

The base was fully manned now. The medical staff consisted of four doctor, six nurses and three med techs. Dr. Bobby Lopez and Nurse Richie Zackowski were ready to get back to the Enterprise. But Dr. McCoy wanted to see them on the base first. They were waiting with their gear in the infirmary. Dr. Booyse waited with them.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Booyse." McCoy said as he came in. "Can we talk in your office?"

"Of course, Dr. McCoy." They went into the office.

"What do you suppose that's all about?" Zackowski asked.

"Just giving her a chance to report on us." Lopez shrugged. "Nothing to worry about. We've been good boys."

In the office, Dr. Booyse sat at her desk. McCoy sat facing her. "So, how did it go Stella? Did you have any problems with Dr. Lopez?"

"Only minor." Dr. Booyse admitted. "Once we were clear on the procedures I wanted him to follow, it was fine. You were right in that he is a fine physician, but his attitude definitely needs work."

"Do you feel it is a problem with women superiors or just youth?" McCoy asked.

"I would not want to torpedo the young man's career." Dr. Booyse said carefully. "He is well liked by his peers and I may be a bit sensitive. But I think if you and Dr. Lopez are aware of the problem he will grow out of it."

"Well, that's much more positive than you were a month ago." McCoy said a bit surprised. "Did you speak to him about the problem?"

"I had a couple of meetings with him regarding the level of professionalism that I expect." Dr. Booyse said. "Since we were not often here at the same time, it was not necessary to bring up anything else."

"What about Zackowski?"

"Zackowski is an excellent nurse. He worked with both Dr. Lopez and myself." Dr. Booyse reported. "We had no problems."

"Thank you, Doctor." McCoy stood. "I'll take my crew and go home."

Dr. Booyse walked out of the office with Dr. McCoy. He motioned to the two men to pick up their gear. Booyse said, "Bobby, Richie. I'd just like to say thank you for all your help and cooperation."

"Anytime, Doc." Richie Zackowski smiled agreeably.

"Sure, just yell." Bobby Lopez agreed.

Back on the Enterprise, Dr. Lopez went to his quarters. Dr. McCoy asked Nurse Zackowski to report to his office when he was settled in. Lt. Zackowski informed Nurse Chapel of the doctor's order before he reported. McCoy was not surprised that the head nurse accompanied Zackowski, since his order had been outside the normal chain of command. He invited them to sit down.

"Is there a problem, Dr. McCoy?" Nurse Zackowski asked.

"How long have you been aboard the Enterprise, Zackowski?" McCoy asked.

"Almost four years, Sir."

"In that time, all your job performance ratings have been excellent." McCoy said. "I trust

your judgement, Richie. I was hoping you'd give me your perspective on this last month."

"Anything specific, Doctor?"

"I understand you worked with both Dr. Lopez and Dr. Booyse."

"Yes Sir."

"Excuse me, Dr. McCoy." Chapel interrupted. "But where is this going? Was there a problem on Starbase 68?"

"That's one of the things I am trying to determine." McCoy explained. "Zackowski, generally, what is your opinion of each doctor?"

"Dr. Booyse is all business, all the time." Richie answered. "I trust her medical judgement without exception. Administratively, she runs a tight ship. I have no problem with that."

"And Dr. Lopez?"

"Well Sir, I've known Dr. Lopez for over a year. He has a more relaxed style. He has a real talent for getting people to trust him and he's not afraid to ask a question if something is beyond his experience."

"Interesting." McCoy said. "Sounds like their two styles are quite different. Could cause a problem."

"Dr. Lopez likes to be in charge." Chapel said. "He's much better at giving orders than he is at taking them."

McCoy looked at his head nurse with surprise. She never would have complained about one of the doctors unless he had asked. Since all other medical personnel reported to her before coming to him, she would know if there were any personality conflicts. She had always just handled it. Sometimes McCoy did not appreciate his staff as much as he should have.

"Thank you for your opinions. Dismissed."

Dr. McCoy realized there was nothing to do at present but monitor the situation. He would keep his eye on Bobby Lopez and his ability to work with and for others. He needed time to think about this problem. As for now, McCoy headed to the bridge.

