

"Captain's log. Stardate 7923.5." James T. Kirk recorded from the command chair of the U.S.S. Enterprise. It had been over three weeks since they had left Starbase 68. "The medical check of the colonist on the science station at Turkana IV was routine. We were able to repair their atmosphere stabilization generator and treat the effected personnel. No casualties. We are now on course for the colonies on Margra Minor, but remain on call for the new star base for as long as necessary."

"Captain." Lt. Commander Uhura reported. Kirk swivelled his chair towards her. "I am receiving a Mayday. Audio only."

"Let's hear it." Kirk said.

"Mayday. This is the U.S.S. Yukon out of Starbase 68." A male voice spoke quickly. "We've lost all power. Attempting emergency landing procedures in system K328 with battery power only."

"Mr. Anderson," A woman interrupted him. "Sensors and tactical off line. Emergency back up power down to twenty two percent."

"Then we're going to have to do this the hard way. Switch to manual. Line of sight." Anderson answered. "I'm putting the may day on automatic but I'm not sure we are transmitting."

"This is Enterprise. We read you, Yukon." Uhura answered. "Stand by."

"Do you have the location, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Yes Captain." Spock said looking up from his scanners. He sent the coordinates to the navigation station. "We could be there in five hours at warp nine."

"Mr. Chekov, set course for system K328." Kirk ordered. "Warp nine, Mr. Sulu. Commander Uhura, inform the Yukon we are on our way."

Each officer acknowledged the order. After Uhura sent the message, she said. "I am getting no response from the Yukon except the repeat of the automatic distress call, Captain."

"Contact Starbase 68." Kirk said. "Inform the C.O. that we are on our way. Request information on the ship and crew."

"Aye Sir."

Lt. Commander Uhura continued to transmit. As Enterprise came into orbit around the third planet in System K328, she reported. "Still no response, Captain."

"Spock." Kirk turned away from the green planet that filled the view screen. He walked over to his Vulcan first officer at the bridge science station. "The Yukon is one of the new runabouts, isn't it?"

"Yes." Spock nodded. "It is the smallest class Starfleet ship capable of warp speed. The Yukon's mission is detailed stellar cartography. Mapping and surveying all the systems around Starbase 68."

"That could take an entire career." McCoy said.

"Indeed." Spock nodded. "The runabout's crew consists of five officers. Lt. Anderson in command. Astro-cartographers, Drs. Young and Levy. And two ensigns training on the new equipment, Gonzoles and Cicero."

"Gonzoles." Lt. Chekov turned to Sulu with raised eyebrow. Sulu just laughed and

rechecked the readout of the ship's helm controls.

"Wasn't she the pretty one?" McCoy leaned against the navigation station.

"Yes, Doctor." Chekov said to McCoy. "Long black hair."

"Big brown eyes." McCoy nodded.

Kirk shook his head and turned away from McCoy and Chekov's critique of the ensign's appearance. He returned to the science station. "Do you have a fix on the downed ship?"

"The residual plasma trail indicates the Yukon landed in an area of indeterminate life signs. There are indications of industrialization sporadically around the planet, but not in the area of the Yukon." Spock reported. "The planet is class M. It has an unusual magnetic energy field, but it appears to be a natural phenomenon."

"Sounds like we need to look at this ourselves." Kirk said on his way to the bridge's main turbo lift. "Spock, Sulu, Bones. You're with me. Chekov, you have the con. Have a security force stand by. We may need to do a systematic search."

"Aye Sir." Chekov said.

They beamed down to find the runabout partially buried in a rocky hill side. Downed trees and scorched ground marked the path left as the out of control ship slid to a halt. The blackened hull of the Yukon was badly scarred and dented. The aft emergency hatch hung open.

"No life signs." McCoy reported.

"All power grids are off line." Spock said. "Engines inactive. Batteries dead."

"Looks like this was the only way out." Kirk crouched to peer into the pitch black ship. "Anderson? Anyone? Report."

When he did not receive an answer, Kirk activated a portable light emitter and went through the emergency hatch. Spock and McCoy followed. The ship was empty. When Spock could not download the ship's log, he removed the black box to take back to Enterprise.

The Captain left the dark cold ship. "Kirk to Enterprise."

"Chekov here."

"Mr. Chekov." Kirk walked towards Sulu. "Send down the search party. Have them report to Mr. Sulu for deployment."

"Aye Sir."

"Kirk out." He put his communicator away. Sulu scanned the thinly forested area with his tricorder. Kirk joined him. "Any idea which way?"

"No direct evidence, Sir." Sulu nodded to the rocky hillside that rose out of the trees. "But if it was me, I'd go up hill. Get a good look around. Decide where to go from there."

"Agreed." Kirk nodded. "Take charge of the search parties, Sulu. Standard procedures. We'll take the black box back to Enterprise and try to get some answers."

"Aye Captain." Sulu grinned.

Kirk chuckled to himself as he walked away. Sulu had solid command skills, but it was his blatant delight with command that caused Kirk to pass on his experience to the younger officer.

