

Sulu and Chekov finished their shift on the bridge. Chekov headed for the dining hall but Sulu said he'd meet him and detoured to his quarters. He sat down at his desk and touched the control board on his console.

"Computer. Record correspondence to Ensign Rosita Gonzoles, Starbase Sixty Eight. Personal." Sulu said. He took a moment to collect his thoughts before continuing. "Gonzoles. I just wanted to let you know I've seen Parl Alkimi again. He asked for you, more than once. The mission to the third planet of K328 took some interesting turns. Some of it will be designated classified. But I can tell you that our presence on the planet put Alkimi and his troops in danger. I think you will be happy to know we moved them out of harms way. By now they should be at Parl's family farm.

"I know what you are thinking." Sulu smiled. "After all I had just finished giving you a lecture about the prime directive last week. Just to make it harder Captain Kirk left it up to me to make the case pro or con. It was not an easy case to make. But I did and I asked the Captain to disregard the prime directive. Call me a hypocrite, but I thought you'd want to know. I'll talk to you soon. Sulu out."

He sent the letter and went to join Chekov for dinner. He was sitting with Lt. Doris Howard. She was a petite woman with very dark brown skin, very short black hair and a contagious smile. Lt. Howard was head of Bio Science. She and Chekov had worked together on several missions.

"I see you weren't bored without me." Sulu said to Chekov as he sat down. "Hi, Doris. How are things down in the Bio lab?"

"Slow." Doris Howard said. "Not that I'm complaining. I've never been this caught up."

"That didn't take long." Chekov observed.

"I just stopped to send out a letter." Sulu said sampling the steamed vegetables.

"Good. Now the Princess can stop bothering me about you." Chekov said. Sulu didn't say anything. He did owe Jimmi a letter, but it was hard for him to put his feeling into words for a computer. His letters tended to be short and to the point. Exactly the opposite of Jimmi's letters to him. She just rambled on saying whatever came to mind.

"Princess?" Doris asked.

"Jimmi McCoy." Chekov explained. "Surely you've met her."

"Dr. McCoy's daughter?" Lt. Howard asked. Chekov nodded. "No, I've never met her. But I have heard.....gossip. Is there truth in the rumors, Hikaru?"

"Depends on the rumor." Sulu said non-committally. With each passing day it was getting harder and harder for Sulu to keep his personal life separate from his professional one.

"Why do I get the feeling I should just let this one go?" Doris laughed. Chekov laughed too, but Sulu did not.

"I would appreciate it." Sulu said.

"No problem. Are you guys playing poker tonight?" Doris asked as she stood to go. Both just nodded. "I'll see you then."

After she left Chekov looked at his best friend. "You are not going to start brooding again, are you?"

"I do not brood." Sulu said. He sighed and smiled. "So what exactly do these rumors

say? I haven't heard a thing."

"Of course not. You never hear the ones about you." Chekov laughed. "Everything I've heard has been at least close to the truth. Just that you are seeing Jimmi and that Dr. McCoy is not thrilled."

"I guess there is nothing I can do about it." Sulu said. "And for your information I have made a peace of sorts with the Doctor."

"Good." Chekov said. "Now, let's go play poker. I feel lucky."

"Luck has nothing to do with it." Sulu said as they left the dining hall. "It's skill, Pavel. It is skill that's important."

"We will see." Chekov said.

The next day they completed the initial scans of the inner most two planets of System K328. Neither supported life of any kind or produced any information of scientific significance. There were a few geologic anomalies that might warrant further study but nothing to detain the Enterprise. After his shift, Sulu headed for the gym to work out. He met Chief Petty Officer Gasque, who was the ship's self proclaimed fencing master.

"Sulu." Kirk called as he saw Lt. Commander Sulu come out of the gym. Sulu carried his fencing foil.

"Yes Sir." Sulu responded automatically and fell into step with the Captain.

"Fencing?" Kirk smiled. "I thought you had moved on."

"I like to keep in practice." Sulu said. He had a reputation on board for intense but fleeting passions for his hobbies. "It keeps the eye sharp. Good for the balance. And Chief Gasque is an excellent teacher."

"Still can't beat him?" Kirk asked.

"Not even close." Sulu laughed. Nothing held his attention better than a challenge. "But I am working on it."

"I am sure you will prevail, Mr. Sulu." Kirk said as they walked along. He knew Sulu would lose interest in fencing as soon as he mastered it.

"Captain, may I ask a question?" Sulu said. Kirk nodded. "If the Dentrall had not known we had been to Charsis, would you have moved the children?"

"I don't know." Kirk said honestly. "Why do you ask? It's not like you to question command decisions."

"Only for my own evaluation, Captain." Sulu said. "That was the deciding factor?"

"Yes." Kirk said. "Without that it could have gone either way. What is your personal evaluation of the mission?"

"I let myself get too involved." Sulu said. His evaluation was remarkably logical and dispassionate. He was use to discussing failures and successes with the Captain. "I have reviewed each decision I made. I don't see anything I should have or could have done differently. However, helping Dr. McCoy with those kids I lost some perspective."

"That's why the prime directive is there. It gives us a clear line to follow when we are unsure." Kirk said. "Let me ask you this, Sulu. What would you have done if you were the Captain?"

Sulu thought about that for a minute as they walked along. Kirk waited patiently.

"Perhaps I would assign the task of dealing with the children personally to someone else so that I could be confident that my own decisions did not lack perspective."

"Someone you trusted." Kirk added.

"Yes Sir." Sulu nodded. "I see."

"We've been ordered back to Starbase Sixty Eight." Kirk informed him. "The Federation negotiating team wants to talk to Spock about the information we gathered on the pulse beacon. They may want to talk to you too."

"Yes Sir." Sulu responded. They stopped in front of the turbo lift.

"By the way. I got a letter from Jean Marie this morning." Kirk said. The Captain stepped onto the lift. "She said to say hello." The lift door closed before Sulu could reply. He just shook his head and turned back towards his quarters.

In his own cabin he put away his foil and took a quick shower. Then with his hair still wet and a towel around his neck, he sat down to record another letter. "Computer, record correspondence to J.M. McCoy on Earth. Earthlink code M-157." He took a minute to think. "Hi, Jeanie. I know. I know. So I'm a little late with this letter. I have been busy. Of course it is classified and I can't go into it. Listen, I understand that you have always corresponded with several people on this ship, BUT...I don't need the Captain reminding me to send you a letter. It's bad enough when Chekov and Uhura give me a hard time about something you've said. Do you think you could refrain from discussing me with everyone else on the Enterprise? I hate to think what you say to your father. Speaking of which he and I had a short talk about our relationship. We are working things out. Slowly." He hesitated, unsure if he should say more about her father. He decided against it. "I'm sorry, Darling. But I don't have much time right now. I'll talk to you again soon. I love you. Bye."

He finished dressing and went to meet Uhura for dinner

"Mr. Sulu." The computer said. When he did not respond, the computer automatically raised the volume "Mr. Sulu. The time is 06:30 hours."

"I'm up!" Sulu said rolling over in his bunk. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. He got up and stumbled into his bathroom. As he went he asked the computer. "Are there any files marked for my attention?"

"There are no internal files marked for Lt. Commander Sulu." The computer replied.

After a quick shower, he asked the computer as he got ready for work. "Any correspondence?"

"There are two letters in correspondence file for Sulu, Lt. Commander, Hikaru."

"Play the first letter." Sulu said. He sat down at his desk and pulled on his boots as Ensign Gonzoles appeared on his monitor.

"Mr. Sulu, I would not consider calling you a hypocrite. I appreciate your letter about the children and Purahl Rem Alkimi. I have thought about them often. I would be interested in discussing the complexities of the problem.

"I have flown six mapping missions since we last talked. All have gone routinely. Although we have definitely been monitored by the Della Mir. I'm just not sure what they want.

I am finding it difficult to trust them. What do you think? I hope to talk to you again soon. Gonzoles out."