In the morning Sulu was feeling much better. His arm and shoulder were still stiff, but he at least felt able to move. He carefully sat up and prepared himself for Dr. McCoy's examination. A few deep breaths and he'd be able to smile when McCoy came in. Lt. Anderson had also spent the night in sick bay even though his injuries were minor. However Anderson had already returned to Starbase 68 when Nurse Chapel came to check Sulu's injuries.

"Good as new." Sulu said with a smile.

"Are you a doctor now?" Chapel asked checking the readings over his head. "Or do you think you are going to get out of here on charm alone?"

"It's worth a shot." Sulu laughed. He moved his arm slowly and asked seriously "What do you think, Christine?"

"I think Dr. McCoy has to look at it." Nurse Chapel said. "Just between you and me, I think you are sprung but you are not going back to work today."

"I already promised the Captain I'd be there." Sulu said.

"Why don't you let me be the judge of that?" McCoy asked coming into the room. "Let me see you move that arm, Mr. Sulu."

Sulu complied with the Doctor's orders, wincing only once when attempting to move his arm above his head. "It's not that bad, Doc. Just a little stiff."

McCoy scanned the shoulder and administered a hypo spray that would ease the stiffness. "There's no reason for you to stay in sick bay any longer. But I want you to take it easy for another day at least. And I want to see you in here tomorrow morning before I declare you fit for duty."

"I'll be here, Doctor." Sulu agreed. He hated being on sick call. At least they were at the Starbase, so he wouldn't be missing any action on the bridge.

Dr. Lopez walked into sick bay's inner section carrying a computer pad. "Dr. McCoy, I have the final reports on the tests on Lt. Anderson. You wanted them right away."

"Thank you, Doctor." McCoy said taking the pad and studying it briefly.

"How are you doing, Sulu?" Lopez asked.

"Ok." Sulu lied.

"By the way Sulu, Ensign Gonzoles was in here first thing this morning asking how you were." McCoy said a bit distractedly. He handed the computer pad back to Lopez. "Dr. Lopez, make sure Dr. Booyse gets a copy of these. She'll want to follow up with Lt. Anderson for possible psychological side effects."

"Aye aye, Doctor." Lopez said good naturedly and went to the nurse's station to make the transfer.

"Gonzoles said she wanted to talk to you when you were feeling up to it.." McCoy relayed the rest of the message to Sulu.

"It was the first time she had been in the middle of a war zone." Sulu explained.

"The Captain has authorized shore leave for all off duty personnel." McCoy said. "Let me know if she needs to talk to someone else."

"I will Doc, thanks."

"Now get out of here. You're cluttering up my sick bay."

"Yes Sir."

It was a couple of hours before Sulu could beam down to Starbase 68. He was doing everything in slow motion. The hardest part of the day was getting into a fresh uniform. He ate a leisurely breakfast and managed to visit with Uhura, who was taking a coffee break.

When he beamed down to the Base, Lt. Commander Sulu was starting to feel good. He headed for the barracks to look up Gonzoles. She was off duty, he had checked. Ensigns generally bunked two or three to a room depending on the available space. But according to the computer records Ensign Gonzoles's bunk mate had not yet reported for duty. He reached her assigned room and touched to door signal.

"It's open." She called.

He walked in to find four officers sitting around a table playing poker. The three he did not know, a woman and two men, stood up quickly and came to attention. Gonzoles stood more slowly, smiling at him.

"At ease." Sulu said. They relaxed but did not sit down. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to

interrupt your game."

"Mr. Sulu, would you like to join us?" Gonzoles asked. The others exchanged looks. They thought she must be crazy. When a senior officer came to your quarters looking for you, you didn't ask him to play cards. "I mean, if you play poker."

"I've played a hand or two." Sulu said coming further into the room. "If everyone would relax and sit down, I might join you."

Gonzoles pulled up another chair from the desk and made the introductions. "Lt. Schuman, Lt. Piesto, and Ensign Iwuoha. This is Lt. Commander Sulu who I told you about."

They all sat down. Sulu took the chair between Gonzoles and Piesto. Schuman gathered the cards and dealt a hand of five card draw. He dealt quickly and surely. Piesto was in charge of the chips. She placed a pile in front of Sulu. They all anted up.