Dividing the search parties into teams of three, Sulu started them circling out from the

wreckage. Sulu took his team over the hill and soon found himself on the edge of a what was left of a small town.

Crewman Helmsley led the way through the deserted streets. He edged along the rough stone walls. Occasional wind gusts whistled through the narrow alleys breaking the eerie silence. As he came to the corner of the building, the readings on his tricorder changed dramatically. He stopped and scanned the open area in front of him.

"Mr. Sulu." Helmsley called softly. He held up his tricorder. "Those indeterminate life signs are now all over the place."

Sulu scanned the area with his own tricorder. "It's these buildings. They are interfering with the tricorders."

Crewman Serrana caught up with them. "Looks like no one has lived here for years. Could the life signs be our own reflections?"

"I don't know." Sulu visually scanned the empty plaza. Loose dirt blew down the unpaved streets and piled up against stones fallen from the dilapidated buildings. "We'll do a preliminary recon. Spread out. Be careful."

Serrana went to the right, staying close to the stone building. Sulu went left. Helmsley crept into the open plaza with his phaser in one hand and his tricorder in the other.

Sulu had just turned a corner when he heard several small explosions. It reminded Sulu of the Rigilian ping gun in his collection. He ran back, arriving at the plaza at the same time as Mr. Serrana. Crewman Helmsley lay on the ground next to a small pile of stones. Holding his phaser with both hands, he fired at a relatively intact building.

Sulu slid to a stop, almost falling over the downed crewman. Blood spread slowly over Helmsley's uniform jacket just above his right hip. Sulu's scan read severe but localized damage. "Are you ok, Helmsley?"

"It hurts like hell, Sir." Helmsley took quick shallow breaths to control the pain.

Serrana took cover behind the rocks and scanned for the attackers. He looked up at the building then back down at his tricorder. "I can't localize life signs."

"They're in that building, Derek. Second floor. On the corner." Helmsley put his weapon in Sulu's hand. "My phaser is losing power, Mr. Sulu."

"Relax Jarrod. We'll get you out of here." Sulu took the phaser and pulled out his communicator. "Sulu to Enterprise."

"Kirk here."

"Captain." Sulu said. "Mr. Helmsley requires emergency beam out. He's been attacked and is bleeding badly."

"Acknowledged." Kirk said. "Attacked by what?"

"He's been shot by a projectile weapon." Sulu said. Helmsley collapsed as the transporter beam dematerialized him. "We haven't seen the attackers."

"Any signs of the runabout crew?"

"No Sir." Sulu said. "But tricorder readings are inaccurate and phasers are losing power. What about the other teams?"

"Also experiencing power difficulties." Kirk said. "But no reports of inhabitants. If they have nothing in two hours, I will reassign them to your area. Keep in touch."

"Aye Sir. Sulu out." Sulu put the communicator away. "Come on, Serrana. I think it's best if we stay together."

"Aye." Serrana nodded. As they left the safety of the rock pile, the explosion of several shots came from the building. Projectiles from the weapons hit the dirt as Sulu and Serrana ran from the plaza. They continued their search building by dilapidated building.

Lt. Commander Sulu rounded a stone corner with his phaser ready. Looking over the leveled phaser, he saw Ensign Gonzoles. The young officer turned and aimed her phaser at him.

"At ease, Ensign." Sulu said quickly.

"Commander Sulu." She smiled and lowered her phaser when she recognized the Asian officer she had met on Enterprise. Three other Starfleet officers huddled behind her against the wall of the dimly lit shell of a building. "Are we glad to see you!"

"Report, Ensign Gonzoles." Sulu said. Crewman Serrana came in behind Sulu. He checked the other officers. Two had large blood stains on their uniforms. One was barely conscious.

"For reasons unknown, all power systems on the runabout went dead." Gonzoles took a deep breath and pushed a stray strand of her black hair behind her ear. "Communications are out. Hand held phasers are low but operational. Lt. Anderson is missing. Dr. Young and Dr. Levy are injured. They've lost blood but it's not life threatening. Ensign Cicero and I have been holding off the hostile actions of the local inhabitants. I don't know what else to tell you, Sir."

"What happened to Lt. Anderson?"

"When the two doctors were shot, Lt. Anderson followed the attackers." Gonzoles said. "He ordered us to take cover and apply first aid. We haven't seen him in over three hours."

"Good report, Ensign." Sulu pulled out his communicator. "Sulu to Enterprise."

"The stones used in these buildings are interfering with communications. They generate an unknown type of magnetic energy field." Gonzoles said. "You have to get out in the open, Sir."

"Last time I was in the open, someone shot something at me." Sulu said.

"Yes sir." Gonzoles said. "That has been a problem."

Sulu looked around the stone shell of a building for options. "Can we get up on the roof of this place?"

"This way." Gonzoles nodded. He followed her through a door and up a set of stone steps. They emerged on what had been the second floor of the building. It was now a roofless shell with partially knocked down walls. "I had wanted to bring everyone up here, but the doctors just couldn't make it."