"Ok, computer play the second letter." Sulu ordered. The image of Ensign Gonzoles was replaced by Jimmi's smiling face.

"Was that an order?" Jimmi laughed. "I won't say anything else to James T. or Spock if you keep your end of the bargain. As I recall you were going to let me know the exact date in July Enterprise would be at Starbase Twelve so I could meet you. June is half gone Harry. I have lots of other stuff to tell you, but as usual I'm late. I start my internship today. I'll send another letter soon. I love you. Bye."

"Oh Jeanie. What am I going to do about you?" Sulu sighed. But he didn't have time to think about that now. He grabbed his uniform jacket and left his cabin.

Sulu and Chekov met for breakfast and went to work as usual. The Enterprise was on course for Starbase 68. The base was fully manned now. So not only were all military operations up and running, but others services were becoming available too. The dentists and barber were open for business. Computer games and infonets were available to all personnel. The landscapers were hard at work establishing a park. The gym and the officer's club provided off hour entertainment. At this point there were no restaurants or shops. These services were traditionally provided by civilian contractors. And there were a couple more months before that would happen.

On Starbase 68 the meeting of negotiating teams concluded for the day. Ambassador Carly Lightfoot found herself walking out the door with Iphi-doh the assistant to the chief ambassador of the other side. She was from the planet Lirtos in the heart of the Della Mir Community. She was taller than Carly with pale green skin and long honey colored hair that she wore in twisting braids.

"May I ask a question, Ambassador?" Iphi-doh asked.

"Of course." The Federation ambassador responded with a warm smile. "And there is no need to be so formal outside the negotiating room. My name is Carly."

"Humans are very informal." Iphi-doh said somewhat confused.

"Sometimes." Carly agreed. Iphi-doh had answered all of Carly's questions regarding the planet Tellus. Her boss was less inclined to informal conversation, so Carly very much wanted to keep this line of communication open. "Usually with our friends. It seems your people are more structured."

"Indeed, Ambassador." Iphi-doh agreed emphatically.

"What was your question?" Carly asked.

"I am curious about humans. You are a collection of related species? How many planets make up your homeworld?" She asked.

"Humans are one species from one planet." Carly explained. "But we have within our species divisions called races. You see the different color skin, the different facial features. You don't have these differences on your planet?"

"Not to the extent I've seen since I've been on your starbase." Iphi-doh said. "How does your society handle these differences?"

"What do you mean?"

"In the Community each species does the work they are best suited to. I am Lirtan. We assist and teach. Mirta lead. Barchins serve." Iphi-doh explained using the three species that attended the negotiations as examples. "I do not see how your Federation allocates these same labor resources."

"It is a matter of individual choice." Carly explained. "Each person must decide for him or herself what work they are best suited to do."

"You have many different ideas." Iphi-doh said. "Ambassador Henn-ray has given me the assignment to learn all I can about your people. He would not want me to disclose this to you."

"But you did." Carly observed.

"Yes." Iphi-doh said slowly. "If I did not, you could take my questions as an intrusion. I hope it was not a mistake."

"Have dinner with me, Iphi-doh." Carly said. "And we can learn more about each other. However you are going to have to call me Carly."

"Sharing the evening meal would be pleasant." Iphi-doh smiled. Her concern for her assignment faded. "Thank you, Carly."

While they shared their meal at the Officer's Club, the Enterprise came into orbit around the station. After notifying the Federation delegation that the Enterprise had returned to the Starbase, Captain Kirk authorized limited shore leave to all off duty personnel.

Later that evening Captain Kirk and Mr. Spock beamed over to the base. They were met in the transporter room by Carly Lightfoot. Not that either Starfleet officer would know the difference but she was dressed in the height of business fashion. Carly wore a conservative steel blue two-piece suit. It was long sleeved and tailored giving an air of dignity and power.

"Jim." she smiled extending her hand. "It's good to see you again."

"Carly." Kirk took her hand in his. "You look wonderful."

"Well, you are as good a liar as ever, Captain." She laughed. Kirk was one of the few men who knew she greatly preferred oversized t-shirts and loose sweat pants. "It's nice to see you again, Mr. Spock."

"Ambassador Lightfoot." Spock nodded.

"Let me present Slevon." Carly indicated a young Vulcan man who stood by the transporter controls. He did not seem inclined towards any pleasantries. He simply nodded to Kirk and Spock. "He's our weaponry and computer expert."

"I have been studying the information you gathered on the pulse beacon with interest, Commander Spock." Slevon said. "An eyewitness report may enhance my analysis."

"I come to serve." Spock replied with the traditional Vulcan response.

"While they are going over the technical stuff." Carly said lightly to Kirk. "We are going to meet with Ambassador Ahmad."

Sulu took advantage of the shore leave to find Gonzoles. A martial arts class was just breaking up when he walked in to the starbase's gym. Rosita saw him and walked over to meet him. The sweat on her grey gym shirt and shorts was already drying. Sulu picked up a towel off the pile on the bench and handed it to her. The rest of the class headed for the locker room.

"Hi." He smiled. "You looked pretty good out there."

"Thanks. But I need to work on my reverse Bokai maneuver." She smiled taking the towel and wiping her face. Rosita had her thick raven black hair in a ponytail on the top of her head.

"Keep practicing. You'll get it." Sulu said.

"I heard the Enterprise was coming back." Gonzoles slung the towel around her neck and sat down on the bench. "So you're finished with system K328?"

"For now." Sulu said. He sat down next to her. "We have report our findings to the treaty negotiating team in the morning. You mentioned in your letter that the Della Mir have been monitoring your mapping missions."

"Yes." Gonzoles said. "And I've hailed them several times. But they never answer. I find that most disconcerting."

"But they have made no hostile moves?" Sulu asked.

"Nothing hostile." Gonzoles said. "Commander Von Maltz said I shouldn't worry because they know what we are doing. So why are they watching?"

"Maybe they don't trust us." Sulu observed.

"Perhaps. But we did not attack their vulnerable space station." Gonzoles said. "And we did not withhold information on a planet we knew they were surveying."

"True." Sulu agreed. "But how do they know we are not here to launch an invasion of their space?"

"The Federation is not in the habit..." She started. Sulu's look reminded her that she should know better. "Granted they have no way of knowing that. But I don't like being watched."

"I can understand that." Sulu said.

"Do you mind if I ask about the children and their situation?" Gonzoles asked hesitantly. She wasn't sure how much he would want to talk about it.

"No, I don't mind." Sulu said. "What else did you want to know?"

"We talked about how we couldn't disregard the prime directive because of our own feelings." She said "What was different when you went back?"

"That's a hard one." Sulu sighed. "I believe I told you that the deciding factor was that our presence had put the children in danger. But I let myself get too involved."

"Too much down time?" She asked.

"Yeah." He laughed at her reference to his remark a week earlier. "The Captain was there, so I wasn't in command. And the pace was slower. A lot of waiting around. I talked to them. Got to know a couple of them."

"And they got to you?"

"One of the girls asked me to take her away." He said slowly and with more aversion than he intended. "She told me she knew how to make a man happy and she didn't eat much. Yeah, I guess they got to me."

Ensign Gonzoles watched him carefully. This was more than she had expected him to admit. "What then?" She asked quietly.

"I felt compelled to make the case to the Captain." Sulu said. "Only I didn't know at that point that our presence had put the children in danger. I gave him every reason I could think of,

but I fully expected he would say the same things to me that I said to you a week earlier."

"But you made the case anyway?" Gonzoles was surprised. "Why?"

"It was a test."

"A test?" She didn't understand.

"You can't learn to make command decisions from a database or a lecture." Sulu tried to explain. "Some things you only learn from experience."

"I thought I was done with tests when I left the Academy."

"Captain Kirk once suggested to me that everything was a test." He understood her feelings. Testing at the Academy was rigorous and exhausting. "I thought he was exaggerating at the time."

"And now?" She asked.

"Now...I understand." Sulu shrugged. He smiled at her. "Do you?"

