

On the Enterprise Kirk and Spock were still trying to get some more answers. No matter how Spock and Chekov reconfigured the sensors, they could not get any readings from the point of origin of the ripple effect. Sulu reported the information that he had obtained from Purahl Rem Alkimi. Uhura was still monitoring the radio broadcasts. She found the debate of whether there was life in outer-space particularly amusing. Religious traditionalists held that the stars were the heavens. The other extreme feared the imminent invasion of evil aliens.

"Anything new, Spock?" Kirk asked coming onto the bridge. He was getting impatient for a return signal from Carol Lightfoot.

"Nothing regarding the sight where the magnetic field is the strongest," Spock reported. "However Mr. Chekov has determined what was causing the problem with transport and communications."

"Chekov?"

"It is the planet itself, Captain." Chekov reported from the second science station. "In the northern hemisphere of the main continent there are large deposits of telluride. It would appear the inhabitants used the telluride as building stones."

"Which means?" Kirk asked. He never had been very interested in rocks.

"Telluride is a generic name for any compound that has tellurium." Chekov explained. "On other planets we usually see tellurium attracted to a more electropositive element. On Tellus we are seeing combinations that we've never seen before. In combination with quartz, iron, and lead just to name a few."

"Ok." Kirk said .

"We speculate that because the tellurium has combined with elements that do not normally carry an electropositive charge," Spock elaborated "When the EMP occurred, the magnetic field was captured by the Telluride."

"So it is possible that whoever this pulse comes from may have chosen this planet for it's elemental composition?" Kirk asked.'

"It is a possibility." Spock nodded.

"Captain." Uhura reported. "Incoming message from Starbase 68."

McCoy and Sulu had been on the planet Tellus carrying out their medical mission for a little over three hours when the Enterprise received a signal from the negotiating team. The treaty negotiations were being held on Starbase 68. It was along the border and although it was Federation property the Della Mir considered it fairly neutral territory.

"On screen." Kirk ordered. Carly Lightfoot's image appeared on the bridge's main screen. "Hello Carly. Were you successful?"

"Surprisingly so." Carly said. "Iphi-doh, an assistant to the Ambassador, had to check into the details. But once she did, she had no qualms about admitting that they were using the planet to test a pulse beacon and their magnetic shields. According to Iphi-doh it is a ten year experiment and they have the permission of the planetary leader to conduct it."

"Interesting." Kirk said. "I was under the impression this planet did not have direct contact with space faring species."

"The general populace may not be informed." Carly shrugged. "But a scout ship Captain named Tenn-drah has the Dentrall, the monarch of this planet, on record as giving his consent to

conduct the experiment."

"What is this technology? This pulse beacon?" Kirk asked.

"Jim, the Della Mir do not give away technology." Carly laughed. "They sell it. It seems to be their primary motivation."

"So they are testing this weapon to sell it. To whom?" Kirk asked.

"They don't seem to care." Carly said seriously. "They apparently see these negotiations as the opening up of vast trade routes. They are not interested in the Federation's philosophy, only its technology. And its markets."

"So they would be equally interested in trading with the Klingons or the Romulans?",

"I wouldn't doubt it." Carly said. "We need a treaty with this Community, Jim. This planet is not going to be a deal breaker."

"What about the disregard for the inhabitants of Tellus?" Kirk asked.

"According to Iphi-doh, no one was killed by the pulse beacon. They claim to have actually saved lives by ending the long civil war." Carly said. "There were some casualties from the explosion used to frighten the inhabitants when the beacon was activated. However both Tenn-drah and Dentrall Kespret felt the number of casualties were acceptable."

"So that's it?" Kirk asked irritably

"That's it." Carly said "Don't get me wrong, Jim. This information has been invaluable. We now know exactly what is and is not important to the Della Mir. That is extremely important for any negotiation to be successful. Thanks. Starbase 68 out."

"Diplomats." Kirk grumbled after the screen went blank. "Uhura, how long before Sulu is due to check in?"

"Forty three minutes, Captain." Uhura answered.

"She called it a pulse beacon." Kirk said looking at Spock. "I don't like the idea of leaving orbit without knowing more about this weapon."

"She also mentioned magnetic shields." Spock said. He had been thinking about this possibility for the last couple of hours.

Kirk walked over to the science station. "Spock, what are you thinking?"

"When you push two magnets together with their like poles facing each other." Spock explained using his hands to illustrate. "They push apart. How far depends on the size and strength of the magnet."

"Right." Kirk said. But he did not see where Spock was going. "How can you use that?"

"If we adjust the shields to project their own magnetic field with an identical magnetic pole and the necessary strength, we should be able to glide along on the opposing field." Spock suggested. "Theoretically we should be able to cut engines and use thrusters only until it was necessary to leave orbit."

"Would the shuttle be able to conserve enough power to leave orbit?" Kirk asked.

"With the reconfigured power flow and the magnetic shield, I believe it would be possible." Spock said. "It would require careful monitoring."

"How long would it take to make the adjustments?" The Captain asked.

"Mechanically, no more than an hour." Spock estimated. "However I will need to run computer simulations once the necessary equipment is in place."

"Keep me apprised of your progress." Kirk said. Spock nodded and left the bridge. He met Scotty in the shuttle bay and went over the necessary changes to the shuttle itself. Scotty and his team started right away. Spock returned to the bridge to finish the computer programming involved for the simulations.

"Captain." Uhura reported as Spock came off the turbo lift and assumed his station. "I am receiving a hail from the planet."

"From?" Kirk swiveled his chair to look at Uhura.

"From Kespret, Dentrall of all of Tellus." Uhura said. "Audio only."

"Open a channel, Commander." Kirk said. He and Spock exchanged glances. Spock raised his eyebrow. Kirk shrugged. "He's hailing us."

"Channel open, Captain."