"We'll have to carry them." Sulu said. He opened his communicator. But before he had a chance to hail the ship, Gonzoles aimed her phaser and shot past him. Sulu turned to see an apparent adolescent boy fall over the wall onto the second level. He had a weapon in his hand. Both Gonzoles and Sulu checked over the walls to make sure no one else was coming.

"Good shot, Ensign. Thanks." Sulu said. "Your phaser seems to be stable. Mine is losing power. Did you reconfigure?"

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles nodded. "Reconfigure power flow to standard minus point eight."

"Good." Sulu took a minute to reconfigure his weapon also. "How did you come by this setting?"

"I've been trying different settings for the last three hours, Sir." Gonzoles said. "None of the standard configurations would stabilize."

Sulu kneeled down by the stunned boy. He was humanoid with pale blond hair and a baby face full of freckles. On closer inspection the freckles started as small light brown spots across his ivory cheeks, but they continued down his neck and onto his body getting larger and darker as they went. "He appears to be a teenager."

"They all seem to be teenagers." Gonzoles said. She wondered if his slight build was characteristic of his specie or just his age.

Gonzoles picked up the boy's hand held weapon and scanned it with her tricorder. "It uses a chemical explosion to fire a metal projectile." She reported. "There is one projectile in the chamber."

"Sulu to Enterprise." Sulu called on his communicator.

"Go ahead, Mr. Sulu." Captain Kirk replied.

"I've located four of the five missing officers, Sir." Sulu reported. "Two are injured. Lt. Anderson is still missing."

"Prepare to beam up, Mr. Sulu." Kirk said.

"It will take a few minutes, Sir. We have to bring the injured into the open for transport." Sulu said.

"Advise us when you are in position, Sulu."

"Aye, Captain. Sulu out." Sulu flipped his communicator closed. "Come on, Gonzoles. I don't want to be here any longer than necessary."

They hurried down the steps back to their companions. Ensign Cicero carried Dr. Young up the steps and onto the roof as gently as possible. He had lost consciousness from the loss of blood. Dr. Levy was in better shape. She managed to hobble up the steps with the help of Mr. Serrana.

While the Starfleet officers were preparing for evacuation, the teenage boy opened his eyes. He rolled onto his stomach and tried to creep away from the strangers. Crewman Serrana grabbed his arm just before he reached the wall. He easily pulled the slight boy up and walked him over to Sulu.

"What do we do with him, Sir?"

The teen twisted and turned to shake Serrana's iron grip, but the crewman restrained him. Sulu waited until the boy stood still before he asked. "What's your name?"

"Are you in command?" the boy demanded. "I've never seen you before. Or those uniforms. Where are you from? What do you want?"

"That's a lot of questions." Sulu smiled. "I am Lt. Commander Sulu. We are from far away. We are here looking for a missing comrade. Would you know where he is?"

"My people don't have him." The boy said. "If the Devils have him, he's probably dead."

"I see." Sulu said. "Your name."

"I'm Preem Hawn."

"Preem?" Gonzoles asked "That's your name?"

Hawn straightened up to bring himself to his full height. He looked Gonzoles in the eye. "My rank."

"A soldier? But you're just a boy!"

The boy frowned and tried to pull his arm from Serrano's grip again. "I'm old enough."

"Ensign Cicero, Mr. Serrano. Take the wounded to the Enterprise." Sulu ordered.

"Gonzoles and I will continue the search for Anderson with Preem Hawn's help."

"Aye Sir." Cicero said. He flipped open his communicator. "Enterprise, four to beam up."

Sulu took the boy's arm and led him away from the others, keeping a firm hold on him. Gonzoles followed them and the four beamed up as ordered. The boy's eyes widened and his mouth fell open when the four people just disappeared before him.

"How?" He asked.

"It doesn't matter." Sulu said. "Where would I find these devils?"

"You can't go there! It's against orders! Only with direct orders from..." Hawn stopped abruptly.

"From your commanding officer?" Sulu asked.

"Mr. Sulu, you can't be serious." Gonzoles said. "This boy is playing games."

"His game has wounded three of our people, Ensign." Sulu reminded her. "Study your history, Gonzoles. War is often carried out by the very young. Who is your commander, Preem Hawn?"

"Purah Rem Alkimi." The boy's shoulders slumped. He did not want to disappear. P.R. Alkimi would know what to do. "I can show you..."

"Lead the way." Sulu said.

"This could be a trap." Gonzoles said quietly.

"It could." Sulu responded as they followed Hawn down the steps and through the back alley. "But our choices are limited. Keep a watchful eye."

Hawn led them through a maze of alley ways. All the buildings were made of the same stone that had been causing the Enterprise officers problems. The alleys were narrow. In places only two people could walk abreast. Several times they were challenged by sentries no older than Hawn. All carried weapons. One by one other children followed them.

They followed Hawn into a plaza filled with children. The kids stopped and stared. A few ran ahead into one of the stone buildings. Hawn led them into the first room of that building.