Gonzoles just looked at him for a minute while she thought. He had demanded total honesty of her before and he had shared more than she expected now. Rosita responded slowly, "I don't think so, Sir."

"You will." Sulu was confident of that. He returned to the original subject. "Anyway, the Captain listened to my concerns. I know he had at least considered my arguments or he never would have allowed Dr. McCoy to stay to check over those kids."

"Why wouldn't he?" Gonzoles asked.

"Captain Kirk knows of Dr. McCoy's weakness for children." Sulu said. "Especially orphans."

"Really?" Gonzoles asked. She had only met McCoy briefly but her first impression did not include a weakness of any kind.

"Really." Sulu laughed. There was no point in explaining McCoy's history with his own daughter to Gonzoles. How he had only taken custody of her and really gotten to know her after her mother had died. And that at that time she had been about the same age as Berk who the doctor had spent so much time with on Tellus. "Does that answer your questions?"

"Well, you've given me more to think about." She smiled.

"Good. Then how are things around here?" Sulu asked.

"Routine." Gonzoles shrugged. "Except for the negotiations, of course. But I don't really have any contact with that situation."

"I guess I'll find out more about that tomorrow." Sulu said.

"You'll be going to that meeting?" Gonzoles asked with surprise. "I thought that was top brass only."

"Those are my orders." Sulu shrugged. Gonzoles reached up and pulled the hair tie out of her hair. She combed her fingers through it absentmindedly. Sulu abruptly changed the subject.

"But, I better go. I want to get a good nights sleep before this meeting."

"Let me know what happens." Gonzoles requested.

"I'll share what I can." Sulu promised. He stood to go. "And I'll let you get back to your workout."

The next morning Lt. Commander Sulu followed Captain Kirk into the conference room. Commander Spock was already there talking to Ambassador Ahmed. The chief ambassador was almost a foot shorter than Enterprise's first officer. He was an accomplished diplomat in his mid sixties, but his coal black hair and neatly trimmed beard belied that age. There were two other Vulcans and three Andorians in the room. Once they were all there, everyone took a seat. This was the first meeting at this level that Sulu had ever attended. He sat next to Kirk, kept his mouth shut, and paid attention.

Ambassador Ahmed sat at the head of the oblong table. Everyone seemed to be waiting for him. "Mr. Spock and Mr. Slevon have provided us with the in-depth analysis of the data we have on the pulse beacon, magnetic shielding, and energy probe that hit this station. I have forwarded their analysis to the Chief of Technology at Starfleet Command. I am assured by all involved that this is a technology to which we can develop an answer and that our best minds are working on it now. So what I want from you today is any and all input that may give me some insight into the minds and hearts of the Della Mir."

"I had a long conversation with Iphi-doh, Ambassador Henn-ray's assistant last night." Ambassador Lightfoot said.

"That's interesting." Ahmed said. "They have resisted all attempts at informal conversation before this."

"The Ambassador gave her an assignment to find out as much about us as possible." Carly explained. "So we had dinner together last night."

"So what do you have to report?" Rashid Ahmed asked.

"They are very confused by us." Carly said. "The Federation in general and humans in particular. They don't understand the freedom of choice allowed the individual in our society. They believe that each species is best suited to one type of work. Their education system, laws, the whole society is based on that idea. So when they meet someone they know instantly his or her station in the society. That's one of the reason we confuse them."

"You say the Della Mir find humans particularly confusing, Ambassador." Mr. Spock said. "Yet freedom of choice is at the foundation of the Federation. Not merely a human trait."

"True, Mr. Spock." Carly said "But to date they have met about a dozen humans, three Vulcans, three Andorians. There are a few other species on the station that I'm sure they've seen but had little contact with. Also everyone they've met has been a diplomat or in starfleet. So they are getting a narrow view of the Federation. They are very confused to find so many visually different types of people in the military, especially as officers. All of their officers come from the Mirta. And the Mirta are the only species in the Community that is required to serve in the military. After their requirement is met then they have a choice to continue or to go on to other service in the government."

"So, they stress the notion of duty over choice." Captain Kirk said.

"Exactly." Carly smiled at Jim.

"Captain," Ambassador Ahmed turned to Kirk. "You and your officers have been up

against them the most. Is there anything you can add to this discussion?"

"Militarily they apparently believe in the show of strength." Kirk said. "That, at least, was the first thing they showed us. Once they had our full attention, they seemed to act thoughtfully and rationally."

"Sir," Sulu said to Kirk. He hesitated to take up the group's time without Kirk's permission. "There is another possibility."

Kirk turned and looked at Sulu. He had heard the hesitancy in Sulu's voice although he doubted anyone else besides Spock did. The Captain nodded to his second officer, "Please continue, Mr. Sulu."

"Why did they attack the base and not the Enterprise? After all, the base was no threat. We had no shields, no weapons, no power at the time." Sulu said. "They attacked without warning but used a weapon that left no permanent damage. Perhaps they wanted to see if they could provoke us."

"Had they managed to provoke us," Spock noted, "Their three scout ships would have been destroyed."

"Wouldn't they have known that?" Ambassador Ahmed asked.

"We estimate their sensor capabilities to be at least equal to our own." Slevon said. "They would have known that a confrontation with the Enterprise was not winnable."

"But they didn't know how we would react." Kirk said picking up Sulu's train of thought. "With one shot they know if there would be a war or a treaty. And if it was war, they could blame us since they had used a stun force. We would have drawn the first blood."

"The captain who fired that shot must have known it was a suicide mission." Ambassador Lightfoot objected. "Why would he agree?"

"Perhaps dying in battle is an honor, as it is with the Klingons." Spock suggested. "Or perhaps with their tradition of duty it is simply expected."

"Bur, as you said, Captain." The chief ambassador said looked to Kirk for clarification. "After that first burst of energy, they responded reasonably."

"Yes." Kirk said. "Of course if they were trying to ascertain how we would react, perhaps their orders would have been to respond as we responded."

"It would seem continued caution would be in order while dealing with the Della Mir." Ambassador Ahmed observed. "Are there any other observations or opinions?"

"Sir." Sulu found himself jumping in again when he hadn't planned to say anything at this meeting. "The Della Mir watched the base construction without answering hails for two years before attacking. They are now watching the mapping missions in the same fashion."

"How do you know this, Commander?" Ahmed asked.

"One of the pilots expressed concern about it to me last night, Sir." Sulu answered.

"We are aware of the situation, Commander." Ahmed said. "Ambassador Henn-ray assures me this is standard procedure for them and not a prelude to hostile action. I thank you for you input ladies and gentleman."

The Ambassador ended the meeting by standing up. The rest of the group at the table stood also. Ahmed retreated through the door directly behind his chair followed by his two Vulcan advisors. The three Andorian observers started discussing the meeting among themselves

in their native language. Carly Lightfoot whispered in Jim Kirk's ear before following after her boss.

Kirk turned to Sulu. He grinned and said, "I thought you had nothing to add to this meeting."

"I may have been mistaken, Sir." Sulu admitted.

"But next time, tell me your ideas before we go in." Kirk advised. He turned more serious when he asked, "Did Ensign Gonzoles have anything else to say about the mapping missions?"

"No Sir. Only that she found it disconcerting when the Della Mir scout ships did not answer her hail."

"Ok, return to the ship." Kirk ordered. Sulu nodded and turned to leave. When he got to the door, Kirk added, "And Mr. Sulu. Good work."

"Thank you Sir." Sulu said. He left the meeting room and returned to the bridge of the Enterprise.

"I don't like it, Spock. It doesn't make sense." Kirk said as the two officers left the meeting room together. "Standard procedure? I don't think so."

"It would be more logical for a scout ship to answer all hails." Spock agreed.

"Come on. We'll ask Von Maltz what else has been reported about this." Kirk headed towards the turbo lift. They found Commander Von Maltz in his office just off of operations. He rose from his desk as they came in.