"This is Captain James T. Kirk of the Starship Enterprise." Kirk said. "What can we do for you, Kespret, Dentrall of Tellus?"

"Starship Enterprise?" Kespret asked slowly. "Did Tenn-drah send you?"

"No." Kirk said. "We are not associated with the Della Mir Community. We are representatives of the United Federation of Planets. Perhaps we could meet face to face, Dentrall."

"What is your position, Enterprise?" Kespret asked carefully.

"We are in orbit around your planet." Kirk said. When the Dentrall did not immediately respond, Kirk added. "Take your time. We're not going anywhere."

"I am alone now." Kespret said. "If you could join me now, that would be acceptable."

"Is that true Spock?" Kirk asked without cutting off the audio. He wanted Kespret to know they were capable of checking up on him.

"Yes Captain." Spock answered. "I am reading only one life form at the source of the transmission. However there are others in the same structure."

"That's true." Kespret tried to sound unimpressed. "After all this is a palace."

"Of course, Dentrall. We'll join you momentarily. Enterprise out." Kirk said. He turned to Spock "Come on Spock."

"Captain, this will delay the refit of the shuttle." Spock advised him.

"It can wait." Kirk said. "Chekov, you have the con. Keep an eye open for the Della Mir. This Dentrall character was obviously expecting to find them here."

They materialized in a beautifully but sparsely furnished well lit room. The office was dominated by a large polished wooden desk. There was a flag behind and to the right of it and two plush but straight back chairs in front of it. There were portraits on the wall, obviously past leaders. The thick carpet was a subtle blend of a multitude of colors. Across from the desk were glass doors that opened onto a large balcony.

Dentrall Kespret stood in front of the desk waiting for them. He was a robust man in his early fifties. His dignified outfit was a loose flowing grey jacket over a deep purple shirt and loosely fitting slacks. His salt and pepper hair was cut short and his spots were fading as with all people his age.

"Captain?" he asked as they materialized.

"I am Captain Kirk." Kirk said coming towards Kespret. "This is my first officer, Mr.

Spock."

"I am Kespret, Dentrall of Tellus." He introduced himself. Kespret couldn't help but stare at them. They were so different from Tenn-drah. However they were closer in appearance to his own people. This contact with aliens was so exhilarating. "You are not of the same worlds, are you?"

"No Sir." Kirk said. "As I said before we represent a federation of many planets. But I understand you have had contact with the Della Mir."

"I have had contact with CaptainTenn-drah and he has been a good friend to me." Kespret clarified. "I have never met any others from space until now. However you have been to Tellus before. "

"Why do you say that?" Kirk asks.

"I have a report from a small town in the north. Charsis." Kespret said. He circled Spock, still staring. "They claim a troop of Achromorphs attacked the occupation headquarters shooting people with lights."

"Achromorphs?" Spock asked.

"It is the name given to those born without spots." Kespret told them. "In less enlightened times they were killed as children of evil spirits."

"And now?" Spock asked.

"Now we are more enlightened." Kespret said to Spock. He finally tore his eyes away and turned to take his place behind his desk. When he was sitting he said. "Were those your troops, Captain? Can I assume you will take up the cause of the Dendrox?"

"The Federation does not get involved in the internal affairs of other worlds." Kirk explained as he walked over to the intricately carved desk. "A small ship of ours lost power over your planet and had to make an emergency landing. We recovered our people without any fatalities."

"Then why are you here now?" Kespret asked.

"The Della Mir." Kirk said simply. "Apparently they don't agree with the Federation's policy of noninterference. They involved themselves in your war."

"There is no war." Kespret smiled a diplomatic smile.,

"There is a war in Charsis." Spock said.

"The Dendrox army surrendered five years ago. Most of the province is enjoying the peace." Kespret dismissed Spock's statement. "The rebels in Charsis and Wildas are merely outlaws."

"I see." Kirk said. "Of course this peace would not have been possible without Captain Tenn-drah's help. And I assume you helped him."

"He has been a friend." Kespret said simply. Both the Dentrall and the Della Mir understood trade and the importance of keeping the upper hand in any negotiation. "He and I understand each other."

"How much do you know about this pulse beacon?" Kirk asked.

"I know that it renders machinery powerless." Kespret said. "Is that what happened to your ship? Was it pulled out of the sky?"

"No, there were other problems. It was a small ship with an inexperienced crew." Kirk

dismissed the idea. He leaned on the Dentrall's desk and added. "Which is why they sent me."^

"So your ship is bigger?" Kespret asked. He was eager for the answers, but doing his best not show it. "Your crew more experienced?"

"Are you looking for information for Tenn-drah?" Kirk smiled. Kespret carefully kept his expression the same. "I'm sure he already knows. But for your own information my crew, which is over four hundred strong, is the best in the fleet."

"Captain." With one word and one raised eyebrow, Spock reminded Kirk of their time limits and commented on the lack of productive information coming from this conversation.´

"You're right, Spock." Kirk pulled out his communicator and opened a channel. "Kirk to Enterprise. Two to beam up. Nice to meet you, Kespret. Say hello to Tenn-drah for us."

McCoy came down the stone steps from the second floor. It had gotten dark quickly and McCoy was feeling a little tired. It had been a busy afternoon. He had just checked the fifteen kids he had stowed in Alkimi's bedroom where he could monitor them. Sorlee and Naddey were playing nurses. The fire in Alkimi's hearth provided the only light and quite a few shadows in the stone room. Alkimi was pouring a steaming liquid into a coffee mug that Sulu was holding. P.R. Alkimi held the pot up and asked. "Want some, Doc?"

"What is it?" McCoy asked skeptically. It couldn't possibly be coffee.

"I don't really have a name for it." Alkimi admitted as he poured a mug for Dr. McCoy. "I make it from a weed that grows around here. But it's satisfying on a chilly night."

"It's not too bad, Doc." Sulu said. "Close to an herbal tea."