"How's your shoulder?" Gonzoles asked.

"Stiff." Sulu admitted. "The Doctor won't declare me fit for duty until tomorrow."

"I'll open for ten." Ensign Iwuoha tossed a chip in the pot. Every one at the table called his bet. Sulu studied the faces of the players. Iwuoha was a young man, probably just out of the Academy. He had intensely dark eyes and smooth skin the color of strong tea. Lt. Piesto had full sensual lips and she wore her deep brown hair in shoulder length curls. Lt. Schuman's reddish brown hair was receding rapidly. And Sulu couldn't help but notice his long thin fingers.

As they played a few hands, the group loosened up a bit. Every time Sulu looked at Gonzoles, she met his eyes with a warm smile. Before this he had only seen her with her hair in a braid or held back with a barrett. Today it was a shiny black wave landing just below her shoulder.

"You're bluffing, Regina." Schuman said to Piesto.

"Only one way to find out." Piesto answered. Everyone else had folded. Schuman tilted his chair back as he studied his cards. Piesto met his gaze steadily. She never even glanced at her cards. "Make up your mind, Bruce."

"Call." Schuman said. He laid his cards on the table. "Two pair. Jacks and eights."

"Full house, threes and fives." she laughed and took the pot.

Gonzoles gathered up the cards and dealt. Sulu looked around the room. He never liked to watch the cards being dealt. It was one of the few superstitions he indulged in. The room was standard issue. Two bunks, one on top of the other, two desks with computer terminal, two chest of drawers, and the table they were using for cards. The only sign of personal possessions was a draped easel in the corner and a neatly arranged paint set on the desk.

The game continued. Each looking at their cards, drawing one or two more. Sulu tossed in two cards. Gonzoles gave him two. He was smiling and relaxed, but she wondered if that was part of his poker face. She warned herself to question her reaction to him.

"I'll bet ten." Iwuoha tossed the chip in. Schuman and Piesto called.

"Your ten, and twenty more." Sulu said.

"That's thirty to me." Gonzoles said putting her chips in. "And I'll raise thirty more."

"Ouch!" Iwuoha said and dropped his cards face down. "I fold."

"I'll call." Schuman said.

"Not me." Piesto folded. She stood up and stretched.

"Your thirty." Sulu said looking Gonzoles in the eye. He placed his chips in pot. "And fifty."

"I'll call." Gonzoles smiled.

"Out!" Schuman said. He had already lost too much today.

"Read them and weep." Sulu said. "Full house. Aces over queens."

"Not so fast, Mister." Gonzoles said as he reached for the pot. She laid her hand on the table. "Four threes."

Sulu laughed as she took the chips. "Gonzoles, you surprise me."

"That will teach you to underestimate me, Mr. Sulu." She smiled

"I won't make that mistake again, Ensign." Sulu said a bit more seriously than Gonzoles realized.

"Anybody for a little late lunch?" Piesto asked. She was due on duty in another hour.

"Yeah." Iwuoha agreed. "I've got to get something to eat before going to work. You've got to give me a chance to break even soon, Rosita."

"Any time Sam." Gonzoles said as Iwoha and Piesto headed for the door together. Schuman stood to go also. "You too, Bruce?"

"I have no luck at all today. I'll see you later." Schuman said. His luck had changed when Sulu joined the game. A superior officer playing had made him nervous. He nodded to Sulu. "Commander."

"Mr. Schuman." He acknowledged the lieutenant. Sulu turned to Gonzoles. She was putting the chips away in their case. "I didn't know you were a card shark."

"Luck was on my side today." She smiled at him as she gathered up the last of the cards. "You never said why you came to see me."

"Dr. McCoy told me you had come by to see me." Sulu explained. "He said you had wanted to talk to me."

"I just wanted to see how you were doing." Gonzoles said. "I suppose I wanted to assure myself that it was ok. That it was over."

Sulu nodded. "Did you dream about it last night?"

"I'm not sure." She said putting the cards and chips away in a drawer. "I just had an uneasy feeling when I woke up this morning."

"So you played poker." Sulu observed.

She smiled. "Why not? It's something I'm good at. And nobody gets hurt. What do you do when you feel like that?"