Several thin boys and girls stopped talking when the Starfleet officers walked in. Their clothes were rags, but Sulu noticed all their weapons were well maintained. Hawn stopped in front a large wooden table in the middle of the room. The man behind the table stood. The dim light of the fire behind him cast more shadows than light in the crowded room.

"P.R. Alkimi." Hawn addressed the man. "This is Lt. Commander Sulu."

"You bring me prisoners, Hawn?" Alkimi asked. "When we have trouble feeding our own."

"Not prisoners." Sulu said. "I asked Preem Hawn to bring us here. I am missing an officer and hoped that you could help me find him. When we have him, we will be on our way."

"Just like that?" Alkimi laughed. "Take a look around. You are greatly out numbered,

friend. What happens next is up to me."

"I see." Sulu met Alkimi's gaze across the table. Preem Hawn could not wait any longer. He leaned on the table. It took all his self control not to grab Alkimi's arm to get his attention.

"Purah! Rem! He has a radio that works! And his people can disappear into thin air." Hawn spoke rapidly. He couldn't get the words out fast enough. He pointed to Gonzoles, "And she shot me with a light and knocked me out, but I just woke up and I wasn't hurt."

The other teens in the room laughed. Alkimi came around the table and rested his hand on the boy's shoulder. "Slow down, Hawn. Relax. Eat. We'll talk later."

"It's true!" Hawn turned to Sulu. "Tell him Lt. Commander Sulu."

"Ensign Gonzoles did knock the boy out." Sulu said vaguely. "He was about to shoot me."

"Go on, Hawn. Everyone. Out." Alkimi ordered. Without question, the teens filed out of the command center. "Tek Radhaka, stay."

One young man stationed himself just inside the door. He held his bulky metal firearm easily. Ensign Gonzoles wasn't sure just what to do. She kept one eye on the Tek at the door, the other on Sulu.

"Are you the only actual soldier among this crew?" Sulu asked.

"Don't underestimate my troops, Lt. Commander Sulu." Alkimi said. "The real battle may be going on miles from here, but the resistance is alive. And my troops are seasoned fighters."

"Even Hawn?"

"Hawn may not have explained it well. But I've heard similar reports today." Alkimi said. "I assume that is a weapon your friend has in her hand. Am I right?"

"That's classified information." Sulu said.

"It was a mistake to send you in here alone to test it." Alkimi said. "Too bad they'll never see you again."

"I am not your enemy." Sulu said.

Alkimi laughed. "You expect me to believe you?"

"I expect nothing." Sulu said. "I am asking for your help."

"I have nothing to give you." Alkimi said. "Radhaka, now."

The young man at the door brought his fire arm to his shoulder. But he didn't have the chance to aim. Gonzoles deflected the barrel of the rifle with her arm as she slammed her shoulder into the teen's chest. He fell back against the door gasping for breath. Gonzoles relieved him of his weapon. One quick movement and Sulu held his phaser at P.R. Alkimi's throat.

"It can be set to stun as it was for Preem Hawn. Or it can kill if necessary." Sulu spoke softly, but his deep voice carried easily in the stone room. "Now, where is Lt. Anderson?"

"We don't have him." Alkimi stepped back, but Sulu grabbed the front of his shirt. The phaser pressed against his throat made him conscience of every swallow, every breath.

"I already know that." Sulu said, his face just inches from Alkimi's. "Where would your enemies hold him?"

"It's not far." Alkimi said. "But if you are really not one of them, you'll never make it in

and out alive."

"You let me worry about that." Sulu said. There was a knock at the door. Despite the weapon at his throat, Alkimi grinned. The kids weren't afraid and that gave him power. Sulu never took his eyes off Alkimi. "Tell them to come in."

"Tek. Open the door." Alkimi ordered. Two teenage girls came in and stopped in front of Alkimi. They stared openly at the Starfleet officers. Sulu tried to overlook their limp hair and ragged clothes. Alkimi looked past Sulu to the girls. "Report, Preems."

"They took their prisoner to headquarters. He's tall." The older girl reported. She pointed at Sulu. "He wears that uniform."

"So they have your missing man." Alkimi said. Sulu kept his phaser on Alkimi. Gonzoles cradled the muzzle of Rad's heavy weapon in her elbow and still managed to keep her phaser ready. The two unarmed girls made no attempt to help their comrades.

"How do these young ladies get in and out alive?" Sulu asked.

"Sorlee?" Alkimi directed her to answer the question.

"They think we just want food for the young ones. We trade for it."

Gonzoles looked around. The room was empty except for a table and a couple of simple wooden chairs. "What do you trade?"

Alkimi smiled at the exotic woman. Even in the dim light he could see there was no variation in her complexion. No spots on her neck for a man to caress. "The only thing we have."

Sorlee ignored the interruption. "The devils are very interested in the prisoner and his little black boxes."

Sulu still held his phaser against Alkimi's neck. He let go of his shirt to pull out his communicator. "Like this?"

"Yes."

"Did they have his weapon?" Sulu nodded towards his phaser. "This?"

"I didn't see it." The girl said.