"I hate herbal tea." McCoy said. "But right now I'd drink hot water. Does it have any caffeine in it?" Alkimi shrugged. He didn't know what that was. He handed McCoy the mug.

"I've got to check in shortly, Doc." Sulu said sipping his drink. "The Captain's going to ask."

"Two of those kids are still running fevers." McCoy said. "Unless the Captain gives a direct order to return, I'm staying."

"Ok, Doc." Sulu said. He checked his chronometer. It had been almost four hours since Captain Kirk had returned to the Enterprise. Regular contact meant every two hours. Technically Sulu and McCoy should both be off duty by now. However Sulu jumped at any chance at command and would continue all night and into the next day if necessary.

"Kids amaze me." McCoy said thoughtfully. He sat on the edge of the hearth and sipped his drink. "When they are sick, they'll always call for their mother. It doesn't matter how long she's been gone."

Sulu stood up and put his coffee mug on the table. "I'll go check in."

"You have time. There is no need to leave, Hikaru." McCoy said calmly. "We'll have to talk about it sometime."

"Now, Doc?" Sulu said incredulously. A little warning would have been nice. They had gotten along very peacefully the past couple of months. They hadn't even mentioned Jimmi between them for weeks. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"I was out of line." McCoy said. Sulu just stared at him. He had been avoiding this

conversation. P.R. Alkimi looked back and forth between the two trying to figure out what they were talking about. "What I said at the bar."

What was he suppose to say to that? He sat back down in the chair by the table. "I don't know, Doc. You seemed very serious to me."

"Oh, I didn't say I wasn't serious. " McCoy smiled mischievously. It was an expression that Sulu had seen on Jimmi many times. "Just that I should have kept my mouth shut. I have trouble doing that sometimes."

"Ok." Sulu said slowly, thinking that over. "So where does that leave us, Doctor?"

"I'll try to stay out of it." McCoy said simply. He wasn't promising him anything. But it had occurred to McCoy that Sulu might be a maturing influence on his daughter. And since she was bound and determined to ignore the inevitable obstacles, there wasn't much McCoy could do about it anyway.

"Thank you, Dr. McCoy." Sulu said. Sulu had trouble imagining McCoy staying out of anything, but he had to appreciate the Doctor's attempt at solving this problem between them. "I better check in."

"I'll walk out with you." Alkimi said. "I've got to see to the night patrol."

McCoy sat back and relaxed while the two younger men went outside. He should speak to the Captain himself, but he needed just a couple of minutes to himself first. Sulu and Alkimi hadn't been gone two minutes when a boy came in through the window. It took McCoy a moment to recognize the talkative young Berk.

"Can I see it again?" Berk asked quietly.

"The scanner?" McCoy asked. Berk nodded eagerly. He opened the scanner and motioned the boy to join him sitting on the edge of the hearth. "Here, I'll show you how it works. Maybe you could be a doctor someday."

"I don't think so." Berk said quietly.

"Don't give up hope, Berk." McCoy said. "Anything's possible."

Sulu and Alkimi walked down the steps into the dim light of the planet's dusk together. Alkimi just had to ask. "What was that between you and the Doctor?"

"Nothing. Dr. McCoy is just concerned with his daughter's happiness." Sulu said.

Alkimi just grinned, nodded and went off to meet with the night patrol. Sulu walked into the square and pulled out his communicator. "Sulu to Enterprise."

"Report, Mr. Sulu." Kirk answered his hail.

"All's quiet here, Captain." Sulu said "Dr. McCoy is watching two children with fevers and requests that we stay until he has it under control."

"I see." Kirk said. "Are you alone, Mr. Sulu?"

"Yes Sir."

"We now have information that the Della Mir are testing a weapon they called a pulse beacon. This weapon is still operating at the sight of the mysterious bomb. According to the Della Mir they had the permission of the government to the South to test and to monitor the beacon for ten years." Kirk said.

"What does that mean for us, Sir?" Sulu asked.

"Well, the diplomats are satisfied with the Della Mir's explanation. But I am not." Kirk said. "Spock and Scotty are working on a shield for the shuttlecraft that will allow us a better look at this pulse beacon. They will be ready in half an hour. We'll beam you and Bones up then."

"Captain," Sulu said. "What about the children?"

"What about them, Sulu?"

"The situation here is the result of the Della Mir, not an internal affair." Sulu said slowly. He knew it shouldn't matter, but these kids were starting to get to him. Just like Gonzoles, he wanted to help them.

"What did you want to do about it?" Kirk asked.

"I don't know, Captain." Sulu admitted. "Something."

"I'll take it under advisement, Mr. Sulu." the Captain said. "Be ready to beam up in thirty minutes. Enterprise out."

Sulu returned to Alkimi's headquarters slowly. The Captain had not said he could disregard the prime directive all together. But the circumstances seemed to Sulu to warrant some limited intervention. McCoy was sitting just where Sulu had left him. Berk was sitting next to him still asking questions.

"Berk." Sulu was a little surprised to see him there. He hadn't seen Berk cross the square and there was no back door. Of course in the growing darkness a smart kid could travel in the shadows undetected. "How'd you get in here? I didn't see you go by."

"The window." Berk said. "These kids learned early to get by unseen. "You were busy."

"Could you do me a favor, Berk?"

"Sure thing Commander." Berk handed the scanner carefully back to McCoy. "Whatever you need."

"Find P.R. Alkimi and ask him to join us here." Sulu said.

"Right away. I know where to look for him." He jumped up and ran out of the room.

"Smart kid." McCoy commented. "What did Jim have to say?"

"We have thirty minutes then we beam up." Sulu said. "The Della Mir freely admit to testing a weapon called a pulse beacon here. They say they have the approval of the government's leader. Mr. Spock is refitting a shuttle craft with a safer shield. The Captain wants a look at this beacon even though the negotiating team apparently doesn't care."