"Sometimes racquet ball, sometimes fencing." Sulu said. "Anything physical where I can beat Lt. Chekov."

"What does Lt. Chekov have to say about that?" She laughed.

"He keeps trying to beat me." Sulu said. He nodded towards the easel. "You paint?"

"I try." She shrugged. "It's nothing."

"Ok." He didn't press her about it. He wasn't sure how much he wanted to know anyway. "Do you have to go on duty?"

"They don't usually let a pilot who loses a ship take another one out right away." She shrugged, suddenly feeling a little awkward having him in her quarters.

"Is there an inquiry?" Sulu asked, still sitting at the card table.

"I've given a report to the base commander." Gonzoles said. "I'll have to wait and see what happens next."

"I'm sure it will be fine." he assured her. "As I understand it, there was nothing you could do. Don't worry about it."

"I'll try not to, Sir."

Sulu's communicator signal sounded. He pulled it out and flipped it open. "Sulu here."

"Sulu, report to Commander Von Maltz in operations." Uhura said.

"On my way." Sulu replied and closed the communicator. "Enterprise will be around for a couple of days. Maybe I'll see you."

"I'll be here." She said as he left her quarters.

Sulu took the turbo lift to operations. It looked quite different than the last time he had been there. All stations were fully manned and activated. Sensors busily gathered new information to be studied and analyzed. A stellar cartography team was returning in a runabout. The Enterprise in standard orbit around the station reflected the light from a nearby star.

"Commander Sulu." Von Maltz said looking up from one of the science station. "Join me in my office."

Sulu followed Von Maltz. His office was spartan except for a landscape painting on the wall behind his desk. It was a scenic snow covered mountain village. Somewhere in the Alps, Sulu guessed.

"What can I do for you, Commander?" Sulu asked.

"I saw your report regarding the incident on the third planet of the system K328 including the rescue of the crew of the downed runabout." Von Maltz said sitting behind his desk. He indicated the chair opposite him and Sulu sat down. "Did you take any tricorder readings of these mysterious stones?"

"Only the most preliminary readings, Sir, which were included in my report." Sulu said. "Only enough to know we had to get out in the open to transport or communicate with the ship. Most of the time we were dodging hostile fire. The weapons were primitive but effective."

"Have you seen the pilot's report regarding the crash?" Von Maltz asked.

"No, Sir." Sulu said "The only information I have on the crash comes from the Mayday we received from the runabout. I was on duty on the bridge when it came in. Is there a problem with the pilot's report?"

"No, Ensign Gonzoles followed proper procedures." Von Maltz said. So often the young officers were afraid to admit they were having a problem. They worried that it would look bad on their records or that they would appear weak. "She is young, just out of the Academy. I am wondering if I should send her out on her next scheduled flight or give her time to adjust. Captain Kirk suggested I get your input."

"I've just come from talking to Gonzoles." Sulu said. "She is not unaffected, but I believe she is coping. I would suggest she keep with her normal duty schedule."

"That is my inclination also." Von Maltz said nodding. "However we will be turning the surveying of that particular system over to the Enterprise. The magnetic energy from that planet is too much for a smaller ship to handle. I've never seen anything like it."

"Nor have I." Sulu agreed.

"I have asked Captain Kirk to keep me advised of the survey results."

"The Della Mir have no information on that planet?" Sulu asked.

"No." Von Maltz said. "They were aware of the planet and the war going on there, but they feel the level of technology was not advanced enough to make the planet worth investigating. And that seems to be their motivating force. Confidentially, Mr. Sulu, I think the Enterprise will be required to patrol this sector for a substantial period. At least until we decide just what the Della Mir truly want from us."

"Then the survey is a good legitimate reason for us to stay." Sulu said.

"Yes." Von Maltz said. Captain Kirk had been right about Sulu. You didn't have to paint him a picture. Commander Von Maltz decided to reschedule Ensign Gonzoles for normal duty.

"Anything else, Sir?" Sulu asked.

"No. Thank you for your input, Mr. Sulu." Von Maltz dismissed him. Sulu left the office and operations.

"Computer, location Ensign Gonzoles?" Sulu asked in the turbo lift.