"Captain Kirk. Mr. Spock." Von Maltz greeted them. "Please sit down. What can I do for you?"

"Commander." Kirk said as all three officers sat around the Commander's desk.. "I understand some of your pilots have encountered Della Mir scout ships."

"Yes Captain." Von Maltz replied. He did not seem too happy about it. "All of my runabout pilots have reported sensor contact with their scout ships. Not one of those ships had answered a hail."

"The Della Mir took no action in response to the hail?" Spock asked.

"Nothing. They continue on course as if they never heard or saw us." Von Maltz explained. "Ambassador Ahmed has issued orders not to provoke them. Pilots are to hail the scout ships only once. If they don't answer, we are to ignore them."

"If they fire?" Kirk asked. He didn't like the sound of this order. The Scout ships outgunned the runabouts which only carried one bank of standard phasers.

"The Ambassador is certain that won't happen." Von Maltz said uneasily. "However I told him my people will defend themselves. He reluctantly agreed. Have you received the same order, Captain?"

"Not yet." Kirk said.

"Will the Enterprise be staying in orbit?" Von Maltz asked.

"For the time being." Kirk said. He grinned and added, "My crew won't complain. They've gotten more shore leave in the last two months than we've had in the last year."

"Perhaps too much." Spock added.

Sulu and Chekov were sharing dinner after their shift. Commander Scott joined them. He winked and asked, "Are you lads going to the Officer's Club tonight?"

"That is the plan." Chekov said eating heartily.

"What about you, Sulu?" Scotty asked.

"I'll be there, Scotty." Sulu said. "But I have to make a stop first."

Scotty, Chekov, and Sulu beamed over to the Starbase together. Scotty and Chekov went directly to the Officer's Club. Sulu went to seek out Ensign Gonzoles. He found her in the newly planted park.

"There you are." He said when he saw her crouched down examining one of the plants. A small blue flower on a yellow bush.

She smiled up at him, holding the vine with the blue flower in her finger tips. "I've never seen this kind of flower before. Do you know what it is?"

"No idea." Sulu shrugged. "But then exo-botony is a very large field."

"I wasn't planning on studying it." Gonzoles laughed and stood up. "I just wondered what it was called. I like flowers."

"That must come from growing up in a rain forest." Sulu commented.

"Next to one, anyway." Gonzoles admitted. "How did the meeting go?"

"It was interesting." Sulu said. "The discussion focused on the impressions of the Della Mir to give the ambassadors a better idea how to handle the negotiations. I did bring up your concern about the scout ships not answering hails."

"What did they say?" Gonzoles asked quickly.

"The Ambassador told us not to worry about that and ended the meeting." Sulu said. "Rather abruptly."

"What does that mean?"

"As usual. We follow orders." Sulu shrugged. Then he changed the subject. Enterprise was not going anywhere fast and so the crew was indulging in what recreation the base offered. "So I understand there is an officer's club on this base."

"Oh yes. Level seventeen. It's the only thing set up for off hours right now. Besides the gym of course." Ensign Gonzoles said. "I can't wait until they allow more civilians onboard. It would be nice to have some alternatives to the club."

"You don't like bars, Rosita?"

"Don't get me wrong." She explained "I've had some very good times in bars, but every night? I'd like a little variety. Something like shopping or theater."

"When you're on a Starship the bars are few and far between." Sulu said putting his hands in his pockets. "I told Lt. Chekov I'd meet him there."

"Well, I'd like to meet this Chekov that I've heard so much about." She smiled. "Mind if I tag along?"

"Come on."

They headed for the turbo lift. When they stepped off on level seventeen there was no question which way the officer's club was. It must have been very crowded because several officers stood outside the door with drinks in their hands, talking and laughing. One of the

officers in the hallway was Dr. Bobby Lopez. He had his arm around a young woman who wasn't in uniform. He waved to Sulu who just nodded and went into the club with Gonzoles.

It wasn't crowded to the point that you couldn't move, but all the seats were taken. Enterprise officers were mixing happily with the Starbase crew. Scotty and Uhura were sharing a table. Lt. Commander Chapel and Lt. Howard shared another table. Chekov was leaning against the bar sipping a beer. He was talking to a young woman who was standing next to him. They were both lieutenants. As they approached the bar Sulu recognized the woman Chekov was talking to as Lt. Regina Piesto.

"Lt. Chekov this is Ensign Gonzoles." Sulu introduced them as they walked up to the bar. "Nice to see you again, Lt. Piesto."

"Pavel." Chekov said extending his hand to Gonzoles.

"Rosita." She smiled as she shook his hand. Gonzoles turned to Piesto. "The place is crowded tonight, heh, Gina?"

"Indeed." Gina sipped her drink and winked at her friend. "But I'm enjoying it."

"Pavel, get me a beer." Sulu said since there was no room for him to get up to the bar.

"What are you drinking, Gonzoles?"

"Beer is fine." She said.

"You will get the next round." Chekov told Sulu as he got the bartender's attention and ordered two more beers.

They stayed for a couple of hours. Chekov and Piesto got involved in a heated game of scramble. It was a computerized three dimensional maze that Chekov particularly enjoyed. It shocked him when Piesto shut him down in the first three games. Both of them were very competitive and they never gave up the table once they sat down.

"I've never seen anyone as good at that game as Chekov." Sulu said leaning on the bar. "Until now."

"Gina loves scramble. She plays all the time." Gonzoles had finally grabbed a barstool. She stifled a yawn. "I spend half my time in here watching her play."

Sulu set his empty glass on the bar. "I don't think they will notice if we call it a night."

"After I finally got a seat." Gonzoles laughed. Sulu was about to suggest they could stay for another when she put her empty glass next to his and said "I don't think they would notice at all."

They walked out of the bar together. As they walked down the corridor, Sulu started to wonder. This was starting to feel more like a date and less like at a night at the bar with his fellow officers. They had stopped talking. There was nothing left to say. They had just stepped into the turbo lift and requested the transporter room when Sulu smiled at her and reached over to touch her chin. He tilted her face up to him and kissed her. He kissed her gently, giving her ample opportunity to object. Question everything, she reminded herself.

"Commander." she said quietly. "What are we doing?"

"There's no regulations against romance, Ensign." He reminded her smiling at her use of titles instead of names. He was standing quite close to her. Her fragrance was pleasantly exotic and a bit musky.

"It's not that I haven't thought about this, I have." Gonzoles said slowly. She leaned

against the wall, collecting her thoughts. He was very attractive. She had thought so from the first time she saw him. "But this is not what I want from you."

"Oh." Sulu took a deep breath. He self consciously backed off from her a few inches and put his hands in his pants pockets. "You know when I told Captain Kirk about you, he said I better be clear with you and with myself regarding--"

"Wait a minute!" Gonzoles cut him off. What was he saying? "When did you talk to Captain Kirk about me?"

"Last week. When I introduced you in sick bay." Sulu answered a bit confused as to why that mattered. Surely she realized that he and Kirk talked.

"But what did you say? What did he say?" She demanded. He was confusing her. Had she read the whole situation wrong? Or had she just had one too many beers? "Why were you talking about me?"

"I was telling him that I was impressed with your work." Sulu explained. He thought she understood that. Maybe he hadn't said it right. Did he leave something out? "He cautioned me to be clear with you and with myself about what I want from this relationship."

"What do you want?" Rosita looked him in the eye. She was so straight forward. No yelling. No uncontrollable emotions. She didn't slam anything or throw anything or run away. "I thought you were interested in my career. I thought I could learn to be the kind of officer you are. Or at least the kind I thought you were. Am I wrong?"

The turbo lift door opened. Sulu backed out into the hallway. He must be feeling the beer more than he thought. He pulled his hands out of his pockets and straightened his uniform jacket. It was time to think straight. Gonzoles stood in the doorway of the turbo lift watching him. "Take a walk with me, Ensign." He ordered.

"Yes Sir." She replied. She was frankly happy to have things back on the solid ground of military protocol.