"Sulu, are you telling me that the Della Mir came in and took sides in this war?" McCoy asked. Of course it was against Federation laws, but it just seemed callous to McCoy. "Then they used it to test their weapons!"

"So what do you think, Doc?" Sulu asked. "Does the prime directive still apply?"

"We've already stretched it a bit." McCoy conceded. It wasn't hard for McCoy to see what was happening. This was the first time Sulu had even considered disregarding the prime directive. McCoy always tread lightly in this discussion. "Have you discussed this with the Captain?"

"I only said I'd like to do something about these kids." Sulu said. He pulled a chair away from the table and sat on it backwards, leaning on the back of the chair. "He said he's take it

under advisement."

"What do you have in mind?" McCoy asked.

"I wanted to ask Alkimi..." Sulu said just as Alkimi walked into the room.

He stopped in the middle of the room and looked at Sulu. "Ask me what?"

"About that farm you were telling me about." Sulu said, standing up. "You wouldn't have that on one of these maps you have around here, would you?"

"Yeah," Alkimi said slowly, his voice sounded cautious and skeptical to the Star Fleet officers. "I have a map of that area."

Parl Alkimi opened the chest of drawers where he had hastily stashed his maps when McCoy confiscated his office for an examination room. He also took out two of his precious candles and lit them from the fire. It took him a few minutes to find the right maps. He had two. One showed the area for a fifty mile radius with roads, rivers, and towns. The other showed a town and surrounding farms.

"We are here, in Charsis." Alkimi spread the map with the longer view on the table. Sulu leaned over it with him. McCoy looked on but did not study it as Sulu did. "Over here, across this river is the town of Erson. My family's farm is to the northwest of town."

"How big is the farm?" Sulu asked.

"What is this about?" Alkimi asked as he changed maps. Sulu didn't answer immediately. "This is our farm. It's good size. My brothers and I were talking about expanding before the war came."

"You are thinking about relocating these kids to this farm?" McCoy asked Sulu.

"It's not like I haven't thought of that." Alkimi protested. "But how am I going to get them there? We'd have to travel at night. We'd need animals to pull wagons, if I had wagons. And how can you keep the babies quiet when patrols go by. Even before the war you needed permission to travel. The Dentrey have never did believe in freedom for us."

"If none of that was a problem." Sulu said. "Would taking them there work?"

"You mean would the farm support them? Could we feed and house them?" Alkimi asked. Sulu nodded. Alkimi shrugged and said, "The way I remember it, yeah. But I don't know what's there now."

"How long since you've been home?" McCoy asked.

"It's been more than eight growing seasons." Alkimi said heavily. "I'm sure they think I'm dead."

The door swung open suddenly and Captain Kirk came into the room. "There you are." he said. "What's on your mind, Sulu?"

"Captain. You're early." Sulu smiled resisting the urge to check his chronometer.

"Yes, I am." Kirk returned the smile. "Answer the question."

"I was exploring the idea of relocating this group to Alkimi's family farm to the west." Sulu answered.

"How's it going?" Kirk asked.

"It would work if we knew the present condition of the farm, Sir." Sulu reported.

"Mr. Sulu, it is a warm evening." Kirk said. "Take a walk with me."

Kirk turned and left the room. Sulu followed him. McCoy considered following, but

decided against it. Sulu and Kirk never had trouble discussing matters of command. Alkimi looked at McCoy. He wanted to ask but did not.

"Let me guess." Kirk said. "You want to beam over to this farm. Make sure it's ok. Then beam over all these kids. How many of them are there?"

"Fifty seven all together." Sulu nodded. There was no need to tell the Captain he was right. He already knew.

"And the prime directive?" Kirk asked.

"This situation wouldn't exist if it wasn't for the Della Mir." Sulu said.

"True." Kirk said. "Does Alkimi have any idea that this area is one of the few that have not surrendered?"

"Is it?" Sulu asked. "No he doesn't know. He is sure the war goes on."

"Spock and I met the Dentrall tonight. He evidently is the government here." Kirk said as they walked along in the main square. It was dark enough now that Kirk and Sulu could barely see each other. The only light came from the stars. The planet's two moons had not risen yet.

"How did that happen?" Sulu asked. After all that was also questionable as far as the prime directive was concerned.

"He was trying to hail a Della Mir scout ship." Kirk explained. Everything about this planet questioned the prime directive. "We answered. I wanted to be sure the Della Mir did have his permission to use this planet."

"What did he have to say?" Sulu asked.

"He didn't give me much information." Kirk said. "All I got was a feel for the man. He considers the Della Mir captain his friend and ally. And as far as he's concerned the war is over and your friends here are outlaws."

Sulu stopped and took a deep breath. He looked around the square. If they had just beamed in they would think the place was deserted. No light was emitted from any of the buildings. Even McCoy's makeshift hospital room, which was lit by a portable lamp from the Enterprise, did not shine onto the street. The only evidence of inhabitation was the faint smell of smoke from the fires.

"So, what are you going to do Sulu?" Kirk asked.

"Captain?" Sulu asked.

"This is your landing party." Kirk said. "I'm going to leave this decision up to you."

"In the fifteen or twenty minutes I have left?" Sulu asked. "That limits my options."

"According to Spock we have nine or ten hours of darkness left in this area." Kirk said. "I want you and Bones back on the ship. You need to get some sleep if you are going to pilot the shuttle at dawn. It's going to be tricky and I want my best pilot on it."

"Yes Sir." Sulu said.

"The prime directive should never be disregarded lightly." Kirk said. "A little distance, a little sleep may clear things up for you."

"And if I still think they should be relocated?" Sulu asked.

"It's your decision." Kirk said although both officers knew the Captain would have to agree before anything could be done. "Now, let's check on Bones. I can't see a thing out here."