"Can you show me where?" Sulu asked Sorlee. She looked to Alkimi.

"The soldiers would shoot you on sight." Alkimi said.

"Sorlee." Sulu said nodding towards Gonzoles. "Can you show her?"

Sorlee looked at Gonzoles. The woman in the heavy long sleeved uniform did not seem at all pleased with the idea. Gonzoles unconsciously straightened her shoulders under the girl's blank stare. "I guess. But they know all the girls and boys."

"It will be dark soon." Alkimi observed.

"Darkness may be an advantage." Sulu said when he turned his attention back to Alkimi. "We are going to do this my way. You and Sorlee will show Ensign Gonzoles and myself the way to this headquarters. Once we free Lt. Anderson, we'll go."

"Your way?" Alkimi asked. "What makes you think my troops will let you leave this room?"

"Because I have you." Sulu said. "I've seen how these kids look at you, P.R. Alkimi. You are father, big brother, lover all in one. Without you I doubt they would know where to turn."

"Yes. They do exactly what I say." Alkimi smiled. "If I say you don't go..."

"What good would it do to leave them without a leader?" Sulu did not wait for Alkimi to answer. He lowered the phaser. "We will leave as soon as it starts to get dark."

With his phaser still in his hand, Sulu turned his back on the room and walked over to the stone hearth. He listened for any indication that the P.R. would attack him. Better to know now while the odds were with him.

Alkimi adjusted the collar of his shirt. The two girls watched him and waited. He spoke to the quiet one. "Naddey, get us some food."

"None for us." Sulu said without looking around. He wasn't about to take food out of the mouths of starving children.

"Never mind Naddey. Go." Alkimi said. "All of you. Sori, Rad. Out."

"My weapon." Tek Radhaka held out his hand to Gonzoles. The ensign looked over her shoulder to Sulu.

"Give it to him."

Radhaka grabbed the gun from her hands when she held it out. P.R. Alkimi said. "Do nothing, Rad."

The boy held his weapon close to his body. He glared at Gonzoles, silently turned and marched out. Both girls followed Tek Radhaka from the room.

Alkimi strolled over to Gonzoles. It had been a long time since he had talked to an adult woman. He smiled at her and said, "Sorry about that. But it is his only real possession."

"I understand." Gonzoles nodded and glanced at Sulu's back.

"Ensign Gonzoles." Alkimi leaned close to her and lowered his voice to a whisper. "Is that some kind of rank, Ensign?"

"Yes." Gonzoles said. Sulu seemed absorbed in the fire, so she turned back to Alkimi. His dark grey eyes were hard to ignore. The tan and brown spots appeared to come from several layers below his translucent ivory skin. "A junior officer. What about Purahl Rem?"

"My rank, a line officer. Does Ensign Gonzoles have a first name?" Alkimi wondered what a woman looked like without the mosaic pigmentation across her stomach and breast. He couldn't take his eyes off her.

"It's Rosita." She returned his smile. "What about you?"

"Parl." he said. "It means rock. But then if you were from around here you would know that."

"Rosita means a small red flower." Gonzoles gave him information but not the kind he was fishing for. She looked past Alkimi to Sulu, but he was still ignoring them. "How did you end up here? Just you and all these kids?"

"I was separated from my unit and almost dead when they found me. They hid me. Nursed me." Alkimi leaned against the heavy wooden table. "Now we take care of each other."

Sulu leaned against the warm stones of the hearth. He smiled to himself as Gonzoles side stepped Alkimi's questions about the Starfleet officers. She has a good head on her shoulders, Sulu thought. She just might be worth his time. Just as a young Sulu had been worth Captain Kirk's time.

Lost in his own thoughts about the informal mentoring system where one Starfleet

command officer helped another, he was surprised when Gonzoles said. "It's getting dark, Mr. Sulu."

Sulu straightened up. "Let's go."

Sorlee led the way. Two bright full moons lit the night. The four made their way through the maze of alleys. The further they went from the camp, the more deserted the area became. The Starfleet officers had heard Alkimi tell his troops not to follow them, but both kept a watchful eye behind them.

"Mr. Sulu." Gonzoles said. "It's been over two hours."

"I am aware of the time, Ensign." Sulu said.

"Two hours?" Alkimi asked.

"If I don't contact my superiors soon, a rescue party will be sent." Sulu stopped them at a intersection of the deserted street. Alkimi and Sorlee stood against the wall where Gonzoles could watch them, while Sulu looked up for the clearest spot and contacted the ship.

"Sulu to Enterprise."

"Report Mr. Sulu." Kirk snapped.

"We have located Lt. Anderson. He is being held as a prisoner of war." Sulu explained. "We are attempting a rescue within the hour."

"Boost your signal, Sulu. We are barely reading you." Kirk said. "Do you require assistance?"

"I think the fewer people the better right now, Captain." Sulu said. "A few people have already seen too much."

"I will wait one hour, Mr. Sulu." Kirk said. "If you can not accomplish your objective by then, a security force will be standing by."

"Aye Sir." Sulu closed his communicator and returned to the others. "We are running out of time."