"You are not wrong. I am interested in your career." Sulu said as they walked slowly along. He wasn't sure just how much he should explain. "Please continue to remind me to stay clear about that."

"Yes Sir."

"I am sorry, Gonzoles." Sulu said contritely and sincerely. "It seems that I did not take the Captain's advice. And I should have."

"Do you talk to the Captain about personal matters, Sir?" Gonzoles asked tentatively.

He stopped walking and looked at her. What was she concerned about? Sulu wasn't about to tell Captain Kirk about the kiss. "Sometimes. But not a lot lately. Why?"

"I'm just trying to understand how this works." Gonzoles said. "Yesterday Captain Kirk said that it wouldn't be long before you made captain and that I should consider your advice carefully."

"I wasn't aware you had spoken to the Captain." Sulu said surprised.

"I ran into him briefly on my way out of the gym." she explained. She continued walking because she didn't want to look at him as she added. "I don't think command is out of my reach, but I will need some insight along the way. I was hoping you could provide that."

"I agree with your assessment of the situation, Ensign." Sulu smiled to himself as he

walked along with her. His original assessment of her had been correct. It was his own judgement that concerned him now. "I am glad we had this talk, Gonzoles. It would seem that insight is a two way connection."

Sulu returned to the Enterprise. He was on duty in another ten hours and he should have gone right to bed. Instead he went to Uhura's quarters. She answered the chime in a Persian blue silk dressing gown. The lights were low and soft rhythmic music played in the background.

"You look good, Girl." He smiled, leaning on the door frame.

"And you've been drinking, Boy." She laughed. She moved to clear the way and bade him to come in with a sweeping motion of her arm. He walked in and collapse in her desk chair. "What's up?"

"Good question." He said rubbing his eyes. "I seem to be having trouble understanding women lately."

"So naturally you come to me." Uhura sat on the edge of her bed. "Ok. Tell me."

"Gonzoles." he said.

"I thought that was a strictly professional relationship." Uhura said. "I mean, I don't know the girl, but Hikaru, she is hardly your type."

"I wanted it to be professional." Sulu explained. He picked up the small bronze nude that sat on her desk. It was heavier than he expected it to be. It was a figure from Greek mythology, but he wasn't sure which one. He turned it over and back, idly playing with it as he spoke, "But I got confused and I kissed her."

"You did what?" Uhura asked. She stood up, took the statue out of his hands and returned it to its place on her desk.

"It's not like I forced myself on the girl." Sulu defended himself to his good friend.

"Hikaru! You out rank her by two full grades." Uhura reminded him. She went over to her dresser and took her brush out of a drawer. "What's she suppose to think?"

"You don't have to worry about Gonzoles." Sulu said, leaning back in the chair and sighing. "She called me on it. And what do you mean she is not my type?"

"How many beers did you have?" Uhura laughed. She sat back on the edge of her bed and began brushing her hair. "I mean she seems too much like you. Very controlled. You've always gone for a girl with a bit of a wild side to her."

"Not always." Sulu objected. He tried to think of an example, but could not.

"Tell me, what were you thinking about when you kissed her?" Uhura asked.

"What do you mean?" Their talks about the women in his life always went like this. He never understood her logic, but she was always right. Uhura was the one who had told him to stop fighting his feelings for Jimmi. He had always been fascinated by women, but he had never understood them.

"Just answer the question. Truthfully please. What were you thinking about when you kissed her?" Uhura insisted.

Sulu thought for a minute. "I wanted to kiss her. She is very pretty. I thought about the Captain's advice not to do what I did. I thought about the rank difference. I thought about not being too aggressive, about giving her an out. About what I would do if she objected." He left out that he had thought of Jimmi.

"That's an awful lot of thinking for one kiss. Not much passion." Uhura noted. "What do you think about when you kiss Jimmi?"

"You mean besides where her father is?" Sulu leaned back in the chair. Closing his eyes, he grinned and said, "With Jimmi? I don't think when I am with Jimmi. That's one of my problems."

"What does that tell you?" She tapped him lightly on the knee with the brush. Sulu sat up and shrugged.

He stood up. "That I need to go to bed and think about this in the morning."

"Good idea." She followed him to the door and gave him a gentle push out of her quarters. She pointed down the hall. "You live that way."

"Hey! I did not have that much to drink." He protested with a laugh and went home. In his quarters, he quickly stripped and climbed into his bunk. Uhura was right, but then she always was. Sulu hoped he had not ruined his relationship with Gonzoles. "Computer, play video file sulu-5. Lower lights." The lights dimmed and his video of Jimmi on the beach in San Francisco played on his screen.

The next morning when Sulu reported for duty, Chekov was already at his station. Since they were still in orbit around Starbase 68, there wasn't much to do on the bridge. It should have been the Captain's watch, but he wasn't there. Spock was in the center seat.

Sulu glanced at Chekov. He seemed unusually quiet this morning. "Missed you at breakfast this morning."

"Don't mention food, please." Chekov said.

"Sorry." Sulu said quietly. Of course it was impossible to have a conversation on the bridge Spock did not hear, but he did tend to ignore most nonessential exchanges. "Rough night? Who won?"

"We broke even." Chekov said quietly. He managed a smile and added, "But it was worth it."

Sulu decided to wait until they took a break to pursue the conversation further. From the bridge of the Enterprise they could see one of the Starbase 68's runabouts clear the main landing bay. The bridge crew watched the sleek little craft sweep around the base and jump to warp speed. Eventually Captain Kirk came onto the bridge. Spock gave up the command chair without bothering to report. Kirk knew the ship's status.

"Good morning Spock." Kirk smiled.

"Did you enjoy your evening, Captain?" Spock asked.

"Very much." Kirk was in a good mood. "We caught up on old times. Carly is also concerned about this tendency of the Della Mir to ignore hails. She is going to see if she can come up with any more information for the ambassador's assistant."

"Captain. I am receiving a distress signal from the U.S.S. Pythagoras." Uhura reported to Kirk. Spock manned his station and called up the information on the distressed ship.

"A class one tug, Captain." Spock said after consulting his computer. "Crew of 232 Commanded by Captain James Douglass."

"Let's hear it, Uhura." Kirk ordered.

“Aye Sir.” Uhura said and put the distress signal on audio. “Mayday. Mayday. This is the U.S.S. Pythagoras. Coordinates unknown. Navigational computer off line. Antimatter containment field has failed. The core has been ejected. We are on emergency power. Life support on emergency back up. Last known coordinates sector 30. 58 by 83 by 6.”

“Can you get a fix on them?” Kirk asked looking over at Spock.

“They have drifted off course by only three degrees.” Spock said. “At warp nine we could be there in forty three minutes.”

“Open channel to the Pythagoras.”

“Channel open.” Uhura acknowledged.

“Pythagoras. This is the Enterprise. We are on our way. Continue to transmit your status.” Kirk said. He turned to his crew. “Uhura inform Starbase that we are on our way. Chekov set course for the Pythagoras.”

“Captain.” Spock said. “We have off duty personnel on the base.”

“Uhura, issue emergency recall.” Kirk said. “Anyone the can’t be onboard in five minutes will have to wait for us here.”

“Aye Sir.”

Kirk waited exactly five minutes. “Mr. Chekov set course for the Pythagoras. Warp nine at earliest safe distance from the base, Mr. Sulu.”

“Aye Sir.” Both officers answered. Sulu and Chekov exchanged looks. They were grateful they had been on duty when the distress call came. Anyone who hadn’t made it back to the ship in the allotted five minutes would hear about it from the Captain.

The Pythagoras transmitted detailed status report so that by the time they were closing on the disabled ship’s position, the Enterprise engineering crew was making preparations to repair the ailing tug. The damage was extensive. Commander Scott talked at length with Lt. Commander Marsha Redditt, the chief engineer of the Pythagoras. During the short trip Dr. McCoy came to the bridge.