Back in the fire lit room, McCoy and Alkimi sat together drinking their tea. Parl Alkimi had tried not to think about the life he left behind. He didn't know how many of his brothers had survived. He didn't know if the farm still existed.

"Eight years is a long time." McCoy commented watching the young man brood.

"It's a lifetime." Alkimi agreed. "You know, when I left for the war my Denni and I drank the wine together for the first time."

"Denni?" McCoy asked.

"My mother's father." Alkimi explained. "Denni knew where the best berries grew and when they were ripest. As children we went with him to pick and eat the berries. Every year he took a basket full and made them into his special wine. He used it to toast weddings, births. In my family when Denni handed you a glass of his wine that meant you were an adult."

"That's a nice tradition."

"Yeah." was all Alkimi could say. He wanted to know what Captain Kirk was telling Sulu. He didn't want to think about the farm if he was never going to see it again. Finally Kirk and Sulu came back.

"Bones, are you ready?" Kirk asked.

"No." McCoy said. He stood up. "I need to check them one more time. Why don't you join me?" Kirk made a face. He had been avoiding getting close to the children. But obviously there was something McCoy wanted to show him, so he followed the Doctor up the steps.

Alkimi looked at Sulu. "Well?"

"I can't make any promises right now." Sulu said. "I have another mission to take care of early in the morning. The decision will have to wait until after that."

"Your mission is here on Tellus?" Alkimi asked.

"More or less." Sulu said. "It's classified."

"What about this law of noninterference?" Alkimi asked.

Sulu sighed and thought about how much more he could say. "The reason we are here now is because someone interfered before. That gives us a little more leeway. But I need all the facts to make the right decision."

"Information is not easy to come by around here." Alkimi observed.

"I've noticed." Sulu said. "Do you know how the war goes for your people?"

"We haven't seen any Dendrox soldiers in years." Alkimi said. "So we must be very far behind enemy lines. I can only surmise that the war does not go well for my side."

"What happens when the war ends?" Sulu asked.

"Me? I go back to farming." Alkimi said. "Aside from war, it's all I know how to do."

"What about these kids?" Sulu asked. "They don't know anything but war."

"I don't know."

Up in the sick room all the kids had gone to sleep. There had been a large bed in the center of the room. Six of the youngest patients were sharing the bed, taking up every square inch of space. Two teenage mothers were curled up on either end of a couch against the far wall.

Each had her baby in her arms as she slept. The other five slept on a pile of blankets in front of the small fireplace. McCoy scanned them all, lingering at Ree and her daughter Pella on the couch. The parasite had proven difficult, but the medication seemed to be working now.

"Ok, Bones. What did you bring me up here for?" Kirk asked. He didn't want to get emotionally involved with these children. It was bad enough that Sulu and McCoy were losing perspective, Kirk needed to keep a clear head.

"I just wanted you to see how these children are living." McCoy said putting his scanner away. "I am amazed. They are actually fairly healthy. By all rights they should be dead."

"I know what happens to children in a war like this, Bones." Kirk said as McCoy gathered up the last of his supplies including the lamp. Kirk sighed. "I guess this means you approve of Sulu's idea of relocating them?"

"There is a ten year old boy who has come back three times asking questions about my medical scanner." McCoy continued. They left the roomful of sleeping children and started slowly down the stairs. "He is starving for an education. And he is going to need it when the war is over."

"The war is over, Bones." Kirk said. "Except for a couple of pockets of resistance like this one, the Dendrox have surrendered."

"They don't seem to realize it." McCoy observed.

"I know." Kirk said.

"What did you tell Sulu?" McCoy asked.

"I told him to sleep on it." Kirk said. He did not elaborate. They had reached the command room. Sulu and Alkimi sat at the table talking. Sulu had gathered the rest of McCoy's medical supplies and put them back in the boxes. Kirk nodded in the direction of the door. Sulu got up and picked up the boxes. Kirk and McCoy went out first.

"Will you be back?" Alkimi asked Sulu.

"Yes." Sulu said. The Captain would simply have to back up this command decision. "Either way, we'll talk again."

Back on the ship, Sulu first stop was the dining hall. After a hearty meal he returned to his quarters. He wanted to talk to Uhura. They often talked over command decisions and he valued her perspective, but according to the computer she was in conference room three. He tried to find Chekov but he was also in conference room three. As was the Captain. He didn't know what was going on but he only had seven hours before he had to report to the shuttle bay. He just went to sleep.

In the morning Sulu checked the computer. As usual Mr. Spock had left the specifications for the adjustments made to the shuttle in a file for Sulu. He downloaded the file into a computer pad and studied it while he ate his breakfast. By the time he reported to the shuttle bay, Sulu was up to speed on the refit of Galileo. He checked with Scotty to be sure the new shield and the reconfigured power flow had been completed over night. Sulu was in the Galileo doing the final preflight check when Captain Kirk and Commander Spock joined him.

"Any questions, Mr. Sulu?" Spock asked sitting in the copilot's seat.

"No Sir." Sulu said. "At least, not yet."

"Get as much information on the pulse beacon as you can." Kirk stressed again. "But the first sign of trouble, get out of there."

"Understood Captain." Spock said.

"Good luck." Kirk said and left the shuttle.

Sulu expertly piloted the small ship into the upper atmosphere of the planet. He opened the security panel that normally covered the forward view ports so they could see the clouds as they cruised through the atmosphere. Through the clouds Sulu could see some of the country side. It was dawn on the farm land below them.

"Approaching magnetic field." Sulu reported.

"Activating shields." Spock said. "Magnetizing current to multiplex circuits."

"Magnetic field fluctuating." Sulu said. "this beacon must be emitting an oscillating current."

"Compensating." Spock said his fingers moving expertly over the controls. "Shields stabilizing. Cut engines."