"We heard." Alkimi said. "Where is this Captain you were talking to? If he's only going to wait an hour, it can't be far."

"Classified." Sulu said. "Let's go."

"It's a space ship." Sorlee said looking up at the night sky. The brightness of the two moons hid most of stars from view. Sulu and Gonzoles said nothing.

"Don't be silly, Sorlee." Alkimi didn't have time for her fantasies. "We're almost there. Show us what you saw."

Sorlee stopped them in a half destroyed building across a wide street from the enemy's headquarters. She pointed out over the half wall. "They took him in there."

"Have you been inside?" Sulu asked. Sorlee nodded.

"Just inside the door is a large entrance hall. At the end of the hall is a kitchen and their bunks." Sorlee reported. "There are steps that go upstairs and a couple of doors in the hall but I don't know where they lead."

"Good report." Sulu smiled at the girl but her blank expression did not change.

"They don't look like they are expecting any trouble." Gonzoles observed. The two guards at the front door appeared relaxed. To the Starfleet ensign, their lightweight grey uniforms looked inadequate to the weather. But neither man seemed to pay any attention to the

chilly night air.

"No they don't." Sulu agreed. Both their rifles leaned against the wall next to the door. One of the guards sat on the wide steps.

"Mr. Sulu." Gonzoles said. "With the power loss we've been experiencing, I'm not sure the phasers will function effectively at this range."

"Agreed." Sulu nodded. "Take Sorlee up there. When you are close enough, stun them both. Don't give either a chance to get off a shot."

"Aye, Sir. Long sleeves don't seem to be in style here." Gonzoles took her uniform jacket off and tossed it to Sulu. Goose bumps stood out on her arms below the short sleeves of the standard uniform t-shirt. "This wasn't what I had in mind when I joined..." She stopped herself and met Sulu's eyes. She had almost said Starfleet "...when I joined up."

"Flexibility, Ensign." Sulu smiled at her. Was she listening? He had always listened to everything Kirk said about command. "It's one of the hallmarks of a good commander."

"Aye." Gonzoles said. She took a deep breath and nodded to Sorlee. "Let's go."

The two young women left the safety of their hiding place and approached the guards at the door. As Gonzoles followed Sorlee, she wondered why the girl wasn't shivering. What little clothes she had on were threadbare.

One of the guards leaned against the door way of the building. The sitting guard dug the toe of his shiny boots into a crack in the stone steps. They watched the two young women approach. As they got closer, the first guards straightened and picked up his weapon. He held it loosely with the barrel pointed at the ground.

"Sori. You're back." The other guard stood up and smiled at the girl. "Who's your friend?"

"She's looking for Naddey." Sorlee answered heading directly for the guard who spoke to her. "A cousin from the country. Have you seen Naddey?"

"She left here with you." The guard who left his rifle against the wall came down two of the four steps. Sorlee met him. He smiled and put his arm around her. "You girls should keep better track of each other. It's a dangerous world."

Gonzoles walked slowly towards the guard with the rifle in his hands. She smiled and let her voice rise an octave when she slowly said. "A very dangerous world."

"You're older than the rest of the girls." He said to Gonzoles. "What's your name?"

"What's the matter, Mister? Not sure you can handle a real woman?" She laughed softly and took a few steps closer. Almost there. "I'm Rosey."

"Rosey, huh?" he smiled letting his rifle droop slightly.

"Yes." Bringing her phaser up, she fired quickly at one then the other guard to stun both. The guard next to Sorlee tumbled down the steps at her feet. Gonzoles caught the armed guard. Sorlee grabbed the rifle from his hands as Gonzoles laid him down next to his friend.

Sulu and Alkimi ran from their hiding place, across the street and up the steps. Alkimi stopped to search the guards and gather up their weapons. He grinned when he found a full ration of ammunition.

"Sorlee." Alkimi said. "Take these and hide them where we can get them later. Find the night patrol. Have them stand by in case I call for help."

"Yes sir." The girl retreated with the heavy bundle of weapons.

"Night patrol?" Sulu whispered. He handed Gonzoles her jacket. While putting it on, she wondered if the children had blankets.

"We're not amateurs." Alkimi smiled. "How long will they stay out like this?"

"Not long." Sulu said. He motioned to them to be quiet and slowly cracked open the front door. The entrance hall was empty. The three of them went inside and quietly shut the door behind them. They could hear laughter coming from somewhere in the back of the building. There was a door going off from either side of the hall and a staircase directly ahead. Alkimi headed for the staircase, looking up he could see that no one waited at the top for them. Sulu put his ear to the door to the right. He heard nothing. With phaser at the ready he swung the door open. It was an empty office.

Gonzoles listened at the door to the left. She couldn't hear anything either. Sulu nodded to her. She opened the door, surprising three young men evidently gambling on the floor. One jumped up, grabbing his gun. Gonzoles stunned him and the next one that moved. Sulu and Alkimi followed her into the room and closed the door.