“There she is.” Sulu said as they made visual contact with the ship. The Pythagoras was of a design similar to the Enterprise although the saucer section and the space/warp units were smaller. Instead of the Enterprise’s lower secondary hull, the Pythagoras could attach to one or more transport containers. On this trip she was towing two containers. There was no visible outside damage.

“Bring us along side, Sulu. Put a tractor beam on her.” Kirk said. “She’s drifting.”

“Aye Sir.” Sulu said and carried out his orders.

“Uhura, open a channel.” Kirk said. On the bridge’s main view screen appeared the bridge of the class one tug. There was a lot of activity on the tug. The captain was a middle aged human of average height and build. “Captain Douglass. I have repair crews standing by. With your permission, Sir.”

“Captain Kirk.” Douglass allowed himself a small smile. With his ship in disarray, he hadn’t smiled in hours. “We are ready to receive your repair crews. We are standing by.”

Mr. Spock and Mr. Scott were in the transporter room with an assortment of Enterprise personnel. Kirk signaled the ok and they transported to the tug with the two repair crews. One crew would concentrate on the warp core. They would assess what needed to be done to get her

up and running again. If that was possible. The second crew would assist in putting the computer back on line to handle the interfaces for life support, navigation, and sensors.

"Captain Douglass." Dr. McCoy asked. "Do you have any injured that you need to transfer?"

"Dr. Obert feels she has things under control." Captain Douglass said. "Remarkably most of our injuries were minor. Although sick bay is a bit overcrowded."

"Do you know what happened, Captain?" Kirk asked.

Captain Douglass hesitated. "Perhaps we could speak face to face, Captain Kirk?"

"Of course." Kirk said a bit surprised at the request. "I'll beam over to you. I am sure you don't want to leave your ship right now."

"Thank you, Captain."

The screen went blank. McCoy looked at Kirk. "What do you suppose that's all about?"

"Only one way to find out." Kirk responded with a shrug. "Do you want to come along for the ride?"

"I thought you'd never ask." McCoy smiled. They beamed over to the Pythagoras. Captain Douglass met them in the transporter room. He was surprised to find Dr. McCoy with Captain Kirk. *****

"Captain Kirk." Douglass hesitated. "I thought we could speak privately."

"This is my chief medical officer, Dr. McCoy." Kirk said. "Bones, why don't you see what help they need in sick bay. I'll catch up with you later."

"Sick bay is on deck eight, Doctor." Captain Douglass said.

"I'm sure I can find it." McCoy said reluctantly and left the transporter room to find the turbo lift.

"I was on my way to engineering." Captain Douglass explained. "We could talk on the way, if you don't mind."

"Dr. McCoy has full security clearance." Kirk said as they headed for the turbo lift. "There is very little I know that he doesn't."

"I understand, Captain Kirk." Douglass said, but added nothing else.

"So, what happened?" Kirk finally asked when they were in the turbo lift..

"We were cruising at warp two. Our destination is an ag-colony in the Vishnu system." Captain Douglass said. "The first indication of trouble was the computer alert that the containment field strength was falling rapidly. We had no choice but to eject the core."

"What cargo are you carrying, Captain?" Kirk asked.

"The forward container is mostly machinery. Water purification equipment and other miscellaneous items. The aft container is full of bulk ag supplies. Seed, fertilizer, animal feed."

They stepped out of the turbo lift into the mass confusion that was engineering. Commander Scott and Lt. Commander Redditt were examining a warped piece of metal. Captain Kirk and Captain Douglass joined them around the work table.

"Scotty, have you found the problem?" Kirk asked.

"Aye Captain." Scotty said. "A coupling on the main matter/antimatter flow regulator has disintegrated."

"Disintegrated?" Douglass asked. "How?"

"From the energy patterns left on the surrounding plates." Commander Redditt said indicating the distressed metal item on the table. She was a short blond woman in her mid thirties. It had not taken long for Scotty and Redd to earn each other's respect. "We believe there was a defect in the part from the start."

"Why didn't we find it before, Redd?" Douglass asked his chief engineer. "What was the point of that two week lay over at the Rigel Docks?"

"During that layover we had several couplings and conduits replaced." Commander Redditt explained. "We suspect that is where the defective part originated."

"Can we get them up and running, Scotty?" Kirk asked.

"With a few spare parts from Enterprise and a little luck, I think so Sir." Scotty replied. "It may take a little time though Captain."

"It always does, Mr. Scott." Kirk said. The two ships captains continued on their way. Kirk studied Douglass. "Was there something else, Captain?"

"Yes." Douglass said as they returned to the turbo lift. "Just before this incident we had sensor and visual contact with what appeared to be one of these Della Mir scout ships. I'm sure you've seen the intelligence reports on them. Bridge."

"Yes." Kirk said non-committally.

"Well, we hailed them. And they did not answer, as expected." Captain Douglass continued. "This was less than five minutes before we had to dump the core. They ignored our distress signal. I'll pass it on to headquarters, of course. But I thought you'd want to know."

"Thank you Captain." Kirk said. The turbo lift door opened onto the bridge. Captain Douglass went down to the navigation station to check with the three officers attempting repairs there. Kirk ambled over to the science station which had a pair of long legs sticking out from under it.

Mr. Spock was laying on the floor with his head and the upper half of his body under the science station. One officer knelt on the floor next to him handing him tools. Another was watching the control panel above him.

"That's it, Mr. Spock." The young woman who was watching the board said. "I am getting sensor readings now."

Spock disengaged himself from the access panel and stood up. "Run a full diagnostic of the sensors and all systems that interface with this station, Ensign."

"Yes Sir." She immediately turned back to the controls to carry out her orders.

"Report, Mr. Spock." Kirk said.

"The sensor interface is functioning." Spock said. "Repairs are underway on the navigation systems and life support. Communications and shields are temporarily off line. We are inspecting all systems that were worked on at the Rigel Docking facilities."

"How long?" Kirk asked.

"Barring unanticipated setbacks, two hours to have all computer functions back on line." Spock said. "However, Mr. Scott reports repairs to the warp drive will take an additional four hours. The inspections will be ongoing until the Pythagoras can reach a Starbase."

"There you are." McCoy said coming out of the turbo lift

"How are things in sick bay?" Kirk asked.

"Fine." McCoy said. "Dr. Obert has everything under control. Did Captain Douglass have anything interesting to say?"

"Yes." Kirk answered quickly and turned to his first officer. "Spock, do they still need you here?"

"Lt. Andrews is an able science officer." Spock said putting the tools that were still in his hands down on an empty chair. "He can direct the repair crews."

"Good." Kirk turned to look for Captain Douglass. "Captain, I'm going to return to Enterprise. Unless there is something else we need to discuss?"

"No, Captain Kirk. Nothing else." Captain Douglass said. "I can't thank you enough for your timely assistance."

"My pleasure, Captain Douglass." Kirk said he pulled out his communicator. "Kirk to Enterprise. Three to beam up."

Back on the Enterprise Spock and McCoy followed Kirk onto the turbo lift. They knew he would fill them in on his discussion with Captain Douglass in his own time. But McCoy couldn't wait. "So what did Captain Douglass have to say?"

"Bridge." Kirk ordered. "The Pythagoras had contact with a Della Mir ship just before her accident."

"This far inside Federation space?" McCoy asked surprised.

"Our runabouts have been equally far into Della Mir space." Spock reminded McCoy. He asked the Captain, "They did not respond to the distress call?"

"No, they did not." Kirk said pointedly. "And our sensors had no contact between Starbase 68 and the Pythagoras."

"So where did they go?" McCoy asked.

"Good question." Kirk said

"The scout ships could be equipped with a cloaking device." Spock considered. "Or they could have simply monitored our transmissions and adjusted their course to take them out of range."

The turbo lift door opened and the three officers stepped onto the bridge. "Commander Uhura, get me some one on the negotiating team at Starbase 68. On a secured channel. Preferably Ambassador Ahmed."

"Yes Sir." Uhura answered. After a few minutes Uhura turned to the Kirk "Captain, Ambassador Ahmed is in a meeting right now. I have Ambassador Lightfoot standing by. The channel is secured."