"Ensign Gonzoles is in the main dining hall." the computer answered. "Deck twelve."

"Deck twelve, then." He walked into the almost empty dining hall to find Gonzoles sitting alone. He got a cup of coffee and walked over to her table. She was oblivious to anyone around her, picking at her salad with a fork. "May I join you?"

She jumped a bit but looked up at him and smiled. "Of course. That was quick. I didn't expect to run into you again today."

"Commander Von Maltz wanted to know if I felt you should go right back to work or not." Sulu said sitting down.

"And?" she asked anxiously when he did not continue.

"I told him I thought you'd do better back at work." Sulu said. "But I would suggest to you that you talk to someone if the memories bother you."

"Someone?"

"Dr. Booyse, perhaps. Me, if you wish." Sulu said. "I wouldn't want you to make the mistake of thinking you shouldn't be affected. A good pilot always evaluates and learns from any mission."

"Success or failure." she added quietly looking down at her meal.

"And which do you consider this mission?"

"A failure." Gonzoles admitted. "The mission was to survey the planets in system K328. Only the outer most planet was surveyed."

"The fourth planet did not have the same magnetic effect seen on the third planet?" Sulu asked.

"No, Sir." Gonzoles answered. "It showed no abnormal magnetic fields."

"So you had no reason to anticipate a problem with the survey of the third planet." Sulu did not wait for an answer. "Did you know that the survey of the system has been reassigned to the Enterprise?"

"No. Why?"

"It has been determined that none of the small ships on the base are capable of escaping the magnetic effect." Sulu explained. "There was nothing you could do."

"So officially it wasn't my fault." she shrugged.

"You made the best of a bad situation. You saw to the safety of your crew." Sulu said. But when she just nodded and said nothing else, he asked. "That's not what's bothering you, is it?"

"Don't you ever feel that you want to help? Even though the prime directive dictates noninterference?" Rosita asked with a sigh.

"Sure." Sulu answered. It wasn't necessary to point out that ignoring the prime directive always had far reaching repercussions. "But I've seen that even good intentions can go awry."

"You're right, of course." Gonzoles said vaguely.

"Not good enough, Ensign." Sulu said abruptly.

"Sir?"

"Say what you are thinking." Sulu directed. "Don't ever tell me what you think I want to hear."

"I was thinking that I agree with you intellectually, but emotionally...." Gonzoles searched for the right way to express herself. "They were just children."

"Were they?"

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"Think about this, Ensign." Sulu said slowly. "How long do you suppose this war of theirs has been going on?"

"I don't know." Gonzoles said. She thought for a minute before adding "But it's been awhile."

"What tells you that?" Sulu challenged.

"The condition of the buildings. The lack of provisions. The lack of adults. The words Alkimi used. Oppressors, resistance."

"Good." Sulu said. The ability to analyze new situations was crucial to any officer in Starfleet. "I would say the adults disappeared from those children's lives five or six years ago."

"Why?"

"The ages of the children." Sulu explained.

"But, there were children younger than five." She said.

"Yes, but none five, six, seven. And Sorlee is old enough to be a mother." Sulu observed. "If they are to survive they have to have children. After all, the adults are not coming back."

"And so we just leave them alone?" Gonzoles asked. Fighting a war and having children did not make them adults in her eyes.

"They have Alkimi. And I am sure there are other pockets of resistance." Sulu said. "Besides we have no idea about the other side of this war. You have to let them have their own history."

"Yes, I understand." she said slowly. "But it's not easy."

"No it's not." Sulu agreed. The reasons behind the prime directive seemed obvious and right at the Academy, but in reality it was never clear cut. "But you chose Starfleet."

"Yes Sir, I did." Gonzoles admitted. "I'm sorry. I guess I am indulging myself."

"In my experience, that is one of the side effects of too much down time." Sulu smiled. "I believe you will find yourself back on the duty roster."

"Thank you." She said sincerely.

"It wasn't my doing." Sulu shrugged. "I just offered an opinion. You have handle yourself well."

"No." She smiled at him. "I meant for listening to my ramblings. I'm sure you have other things to do with your spare time."

Sulu leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "Just between you and me, my shoulder aches terribly. I'm not going anywhere but to my own bunk when I get back to the ship."