"Hold your fire, Ensign." Sulu said. He picked up the gun from the table before the last man could get off the floor. Sulu tossed the weapon to Alkimi. "Get up. Call for help and you'll end up like your friends. Where is the prisoner? The one wearing this uniform."

"Upstairs." The young soldier stood, leaving the playing pieces on the floor. "The Morak is questioning him."

"How many troops are here?" Sulu asked.

"Ten." he answered quickly. "Most of them are eating dinner."

"Liar." Alkimi said. "There are at least five times that many stationed here. Even if some are on patrol, there are more than ten in the building."

"Perhaps he wants to die." Gonzoles aimed her phaser at him.

"No." The young man held both hands up as if he could deflect the phaser's energy beam.

"Morak Juraan is questioning the prisoner. He has four guards with him. Except for the guards and the patrols everyone else is off duty."

"Which room?" Sulu asked.

"Top of the stairs, to the right." he said.

Sulu nodded to Gonzoles and she stunned him. She smiled. "He's going to be surprised when he wakes up."

"Let's be gone before that happens." Sulu said carefully opening the door to the hallway. The hall was still empty. Carelessness, Sulu wondered, or confidence. Alkimi and Gonzoles followed Sulu up the stairs.

They turned right at the top of the steps and saw two guards outside a lone door. Sulu fired, stunning both. He immediately burst into the room with Gonzoles behind him. Lt. Anderson sat in a chair with two guards behind him and a commanding officer in front of him. The guards brought their guns to the ready and fired. Sulu dropped to one knee and fired, taking out one of the guards. Anderson lunged into the commanding officer throwing them both to the floor. The commander pulled out a side arm. Alkimi dropped onto the commander's arm. Gonzoles took cover behind a chair at the first guard's shot. She brought her phaser up and fired,

but not before the guard had gotten off another shot and hit Sulu in the shoulder. The impact of the projectile ripping into his flesh knocked him off his feet.

"Mr. Sulu!" Gonzoles called. They could hear the troops responding below them. Alkimi closed the door to the room. Anderson helped him shove a heavy chest of drawers against the door.

"I'm ok." Sulu said. But he needed to grab her hand to steady himself as he stood up. He took a deep breath and told himself to ignore the pain. "Lt. Anderson, any idea how we get out of here?"

"There is a balcony." Lt. Anderson pulled back the heavy drapes against the wall. The chest of drawers shook from the troop's attack on the door. Anderson grabbed his communicator and phaser off the desk. They all quickly went out onto the balcony.

Sulu handed his phaser to Gonzoles and pulled out his communicator. That arm was useless now. Pain ripped through his arm and shoulder with the slightest movement. "Sulu to Enterprise." he called but he got no answer. Sulu closed his eyes and took a couple of quick shallow breaths. "Alkimi, if your troops are near by..."

Alkimi shouted as loud as he could. "Radhaka. Attack! Attack!"

From across the street they could hear the explosions of weapons fire and the yelling of the young attacking forces. The troops in the building stopped trying to beat open the door to the second floor room.

"That's the night patrol?" Sulu managed a slight smile. There were more of them than he had anticipated.

"And a few extra troops." Alkimi went back in the room and gathered the weapons. "I told you we weren't amateurs."

"We have to get out in the open." Sulu said getting back to business. "Lt. Anderson, do you know if there is a way to the roof?"

"At the end of the hall there is a ladder that goes into the ceiling, Mr. Sulu." Lt. Anderson reported.

"Good." Sulu concentrated on slow measured breaths. To Alkimi, he said. "Do you think you can get back to your own troops? I can't take you with us."

"I wouldn't go with you if I could." Alkimi said with a grin. "I've stolen more guns and ammunition tonight than the patrols have brought back in weeks. And my kids still need someone to tell them what to do."

Alkimi and Anderson moved the chest of drawers away from the door. Gonzoles opened the door. The dimly lit hallway was empty. She saw the ladder at the end of the hall that Anderson had mentioned.

"Thank you for your help, P.R. Alkimi." Sulu said. "And thank your troops for us."

Alkimi just nodded. Sulu and Anderson headed down the hall to the ladder. Gonzoles started to follow, but Alkimi grabbed her arm to stop her.

"Rosita. I'll never forget you." He kissed her quickly, startling her. Then he grinned and ran down the hall towards the steps to join in the battle.

Lt. Anderson was already on the roof. Sulu called her. "Gonzoles, come on."

She sprinted down the hall to joined him at the base of the ladder. He nodded to her to go

up ahead of him. The blood stain on his uniform was spreading. She asked. "Can you make it?"

"I'm right behind you." Sulu said stoically.

"No Sir. You go first." she said.

"Are you questioning my orders, Ensign?"

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles said. He held onto the ladder with his good hand for support. "You should go first because: 1. You may need help and 2. If anyone comes down the hall, I'll have the free hand to fire the phaser."

"All right." Sulu nodded and started slowly up the ladder. As he reached the roof, Anderson helped him off the ladder. Gonzoles came up last. Sulu had already contacted the Enterprise. "Three to beam up. Have a medical team standing by."