"On screen." Kirk ordered. When Ambassador Lightfoot's image appeared on the screen, Kirk said. "Carly, I've run across some information you may interest you."

"Well, good morning to you too, Captain." Carly smiled. When Kirk did not respond, she continued in a more business like manner. "What is this information, Jim?"

"We just answered a distress call from a Starfleet tug." Kirk started.

"Yes, the Pythagoras." Carly nodded. "We were informed when Enterprise left the base. Is the situation under control?"

"Yes, they had some equipment failure. Repairs are in progress." Kirk reported. "But

Captain Douglass reports that a Della Mir scout ship was in the immediate area when the failure occurred. They ignored the distress call."

"Really?" Carly was visibly upset. "How badly were they damaged?"

"They were on emergency power and had lost their nav. computer." Kirk said. Having served in Starfleet, Carly knew just what that meant. Without any method of setting course or even determining coordinates and only reserved power, they could have drifted endlessly without help.

"I'll inform Ambassador Ahmed." Carly said. "We definitely need to discuss this with Ambassador Henn-ray. Thanks Jim."

"We'll be returning to Starbase in a few hours." Kirk smiled. "I left a few crew members who couldn't make it back to the ship before we left."

"I'm glad I'm not in their shoes." Carly laughed. "Perhaps I'll see you later then."

"Count on it." Kirk said. "Enterprise out."

"Been renewing old friendships, Jim?" McCoy teased after the screen had returned to a view of the Pythagoras.'

"Any regulations against that, Bones?"

"Not that I know of." McCoy smiled.

The rest of the repairs went routinely. Scotty finished the warp drive repairs in about half the time he had estimated. He credited Lt. Commander Redditt's skill and cooperation for the short completion time. Captain Douglass thanked Kirk again then set course for Starbase Twenty Three. It was the closest base with a full service space dock. Once the Pythagoras was on it's way, Enterprise set course for Starbase Sixty Eight. It took a couple of hours to return since they were not traveling at warp nine.

By the time they came back into orbit at Starbase 68, Sulu and Chekov were going off duty. Captain Kirk made a ship wide announcement that while he was granting shore leave to off duty personnel, the Enterprise was still officially on patrol. And that all Enterprise personnel were expected to be able to return to the ship within five minutes of an emergency recall. The crew members who had missed the boat earlier returned sheepishly. Fewer crew members made the decision to leave the ship.

Sulu was heading to the rec room when he saw Captain Kirk. "Good evening, Captain."

"Sulu, you're not going to the base tonight?" Kirk asked a bit surprised. They stopped in the hallway to talk. "I just saw Chekov go into the transporter room."

"Chekov has a date." Sulu explained. "I do not."

"A date?" Kirk asked. Even the Captain kept up on ship's gossip.

"Lt. Regina Piesto." Sulu said. "He met her at the officer's club last night. Nice girl."

"Good for him." Kirk smiled. "You are not going to see Ensign Gonzoles?"

"I hadn't planned on it, Captain." Sulu said. "I was going to join the poker game in rec room five."

"If you don't mind my asking, Sulu..." Kirk started slowly. "What are you planning to say to Jean Marie regarding Ensign Gonzoles?"

"Frankly Captain, I hadn't planned to say anything to her." Sulu said. He was surprised the Captain would ask that question, so he felt obliged to explain. "I don't tell Jimmi anything

about business. And my relationship with Ensign Gonzoles is strictly business."

"How do you manage that?" Kirk laughed. He remembered when he first met Jean Marie McCoy. She was about eleven years old. At first she was very shy, but once she started talking to him she had asked a steady stream of questions about everything she saw or thought.

"I find it easier to just deal with all ship's business as classified." Sulu explained. "Then I don't have to worry about inadvertently saying too much."

"And Jean Marie accepts that?" Kirk was amazed.

"I think she cares more about the ship's gossip than any missions." Sulu shrugged. "Besides she has no choice but to accept it."

"Well, if it works..." Kirk would have to consider that. He checked his chronometer. "But, I have to be going. I also have a date tonight."

Sulu nodded and continued on his way. The rec room was well used. There was a chess game and several video games in progress. A group that had commandeered the couches was laughing and talking. The poker game was being played at a round table in the corner. Four officers were involved in a hand when Sulu walked in. Lt. Kyle, Ensign Posner, Lt. Howard, and Dr. McCoy. Sulu grabbed a pile of chips and sat in the empty chair as Lt. Kyle took the pot.

"Ok." Sulu grinned. "Who's ready for some real poker?"

"Nice of you to join us." Doris Howard gathered the cards and shuffled, "What do you consider real poker?"

"It's not possible to have real poker on a Starship." McCoy said "It would break too many regulations."

"The game is five card draw, gentlemen." Doris said as she dealt. "Ante up."

"We have the cards and the chips." Ensign Eddy Posner said as he tossed a chip into the middle of the table. He was just a year out of the Academy. He had kept the facial tattoo that was common among teenage gangs on Penthara IV where he had grown up. Eddy felt it made him look dangerous and he liked that illusion. "What else do you need, Doctor?"

"Bourbon, Mr. Posner." McCoy replied arranging his hand.

"Cigars." Sulu added. "Hand rolled Havana's if I had my choice."

"Those are illegal." Lt. Kyle reminded him.

"Only on Earth." Sulu corrected him. "I'll open for ten."

"I'm in." Posner said, tossing his chip into the center of the table. "I've never smoked a cigar."

"Good for you, Ensign." McCoy said. He tossed a chip into the pot. "A tobacco habit will kill you."

"I'm in." Lt. Kyle added his chip to the pile.

"Me too." Doris said. "Cards?"

The card game continued as usual.

On the base Captain Kirk had caught up with Ambassador Lightfoot. They were enjoying dinner together at the officers club. The club was not as full as the night before. Lt. Chekov and Lt. Piesto were there. A few other Enterprise officers and some regulars from the base made up the rest of the crowd.

"Carly, I don't feel comfortable with the Enterprise stuck here at Starbase." Kirk said. They had been discussing the implications of the ignored distress call.

"Aren't your orders to be available to the diplomatic team?" Carly asked.

"Yes." Jim admitted. "But I don't think that necessarily requires we stay at the base. Is Ambassador Ahmed still concerned for the delegation's safety?"

"Not any more." Carly said sipping her wine. "What's wrong with staying here?"

"For one thing the Della Mir know exactly where we are." Kirk said. "That is one possible reason why we did not encounter the scout ship that the Pythagoras saw."

"What's the other possible reason?" Carly asked.

"A cloaking devise."

"You think they have that technology?"

"You said yourself that technology is very important to them." Kirk shrugged. "I wouldn't rule it out. And besides that, my crew is getting overly comfortable here."

"I imagine you gave the an inspired lecture to those that didn't make it back to the ship this morning." Carly laughed. Kirk laughed too. "So what you want is to leave the base but still be available?"

"Yes." Kirk said. "I'll keep close enough to the base that I can be back here quickly. But the Della Mir won't know exactly where we are and I can restore discipline on my ship."

"I can see you now. A few drills, a few inspections. Maybe a complacent officer on report." Carly teased him. She reached across the table and took his hand. "Of course, you don't have to leave tonight. Do you?"

"I think tomorrow will be soon enough." He returned her warm smile.

Captain Kirk ordered the Enterprise to patrol the border between Federation and Della Mir Community space. He had talked to Ambassador Ahmed that morning before returning to Enterprise. They had agreed that the Enterprise should stay within ten hours distance of Starbase Sixty Eight. That gave Kirk quite a bit of leeway in his patrol.

"Long range sensors on maximum." Kirk ordered. They were patrolling at full impulse power. Kirk wasn't in a hurry to go anywhere. He wanted to take a long lingering look around.

"Aye Captain." Spock answered.