"What would Dr. McCoy say?" She laughed.

"He'd keep me on sick call for a week if he knew." Sulu said. He looked at her pointedly, "But he's not going to know, Ensign. Is he?"

"Not from me, Sir." she assured him with a grin.

"Good girl." He smiled back and drank his coffee. "Where did you learn to play poker like that?"

"I grew up in a small village in Guatamala." She explained. "When the rainy season came, my uncles would play poker for hours. At first I was just fascinated by the different patterns and combinations the cards could make. But my Uncle Hector saw me watching and taught me the game."

"Big family?" Sulu asked.

"Huge. It seems like everyone I know at home is family of some kind." Rosita smiled. "How about you?"

"Not that big." Sulu said. "I have three sisters and my mother. There are cousins, but I don't see them. When Enterprise picked up the crew for this base, that was the first time I had been back to Earth in at least three years."

"No ties?" She asked. She had trouble imagining not seeing her parents or brothers and sisters for over three years. She had been gone from Earth for less than a month, yet she already had sent and received dozens of letters.

"I wouldn't say no ties. I just haven't had reason to go home." He said. Of course that was changing now that Jimmi was back in his life. But there was no reason to bring that up now. "I've been intent on my career."

"Then I guess your family was very happy to see you." she observed.

"Shocked would be a better word." Sulu laughed "You see I'm not very good about sending letters. A character flaw that tends to get me in trouble quite a bit."

"You mean they didn't know you were coming?" She asked laughing. She had difficulty picturing Sulu as 'in trouble'.

"Not until I walked through the door." Sulu admitted. He looked up to see Lt. Anderson coming their way. He was taller than Sulu with dark brown hair and a neatly trimmed mustache. He carried a lunch tray. "Lt. Anderson, you are looking better than the last time I saw you."

"So are you, Commander." Anderson said. "May I join you?"

"Please." Sulu said. Anderson sat next to Gonzoles. They had flown several missions

together. "What did you think of your hosts on the planet, Lieutenant?"

"I found their methods primitive but effective." Anderson said "Painfully so."

"Indeed." Sulu agreed feeling his shoulder.

"And Chekov said I'd be bored serving on a starbase." Anderson laughed. He took a bite of his sandwich before adding. "It hasn't been boring so far, has it Rosita?"

"Not that I've noticed." She smiled. "Do you still want to bring your wife and baby to the station?"

"More so than ever." Anderson said earnestly. "This is a dangerous business and I'd like to spend as much time with Gwen and Jennifer as I can. Haven't you ever been in love, Rosita?"

"I guess not, Walt." She sighed. "Not to the point that I'd change my plans anyway. How about you, Mr. Sulu?"

He picked up his coffee cup, but it was empty. He smiled and shrugged "I'm still working on that. I'm going to head back to the ship. See you later."

After Sulu had left, Anderson observed. "That was a strategic retreat if I ever saw one."

"What do you mean, Walt?"

"I was bunking with Chekov on the ride up here." Anderson said. "According to him, Sulu is involved with a girl on Earth but the relationship is explosive. Sulu obviously didn't want to talk about it."

"Sounds like ship's gossip to me." Gonzoles said. It felt odd talking about Mr. Sulu behind his back. She wasn't quite sure why, but she felt protective of his reputation.

"Probably." Anderson admitted. "Sulu and Chekov are friends. But that doesn't stop gossip. Chekov found it quite amusing. He evidently knows the girl quite well also."

"That's strange. Mr. Sulu just told me he hadn't been back to Earth for three years before the Enterprise picked us up." Gonzoles said thoughtfully.

"Maybe that's why the relationship is so rocky." Anderson laughed. "It's hard to have a stable relationship with someone who is not in Starfleet. But I'm sure you know that."

"What about your wife?" Gonzoles asked. She didn't want to discuss her previous relationships. "She's not in the service, is she?"

"No." Anderson admitted. He was sure his wife would be very happy on Starbase 68. "She's a software expert. She's done consulting for Starfleet before. She can do her work almost anywhere. Besides, Gwen is exceptional."

"Well, I'm glad you think so." Gonzoles smiled.