's why we wanted them to survive."

"Maybe." Smith nodded. "I know I didn't want to be the one who took them out."

Commander Chekov had asked the communications officer to make the connection to his wife in real time as soon as possible. He returned to his cabin and took a quick shower. When the call came in from Earth, Pavel had just put on the silk robe Cathy had given him. He sat down at his desk and turned on the view screen.

"Catrina." Pavel smiled. It was the middle of the workday in Russia and she was dressed in conservatively in slate gray and pink. She was wearing a necklace he had given her on his last shore leave. "How are you?"

"I'm fine, Pavel. I just got home today." Cathy was sitting in her office in Moscow. She took a sip from a delicate flowered china teacup. "Does this call mean you've caught the people responsible for the attack on the convoy? Do you know what happened?"

"I have some answers." Pavel said slowly. "But I am not sure you will appreciate them."

"Tell me."

"The attack on the convoy was carried out by the Herlan Resistance Force." Chekov said.

"Never heard of them."

"The Cardassians conquered the Herla System many years ago." Chekov explained.

"Some of the refugees formed the resistance group and have been fighting for their home world ever since."

Cathy put the teacup down on her desk. "So they are in custody now."

"Not exactly."

"Then what?" Cathy asked. "Exactly."

"An agreement has been reached." Chekov said.

"What kind of agreement?"

"In return for stopping the raids along the border." Pavel said, "The Herlans will be relocated to a new planet and they will be given amnesty."

"Whose crazy idea was that?" Cathy demanded.

"That does not matter." Pavel said quickly. "The plan was approved by the diplomatic team in charge of the negotiations with the Cardassians."

"I'm not putting up with this." Cathy got up and paced around her desk. She passed in and out of the view screens range while she spoke. "Over two hundred people died. Seventy of those were my employees. Where is the justice for these people? For their families? Who can approve amnesty for murder?"

"The Herlans are at war, Catrina." Pavel explained calmly. "And innocent people die in wars."

"You don't believe that, Pavel." Cathy came back to the desk and leaned down to the view screen. "Starfleet Command is going to hear from me and the Diplomatic Corp for that matter! I'll take it to the Federation Council, for gods sake!"

"Catrina. Please."

"Spock!" Cathy started pacing again. "You said Spock was involved when I was on the ship. This is all his idea, right?"

"Catrina." Pavel said. "Calm down. I understand you feel cheated. But it is out of my hands and yours too."

"You can't be serious, Pavel." Cathy said. "You expect me to just accept this?"

"There is nothing more to be done." Pavel said.

"No." Cathy sat back down at her desk and faced her husband's image. "There is nothing more for you to do. I'm just getting started. I already have a meeting set up with the families of my lost employees tomorrow. I'll meet with my lawyers before that and see what my options are."

"You can't drop this?" Pavel already knew it was a lost cause. He could see she had made up her mind. "Even if I ask you to?"

"I'm sorry, Pavel." Cathy calmed down considerably now that she knew what to do. "I know you have your orders. But I have a responsibility to the people I send across the galaxy. I'll keep you informed."

"Very well." Pavel sighed. "Try not to cause too much trouble."

"No promises." She smiled. "Thank you for being honest with me, Pavel. Now. I have a lot to do. So I'll talk to you later. I love you."

"I love you too." He smiled and terminated the connection. While he prepared for bed, Chekov couldn't help but think the call had gone better than he had anticipated.

Captain Sulu was ready for bed. After he put on his star fleet issue pajamas, he had the communications officer put a call through to Starbase Twelve. It was not his normal time to call. The concern was obvious on Jimmi's face when she answered.

"Harry." She said quickly. Her eyes darted back and forth looking for signs of trouble.
"Is everything ok?"

"Yeah." He smiled and hoped it was reassuring. She was also dressed for bed. She wore a comfortable old nightshirt that she never wore when he was home and her hair was pulled back in a ponytail. "I'm sorry. I know it's late there. Did I wake you?"

"No." She settled down on the couch to talk to him. "The Cafe is practically empty. The kids are asleep. This is actually a very good time."

"Good."

"What's happened?" Jimmi asked.

He gave her the innocent look, wide eyed and clueless. "What makes you think anything's happened?"

"Give me a break, Hikaru." She laughed at the exaggerated expression. "How long have I known you? And it's classified, right?"

"Some of it is actually top secret." Hikaru smiled at her. He sighed. "It's been a long hard day. I wish you were here. I would really like to lay in bed and hold you right now."

"Sounds nice." Jimmi shifted so she was lying on the couch.

"So what have you been up to today?"

"My students papers were due today." Jimmi smiled at him. "So I've been reading. The topic was the effects of World War Two on the various societies of twentieth century Earth. Each student got to pick a country or segment of society."

"Any new ideas?" He asked.

"There are no new ideas when it comes to the big one." Jimmi laughed.

"The big one?"

"That's what they called it." She laughed.

Jimmi distracted her husband with descriptions of her students' assertions regarding history. They talked for a long time. He laughed at her history jokes even though he had heard them all before. After a while there were short periods of silence in their conversation.

"It's getting late." Hikaru finally said. "I need to get some sleep."

"I'm glad you called."

"Me too." He nodded. "I love you."

"I love you too." She smiled. "Remember to be careful."

"Always." Hikaru answered as he always did. He did not know what he would do without the familiar ritual when they signed off. "I'll talk to you at the regular time. Bye."

"Bye."