"Cutting engines, Aye." Sulu watched his board closely but all seemed normal. He wondered if the friction of the two magnetic fields created a blue light. "Aft thrusters at one quarter."

"Power reserves holding at eighty-five percent." Spock said.

"Mr. Spock," Sulu said not looking up from his control panel. "May I ask your opinion on something?"

"The situation with the children?" Spock asked

"Yes Sir."

"You are not prepared to make this decision, Mr. Sulu?" Spock asked. Sulu rarely shied from a command decision.

Sulu sighed. "I want to make the right decision."

"No command problem has only one right answer." Spock said. "Every individual has his own priorities, his own style. Perhaps the Captain is giving you a chance to define your command style with this problem."

"I see the children as a high priority." Sulu admitted. "Approaching target."

"Yes. Humans are unusually emotional regarding children." Spock observed. "Even those that are not their own. Power reserves now at eighty two percent."

"Therefore I should disregard their situation?" Sulu asked.

"Not at all." Spock said. "Just be aware that the emotional reaction may factor into your decisions, but it can not be the sole basis for it. Be careful."

"Thank you, Mr. Spock." Sulu said. Spock was right. If the Captain thought he was acting out of pity he would not hesitate to countermand any order Sulu gave. He would have to present Kirk with logical reasons for his actions. "The electromagnetic current is strengthening."

"Compensating." Spock said. "Sensors activated and recording."

"There it is." Sulu said. In the center of an apparent bomb crater was a dish antenna about a meter in diameter and two meters tall. "Not much to look at."

"Appearances can be deceiving." Spock commented. He studied the sensor readings. "It

is putting out a high level of power on a variety of levels. A dielectric displacement current, an electrostatic field, a magnetic field, and an absorbent current. The power source is unknown."

"Power levels dropping, Mr Spock." Sulu reported "Reserves at seventy three percent and falling."

"Fire engines." Spock ordered. "Return to Enterprise."

"Aye." Sulu fired the engines and adjusted the attitude of the shuttle to take them higher into the atmosphere. The shuttle jolted as they pulled away from the magnetic field. Within a couple of minutes they were climbing out of the upper atmosphere. Sulu turned the shuttle towards home. "Galileo to Enterprise. Requesting permission to land."

"Permission granted, Galileo." Came Uhura's sure voice.

When they were safely on board Spock and Sulu, they reported to the Captain in the briefing room. He and Dr. McCoy were waiting when they arrived. They sat down.

"Report." Kirk said.

"Sensors recorded information for further analysis." Spock reported. "The pulse beacon is emitting a dense field of electric power on a number of frequencies. The source of the power was not immediately apparent."

"And the shields?" Kirk asked.

"Using thrusters to glide along the opposing magnetic field conserved enough power to return to the ship." Sulu said. "However the closer we came to the beacon, the faster our power reserves fell."

"Good." Kirk nodded. It was basically what they had expected. "Spock, would a second attempt yield any significant information?"

"Doubtful Captain." Spock shook his head. "I would not recommend it at least until the information we have just gather has been fully analyzed."

"Then the only business we have left here is Mr. Sulu's concern regarding the children of Charsis." Kirk went on. Sulu shifted in his seat slightly. He would have preferred to speak to the Captain alone. "Mr. Sulu?"

"Captain, I understand that relocating the children is not in accordance with the prime directive, But I believe there are extenuating circumstances." Sulu said carefully. "First the prime directive has already been stretched. Not only have we made contact with both sides of the war, but the Dentrey's military leaders must realize that this weapon is beyond their technology. They have to wonder where it comes from. Speculation of life on other worlds is rampant throughout their society."

"It does not follow that the military leaders would then know the technology comes from another species." Spock interjected.

"Damn it, Spock." McCoy added. "If enough people without spots or with pointed ears walk around the planet, someone is going to make the connection."

"Second, these are children." Sulu continued as if neither had spoken. He had to make his case to the Captain. "Innocent victims who were left to die. Only they survived. Moving them fifty miles to the west will not change the war effort or the society. Purahl Rem Alkimi has said he would take them to his farm himself if he could. We could move them without the chance of their capture. They could stop being soldiers and go back to being kids. I would like to do that,

Sir."

"Very well thought out, Mr. Sulu." Kirk said.

"There is another consideration, Captain." Spock said. "Kespret knows we have been to Charsis."

"You think those children are in danger because of our contact with them?" McCoy asked. "Is the man that callous?"

"He already considers them the enemy. He had the adults removed from the town." Spock said "If Kespret believes that his enemy has knowledge that his great weapon is not his, that is a threat to his power."

"Jim, we have no choice." McCoy said emphatically. "We have to get those children out of harm's way."

"Bones, bring us up to speed on your mission last night." Kirk said.

"Last night Uhura, Chekov and I beamed down to the town of Erson." McCoy said. "We made some discreet inquiries about the Alkimi farm. We went to the shops, tavern, and hotel. There is still no electric power in this area however the town is prospering. They've had to make adjustments, but life goes on. We did not see any Dentrey presence in the town. The Alkimi farm is being run by the mother and the two remaining brothers. According to the bartender, the father and four of the brothers never returned from the war."

"You didn't speak to anyone in the Alkimi family directly?" Kirk asked.

"No." McCoy said. "By all reports they are a hard working farm family that does not come to town often."

"Mr. Sulu, return to the planet and get them ready for transport." Kirk said. "Impress upon Purahl Rem Alkimi that their very lives depend on never revealing their contact with us."

"Yes Sir." Sulu smiled. "Thank you, Captain."

When Sulu beamed into the square it was approaching midday in Charsis. The younger children did not even stop playing when they realized it was him. After the activities of the day before they had become accustomed to people beaming in and out. Sulu looked around. Berk separated himself from his group and ran over to Sulu.

"Hi Commander." Berk smiled. "Are you looking for Purahl Rem Alkimi?"