For two days they patrolled without any contact with the Della Mir scout ships. Kirk changed course, ordering them into Della Mir space. The area had already been mapped by the stellar cartography teams from the starbase. Spock took additional readings, but the Captain wasn't interested in the scientific information.

It was the third day on their new course. They were making a wide circle around the Della Mir side of the base. Spock was in command when the sensors made contact with a Della Mir scout ship. He called the Captain to the bridge before hailing it.

"They don't answer the hail, Mr. Spock." Uhura reported as Kirk and McCoy came off the turbo lift. The scout ship was on the main viewer.

"Are you transmitting on all frequencies?" Spock asked as he vacated the center seat.

"All standard frequencies, Sir." Uhura replied.

"Idea, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"All reports said the scout ships continued on their course as if they had never seen or heard our ships." Spock said. "Perhaps they don't routinely monitor the frequencies we consider standard."

"Try all possible frequencies." Kirk told Uhura. She nodded and continued hailing. Kirk sat in the command chair and waited. "They are still not answering, Captain."

"She's changing course." Sulu noted.

Spock consulted the sensors. "Scout ship's new course is 348 mark 6."

"Heading home." Kirk commented. The new course would take the ship directly away from the Enterprise and further into Della Mir space. "Well, we can assume they heard us."

"But why is he running?" McCoy asked. No one could answer that question. The scout ship moved along its new course on impulse power. "And why is he making such a half hearted effort?"

"Chekov, what's along this course?" Kirk asked.

"Current star maps do not go very far along this heading, Captain." Chekov said. "There is nothing in the immediate area as far as we know."

"Can't be going too far at this speed." Kirk observed. They knew the scout ships had warp capabilities. "Adjust course to follow."

"Aye Sir." Chekov replied.

"Match their speed, Mr. Sulu." Kirk ordered. He leaned forward in his seat resting his elbows on his knees. He tried to make sense of the Della Mir scout ships actions, but he obviously did not have enough information yet.

"Point eight impulse power." Sulu reported.

"The Della Mir scout ship is maintaining heading and speed." Spock reported.

"Perhaps they want us to follow." McCoy suggested. He was leaning against the bridge's hand rail, the picture of calm and ease. It was a deceiving picture.

"Then we will oblige them." The Captain said softly watching the small ship on the view screen ahead of them.

"Sensor contact with another scout ship. Two hundred KPC to port." Spock reported. He adjusted his sensors again. "Two more ahead Z plus 45 degrees."

"Heading?" Kirk asked turning his chair towards Spock. "Are they coming towards us?"

"No Sir." Spock answered "I now have three more ships. All are on a heading towards the same coordinates. Ahead point six light years. Sensors read a large ship at those coordinates."

"Maximum magnification, Mr. Sulu." Kirk ordered.

"Aye Sir." They all stared intently. The other scout ships were now in visual range. They ignored the Enterprise and continued on their individual courses to the same coordinates. As they came to the designated coordinates they saw a large cigar shaped ship. It's main purpose appeared to be the massive landing bay that faced the Enterprise as she came in. Scout ships were landing and taking off with precision and speed.

"Hail them." Kirk said wistfully. He was sure they wouldn't answer.

"I have an open channel, Captain." Uhura said surprised.

"On Screen." Kirk said. He straightened in his chair. The view screen changed to reveal

two Mirta males standing behind a computer console. They were in a control room, probably the bridge of the large vessel. "This is James T. Kirk of the Federation Starship Enterprise."

"I am Bars-mak, chancellor of the third custom house." The larger of the two bald Mirta men said with what passed for a smile. "Tell me what can we interest you in today and I will direct you to the proper personnel."

"Sounds like he's trying to sell us something, Jim." McCoy said quietly to Kirk.

"I would like an explanation, Chancellor." Kirk said. "I am particularly interested in why your scout ships ignore our hails."

The Chancellor conferred briefly with the other Mirta there. He turned back to the screen, "Captain, I realize that different societies have different customs. But why do your ships insist on hailing our representatives when they are not interested in buying anything?"

Kirk and McCoy exchanged looks. "The ships stationed at our starbase on the edge of your space are engaged in missions of exploration." Kirk explained. "Any exchanges in technology will be negotiated with Federation officials at a higher level."

"This is what our diplomatic delegation has told us." The Chancellor said nodding. "And so our technological representatives have not attempted to make any side deals with your military. Yet they continue to hail us."

"It is standard Starfleet procedure to hail any unidentified ships we come across." Kirk explained. "A simple identification and assurance of nonaggression is all they are looking for. To not answering a hail is cause for concern."

"Interesting." Bars-mak seemed amazed. "And this is what brings you here today? You are concerned?"

"Yes." Kirk said. He found it much more satisfying to get the answers himself than to have information filtered down from the diplomatic corp. "Five of our days ago I answered a distress call from a Federation tug. The captain of that tug reported one of your representatives ignored his distress call. That has me concerned."

Again the two Mirta officials conferred before the Chancellor answered. "We are aware of the incident. However we are under orders not to intrude on the internal matters of your Federation. Was not the faulty equipment ejected?"

"Yes." Kirk acknowledged.

"And it was a military ship?"

"Yes." Kirk nodded. "However if the circumstances had been reversed, we would have rendered assistance."

"Why?" The Chancellor seemed confused.

"People could have been hurt!" McCoy couldn't keep quiet any longer.

"Is it not the duty of the military to take the necessary risks of space travel?" The Chancellor asked. But he did not wait for an answer. "Captain Kirk, because of the ongoing negotiations I have attempted to answer your questions, however I have paying customers to attend to. If you wish to see a catalog of available technology, I could have it transmitted immediately at no cost to you."

"Thank you, Chancellor Bars-mak." Kirk said with his best diplomatic smile. "We await your transmission. Enterprise out."

"Military duty?!" McCoy blustered. "It's just an excuse to disregard the sanctity of life."

"It is merely a different value system, Doctor." Spock argued calmly.

"Different value system?!" McCoy was outraged. "The next thing you're going to tell me, Spock, is that it is perfectly logical for them to ignore a general distress call."

"Logical? No, Doctor. However given what we have learned about their culture," Spock said. "It is not entirely unexpected."

"We've been looking at this all wrong." Kirk laughed. "Their scout ships are scouting out trade routes. They are ignoring us because we are not paying customers."

"You mean these ships are full of traveling salesmen." McCoy shook his head in disbelief.

"Spock, go through their catalog. Let's see if they are selling a cloaking device." Kirk said. Spock nodded. "Mr. Sulu, take us away from this custom house or whatever they want to call it nice and slow. We're in no hurry."

"Aye Sir." Sulu replied.

"Chekov, take us back to the course we were on before meeting the first scout ship." Kirk said. "A nice wide sweep back towards the base."

"Aye Captain." Chekov answered.

Captain Kirk took the time later that day to call Starbase 68. He talked to Carly about his discussion with Chancellor Bars-mak. She did not seem overly surprised by his report. He wondered how much information the diplomats had that they were not sharing. Carly did say they would be sure the answering of distress calls was included in any final treaty.

Their patrol route had taken them back towards Starbase Sixty Eight when Scotty came on the bridge and down to the command chair. Kirk looked up from the manpower report he had been studying.

"Captain." Scotty reported. "The dilithium crystal interface is bulking again. We need to get to Starbase Twelve as soon as possible."

"It's not something we can take care of at sixty eight?" Kirk asked.

"Starbase 68 does not have a variety of spare parts that I know twelve has." Scotty says. "I've tried vector calibration three times, but the interface is just not responding as it should. If we don't repair it soon, we will be looking at a collapse of the articulation frame."

"Ok, Scotty." Kirk nodded. "Do we have warp drive at all?"

"I would not push her past warp two, Sir." Scotty said and returned to engineering to babysit his babies.

"Chekov, set course for Starbase 12." Kirk ordered. "Warp two."

"Aye Sir." Chekov replied "ETA 28 hours 8 minutes."

"Uhura, get me Starbase 68." Kirk ordered. "We'll let them know what we're doing."