"Acknowledged, Mr. Sulu." Mr. Spock answered.

When they materialized on the Enterprise, Dr. McCoy was waiting. He had all three officers taken to sick bay. Sulu required a short operation to remove the bullet from his shoulder. Lt. Anderson was dehydrated and exhausted. Ensign Gonzoles just needed a shower and a meal. After she had cleaned up and eaten, Gonzoles returned to sick bay to see how Sulu was doing.

"He'll be fine." Chapel assured her. "It's not the first time we've had the pleasure of Mr. Sulu's company in here."

"Somebody talking about me?" Sulu called from across the otherwise empty recovery room. With a touch, he adjusted the head of the bed up a bit.

"I thought you were asleep." Gonzoles walked across the room to his bed side. "How do you feel?"

"I'm all right." He smiled. "How about you, Rosey?"

"Oh, you heard that." Gonzoles could feel the warmth in her cheeks. She was sure they were bright red.

"It was good work." Sulu laughed at her embarrassment. "I would have been lowering my weapon too. So tell me, what did you think?"

She squinted at him and cocked her head to one side. "About?"

"About being on an alien planet. About being in the line of fire." Sulu clarified. "About having to make the decisions you've been training for all this time."

"Well, it was exciting and scary." She answered carefully. "But what surprised me was that I cared so much."

"You mean about Alkimi."

"I mean about the children." She said. "I did not expect to find myself wondering if they had enough to eat and to wear. I'm glad they have Parl Alkimi to look after them."

"You trusted him?" Sulu asked.

"You didn't?"

"Not at first." Sulu said. "Even as he was helping us, he had his own agenda. I don't know what would have happened if our needs did not coincide with his objectives."

"He was thinking of the children. We wouldn't have done anything to would put the children in danger." Gonzoles said. "Would we?"

"I'm not sure that was his only motivation." Sulu said. "Was it the children that made you trust him? Or was it that you found him attractive?"

"Sir!" She straightened up and stepped back from his bedside.

"There are no regulations against romance, Ensign." Sulu said. "But when you are on a mission you have to question everything, even your own reactions to people and events. You have to keep your judgement clear and your emotions in check."

Her stomach twisted into a knot. Her voice was barely audible. "So you found my conduct on the planet to be unsatisfactory?"

"To the contrary!" Sulu said. "I found your conduct to be exemplary. You were an asset to me and to the mission. Because of that I want you to examine everything you do. Question everything. The good and the bad. You have a future in Starfleet, Rosita. A promising one."

Her concerned expression immediately changed to a grin. Her heart beat faster. One of the senior staff of Enterprise thought she had a future in Starfleet! "You really think so?"

"Yes, I do." Sulu smiled. Gonzoles saw Kirk walk into the recovery room. When the famous Starfleet Captain came towards Sulu's bed, Gonzoles turned to go. Sulu grabbed her arm with his good hand and held her in place. "Captain, this is Ensign Gonzoles. I owe her my life today."

"Sir," Gonzoles sputtered. "I don't think..."

"From Commander Sulu's initial report, I'd have to agree." Captain Kirk smiled. "And I'd have to add my thanks, Ensign."

"And mine." Sulu added.

Gonzoles hesitated. She felt Kirk's hazel eyes look right through her and Sulu's dark brown eyes laugh at her. "Your welcome, Sir."

After a moment's silence, Kirk said. "If you'll excuse us please, Ensign."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles turned on her heel and walked away. After three steps, she covered her burning cheeks with her hands and quickly left sick bay.

"You look pretty good for a man who just had an operation." Kirk observed.

"I'm ready to report for duty, Captain." Sulu pushed himself up with his healthy arm. "But Dr. McCoy insists I stay for awhile."

Kirk sat on the bed next to Sulu's and ignored the injured officer's bravado. He had already spoken to McCoy. "That's a pretty little ensign you've run across."

Sulu nodded. "She has a good head on her shoulders. Brave but not rash. Very thoughtful for someone just out of the Academy."

"You are impressed with her?" Kirk said.

"Yes Sir."

"You plan on taking an interest in her career?" Kirk asked.

"Yes Sir."

"Good." Kirk said. "It's about time you passed on the benefits of your experiences to some one coming up."

"Gonzoles is the first young officer that I've come across who has potential," Sulu said. "And is willing to look to me for perspective."

"I find the role of mentor to be a gratifying one, but it carries a lot of responsibility." Kirk warned Sulu. "Especially in the beginning when roles are not strictly defined."

"Captain, are you telling me to be careful because Gonzoles is a woman?" Sulu asked.

"It's not suppose to matter." Kirk shrugged. "You've always worked well with women. Better than I do as a matter of fact. Just be clear with her why you are interested. And be clear with yourself too."

"Yes Sir." Sulu said.

Kirk stood to go. "Now, follow the good doctor's orders and rest."

"Aye Captain." Sulu laid down and closed his eyes. The short conversation had exhausted him. He didn't let the normal activity in sick bay draw his attention. Sulu drifted off to sleep.