"Yes, Berk. Any idea where he is?"

"He and Rad went out together this morning." Berks said. "The night patrol brought back information he wanted to check up on."

"How long has he been gone, Berk?" Sulu asked.

"Awhile." Berk shrugged. "He should be back soon."

"I need to talk to him, Berk. Can you take me to him?" Sulu asked.

Before Berk could answer a loud whistle pierced the relative quiet of the square. All the children, except for the very youngest, stopped what they were doing and listened. The whistle sounded again. The children burst into activity. The older ones picked up the babies. They all started disappearing into shadows and doorways. Sulu grabbed Burk's arm, preventing him from running. The boy tried to pull Sulu towards a doorway but Sulu did not move.

"What is it?" He asked.

"That's the signal to hide." Burk said. The desperation was obvious in his voice as he

tried to pull his arm from Sulu's grasp. "The devils must be very close. We have to hide!"

"Ok, Berk." Sulu let go of the boy and followed him into the building directly across the square from Alkimi's headquarters.

"About time Berk!" Naddey said. She was counting heads. "Everybody's here."

"What about Hawn?" Berk asked looking around.

"On patrol." Naddey answered.

"Does this happen often?" Sulu asked. He could see that these kids were organized. Eight children were in this particular hiding place.

"Only once before." Naddey said quietly. "We had to find a new camp after that time. The Purahl Rem should have been back by now."

Sulu flipped open his tricorder. Of course in the building it was useless. He went to the door and carefully looked out. It was deserted. Naddey and Berk exchanged looks. To go out before the all clear was called was directly against orders. Sulu went out the door. Berk followed him to the door but did not go out.

"Commander Sulu." Berk whispered. "We have to wait."

"It's ok Berk." Sulu whispered back. "Follow your orders. I'll follow mine. I have to locate Alkimi."

"Will that help you find him?" Berk asked pointing to the tricorder.

"Unfortunately the tricorder has trouble reading through your buildings." Sulu admitted. "But it's better than nothing."

"I can show you about where he is." Berk offered.

Sulu nodded. He leaned back into the building. "Naddey. Gather up all your belongings. When I come back with Alkimi, I am going to take everyone to a safe place."

"Safe?" Naddey asked.

"Yes. Can you spread the word to everyone?" Sulu asked. The girl nodded. "Good. Come on Berk. Which way?"

Sulu followed Berk through the maze of alleys. The boy was nervous and kept looking over his shoulder. The tricorder readings fluctuated erratically. Finally they came around a corner and Berk started up a set of stone steps. He motioned for Sulu to follow him silently. When they came to the roof, they saw Alkimi and Rad crouched against the far wall.

"Sulu." Alkimi said quietly as they approached.

"What's going on?" Sulu asked.

"Late yesterday another Dentrey unit reported to the occupation force's headquarters." Alkimi said. "And this morning, they sent patrols close to our camp. They don't know exactly where we are, but they have a good idea. If they are serious about finding us it won't take them long."

"We were worried about this." Sulu said scanning the area with his tricorder. A Dentrey patrol was on the street below them. "They are close. We better sit tight."

"You've talked to the Captain?" Alkimi asked.

"Yes." Sulu said. "Unfortunately our being here has put you and the kids in danger. Your enemy knows we've been here. So, we are going to move you out of harm's way."

"How are you going to do that?" Rad asked.

"Don't worry about that right now." Sulu said. "But we have to get everyone together so we can do it all at once."

"Rad, Berk." Alkimi said. "Pass the word to every post and patrol. Everyone return to camp. We're leaving. And be careful. We don't want to be found out now!"

"Yes Sir." They said together. Both boys left quietly.

"Dr. McCoy has been to the town of Erson." Sulu said. "According to him it is peaceful and prosperous. He didn't see any Dentrey troops."

"My family?" Alkimi asked hopefully. "The farm?"

"The farm is there." Sulu said. "It's being run by your mother and two brothers."

"Two? Do you know which ones?" Alkimi asked sadly. Sulu shook his head. "There were six of us before the war."

"Maybe the others just haven't made it home yet, like you." Sulu said.

"My father? Denni?"

"I don't have any more details." Sulu said. "Listen. You are in danger because of us. When you get home nobody can mention us. Nobody can tell any stories about strange weapons or methods of travel. You'll have to let them assume you made your way home yourself. Can these kids do that?"

"They can follow orders." Alkimi said. "How do we proceed?"

"I've selected an apparently empty field to the east of your family's house." Sulu said. "That's where we'll set you down. How you proceed from there is up to you. What do you think your mother will say?"

"My mother has never turned a hungry mouth away from our farm before." Alkimi said. "But there is no way that she will be prepared for this crowd. Will it be possible to take what food stores we have with us?"

"Yes. That's no problem." Sulu said. Sulu consulted his tricorder. "The patrol appears to be moving back towards their headquarters. Are you ready?"

"Ready for my life to get back to normal? Are you kidding?" Alkimi grinned.

"Normal?" Sulu asked as they made their way down the stone steps.

"Maybe close to normal anyway." Alkim shrugged. "You couldn't swing Rosita coming by to say goodbye again, could you?"

"I will tell Rosita what has happened here. She was after me to save the children from the very beginning." Sulu said. "But as I said before Ensign Gonzoles is on assignment elsewhere."

"In other words she is not on your space ship?" Alkimi asked.

"Did I say anything about a space ship?"

"No, of course not." Alkimi winked. "Who would believe in such fantasies? I mean besides Sorlee?"

When they got back to the camp it was mass confusion. Rad and Ree were trying to keep things running in an orderly fashion but the idea of going somewhere safe had the children giddy. They couldn't contain themselves. Rad looked very relieved when he saw Alkimi and Sulu come into the camp. Rad whistled a loud piercing whistle to get the kids attention. It worked. They all stopped and looked at him. He pointed at the two men coming their way.

"Hey!" Alkimi yelled walking into the midst of the crowd. "We need to get organized

here. So everyone be quiet and listen to Commander Sulu."

"Ok." Sulu said. "We will go in one hour. So anything you want to take with you, get it, and bring it to this spot. Food. Clothes. Toys."

"Guns?" Du asked. Sulu looked at Alkimi.

"We are going to my family's farm." Alkimi said. "I'm told the war is over there. There won't be any more patrols or guard duty. Everybody will have to work if the farm is going to feed us all. We'll take the guns with us. But things will be different there. We won't be carrying guns with us everywhere anymore."

"The war is over?" The kids all started talking at once.

"A farm?"

"Are we ever coming back?"

"Who won?"

"What will we do there?"

"Is it really safe?"

"Are the devils there?"

"I'm scared!"

"Are we staying together?"

"I don't know all the answers." Alkimi said. The kids fell silent and listened. "But we will stay together. We are a family, remember? Now, one other thing. Once we leave here, we have to forget about Commander Sulu, Dr. McCoy and Captain Kirk. We can't tell anybody they were here or that they helped us."

"We can keep a secret." Berk said. The rest all nodded.

"Good." Alkimi said. "Rad, Ferl get that cart you guys have. Pile all the weapons, food and everything we have in the kitchen if you can fit it. Bring it back here."

"Yes Sir." The two oldest teenage boys hurried off to carry out their orders.,

"Ree, Sorlee make sure that nobody is missing." Alkimim continued. "Keep all brothers and sister together. All Moms and babies stay together. Just like the hiding drills. Everybody has somebody to look after them. No one gets lost or left behind. Ok, let's get busy. We don't have much time."

The kids scattered. Sulu couldn't help but smile at the chaos. But they were actually accomplishing their tasks. Rad and Ferl pulled a two wheeled wooden cart into the square. It reminded Sulu of pictures from high school history classes. All it needed was a nice fat little burro to pull it along. Children of all sizes carried whatever they owned and piled it into the cart. Baskets of food, vegetables and beans, were added to the cart.

"The cart will add to the illusion that we got there under our own power." Alkimi told Sulu. Everything Alkimi owned fit into the leather bag he had been issued in the army. He owned an extra pair of pants, four candles, a handful of maps, a decent gun, and a good knife.

"Good idea." Sulu nodded. "I need you to break into three groups. I'll send you with the first group."

"What if there is a problem?" Alkimi asked.

"I brought you this." Sulu handed Alkimi a communicator. "It's set on my frequency. When you arrive just open it like this and I'll answer. When we're done, leave it in the field and

we'll retrieve it."

Alkimi nodded. He looked at the communicator, turning it over in his hand. "You won't be coming?"

"I don't want to place the children in any more danger." Sulu said. "We won't be back. Are you ready?"

"Yes." Alkimi said. He turned to the kids. "Are we all here?"

The kids spent a few minutes counting each other. Their system was actually fairly efficient. Each teen who was in charge of a hiding group let Ree know their group was there. Ree reported to Alkimi. "Everybody's here."

"Ok, we're going to leave the way you've seen Commander Sulu come and go." Alkimi explained. "I'll go first. Rad I want you in the first group too. Ree, you bring the mothers and babies last. Sulu?"

"Everyone in the first group stand by the cart." Sulu directed. "The rest move away to give them some room."

Alkimi and Rad stood next to the cart. A few others followed. A young girl about ten or so stopped by Sulu and asked. "Does it hurt?"

"No." He smiled at her. "But it does tickle a bit."

She nodded and joined the group. Finally about twenty of the group stood around the cart. Scotty was using the cargo transporter to make things a little easier. Sulu had a direct line to him.

"Sulu." Alkimi said. "Thanks."

"Scotty." Sulu said into his communicator. "The first group is standing two meters due west of me."

"I've got them, Mr. Sulu." Scotty said "Energizing."

Seeing their own friends disappear caused a stir among the remaining children. They all looked to Sulu with wide eyes. They waited. Sulu's communicator beeped twice. Sulu adjusted the frequency.

"Everything ok, Purahl Rem Alkimi?" Sulu asked.

"From now on I'm going back to being plain Parl Alkimi, farmer." He laughed. "I am home! It's not ok, it's wonderful!"

"That's great, Parl." Sulu laughed too. "But are you alone? And can I send the next group?"

"Send them! Send them now!"

"Stand by, Parl." Sulu said. "Ok, whose next?" Most of the kids gathered in the spot where the cart had been. "That's too many. Berk, from you over that way. You guys wait for the next trip. Ok, Scotty."

As the next group went, Sorlee walked slowly up to Sulu. He smiled at her, but she wasn't smiling. She spoke quietly. "It's scary."

"Some people think so." Sulu admitted. "I have a friend whose father told her how much he hated traveling this way so many times that she became afraid of it. Do you know what she does when she gets afraid?"

"What?"

"At the last minute, so nobody sees her, she closes her eyes." Sulu said. "Even her father doesn't know she's afraid. Do you think you could try that?"

"I think so." Sorlee said. She joined the rest of the group. Mostly young women holding their babies plus Berk, Hawn and a couple of others. "It just tickles? You're sure?"

"I'm sure." Sulu smiled. "Ok, this is the last group. Do we have everyone, Ree?"

"Yes Sir." Ree answered. "That's everyone. Thank you, Mr. Sulu. Thank you."

"You are welcome. Ok, Scotty. Last trip." Sulu smiled. A couple of the kids waved. Then Sulu was standing alone in the middle of the deserted square. "Ok, Scotty. I'm ready to come home."

After Lt. Commander Sulu had transported from the square that had been the center of the Alkimi camp, all that was left was the wind blowing through the empty streets. Had he still been there, it would not have been long before he heard the distance rumble of heavy boots marching in formation on stone pavements.