

When Gonzoles returned to Starbase Sixty Eight, it was back to business as usual. Now she found herself with an ensign just out of the Academy as a copilot. Before taking him on any real mapping missions, Gonzoles took Ensign James McDuffie out in the runabout to make sure he knew how to fly. She couldn't complain about his knowledge of a runabout, but he never stopped talking.

The first six weeks of Ensign McDuffie's assignment at Star Base 68 were routine. Down right boring. He had settled in to the place and had made a few friends. He did not mind his new boss. She was pretty, easy going and straightforward. What else could he ask for? Maybe some excitement. Just a little action was all Jamie McDuffie wanted.

McDuffie manned the copilots seat of the Starfleet Runabout Congo. Ensign Gonzoles was in command. The flight was routine. Once they had completed the survey of the last planet of the system, Gonzoles turned the Congo towards home. Dr. Levy and Dr. Young were going over the survey data intently. The patterns of this last system did not follow with the rest of the systems they had surveyed in this area. The star was the same age and size of its neighbors but had twice the number of planets and an asteroid belt. The astro-cartographers were fascinated.

"Bunking with Griffin is like bunking with your mother." Ensign McDuffie was complaining. "He gets upset if you drop your boots on the floor."

"Where are you suppose to put them?" Gonzoles asked. There was little to do at this point but monitor the readouts and enjoy the ride.

"He thinks you need to stow everything even if you are just going to take a shower." McDuffie said. "He's worried the base will lose gravity and all our stuff will get mixed up."

"Just tell him that if all of his stuff is put away, nothing can get mixed up." Gonzoles suggested. She would never be able to look at Griffin the same way after this flight.

"The base hasn't ever lost gravity, has it?" McDuffie asked as casually as he could. He was a lean young man and several inches taller than Gonzoles. His sandy brown hair was cut short and brushed straight back, but it just accented his rather large nose.

"I've been assigned to Starbase Sixty Eight since it opened four years ago." Gonzoles assured him. "It has never lost gravity or life support."

"Four years?" McDuffie asked, his pale blue eyes earnest and innocent. "Don't you want to get on a ship?"

"I have a request in for transfer." Gonzoles did not look at him. "Commander Von Maltz does not like to let go of able pilots."

"Oh." Before McDuffie could think of a response the proximity alert sounded. Both ensigns immediately scanned their controls. "I have nothing on sensors."

"Computer." Gonzoles ordered "Locate and identify."

"Unable to comply." the computer responded.

"Identify object that triggered the proximity alert." Gonzoles repeated.

"There is no object within twenty five meters of the outer hull." The computer responded.

"Then what set it off?" McDuffie asked.

Gonzoles shook her head. "I don't know. Just keep your eyes open."

"Aye." he responded automatically. Changes on his control board caught his eye. Unsure, McDuffie studied his readings. "I don't get this."

"Report." Gonzoles said.

"Hull temperature." McDuffie adjusted his instruments but they were reading right.

"Rising dramatically. Radiation levels increasing."

"That doesn't make sense." Gonzoles said. "Radiation source?"

"Helium plasma." McDuffie said perplexed "But no evidence of a plasma stream of any kind. It's almost like..."

"The backwash of an impulse engine." Gonzoles finished his thought. "Shields. Hull temperature?"

"Still rising." McDuffie said after he had raised the shields. "Two hundred twenty five. Radiation increasing geometrically."

Gonzoles made a few more adjustments. "Forward sensors failing."

"Runabouts weren't meant to take this kind of radiation." McDuffie said. "I'm losing engine interface."

"Gun 'em." Gonzoles ordered. "We've got to get out of this."

"Aye." McDuffie answered. He pushed the throttle to the limit. He never saw the two doctors come forward. "That's it. I've got nothing."

"Aft sensors still functioning. We are clearing the plasma flow." Levy reported. "We're coming out of it."

"I can't get a reading on engines." Young said. "Attitude control is not responding. But we still have thrusters."

"Damn." McDuffie said. "Navigation computer is out. Now what?"

"Hull temperature?" Gonzoles asked.

"Leveling at 300 degrees." McDuffie reported. "Falling now. Two eighty. Slowly. Two seventy five. Two seventy."

"Continue scanning." Gonzoles said. "There might be a cloaked ship in the area."

"But we are light years from Romulan or Klingon space." McDuffie said. "I thought the Della Mir didn't have a cloak."

"Assume nothing." Gonzoles repeated what Commander Sulu had told her many times. "You never know what you'll run into in uncharted space."

"I don't read any ships in the area." Levy said. "What about navigation, Rosita?"

"Nav. com still not responding, but we're not far from Kali Guari." Gonzoles said.

"Allen, please tell me we have communications."

"Audio is responding." Dr. Young reported. "It should go through."

"Then, send a may day to the Kali Guari ship yards. If possible send a report to base." Gonzoles ordered. Young nodded. "Ruth, work on the nav computer. See if you can reboot and access."

"It was a short burst of radiation." Levy agreed. "Maybe the interface is all that crashed. I'm on it."

"Jamey, the engines." Gonzoles said. "Even if you can't get me control, try to get me some readings. This is going to be hard enough without knowing how fast we are traveling."

"What this?" Jamey McDuffie asked. "How can you get to the ship yards without a nav computer? It's useless."

"I've flown past here over a hundred times. I'm going to use thrusters to change headings

and point us in the right direction." She explained. "And we'll have a lot better chance of getting out of here if you get to work."

"Aye." McDuffie got the tool kit out and slid under the forward station to see what he could do. He was surprised to find burned out circuits between the control boards and the interfaces boards. McDuffie had never seen this kind of radiation damage. Some of it was beyond his ability to repair. He concentrated on the throttle readouts and controls.

"Damn." Dr. Levy said. "I can't get this to reboot."

"Computer." Dr. Young slid his chair over to her station. "Reroute navigation controls through communication interfaces."

"Unable to comply."

"What else do we have?" Young asked.

"Aft sensors, thrusters," Levy started to list.

"Don't touch thrusters." Gonzoles interjected.

"The science data bank!" Levy smiled at Young. "Of course we could lose all our data."

"If we survive we'll go back." Young said. "Computer reroute navigation computer controls through science station three controls using science database interface."

"Working." the computer replied.

"Are you getting any readouts?" McDuffie called after he had reconnected several of the damaged circuits.

"Yes!" Gonzoles responded with delight. "Now. What about throttle control?"

McDuffie continued his repairs a few moments longer. "Try it."

"Ok, I'm slowing us to one quarter impulse." Gonzoles moved her fingers carefully over her controls. According to the readings, the ship slowed. "That's great, Jamey. Is there anything else you can do down there?"

"No sir." McDuffie backed out from under the panel. "I suggest we make the nearest port possible."

"Good work." Gonzoles smiled as he remanned the copilots station. "What about the nav comp?"

"Give us another minute." Young said. They waited while Young and Levy made some final adjustments. "Ok, I can't give you any kind of heading lock or cyberpilot. But you can at least see where you are going."

"Good work. I like to fly by the seat of my pants." Gonzoles said. This was the most exciting mission they had flown in years. "Has there been any response from Kali Guari? We're coming up on the ship yards."

"They acknowledged the mayday." Young said. "But you know how they are."

"Hey, we are bringing them business." Gonzoles said. Her adrenaline was flowing. "Get me the dockmaster."

"Aye." Young returned to the communications station. After a few minutes a Kalan woman appeared on the screen. She was humanoid with a reddish tan skin color. As typical of her species, her hair was the same color as her skin and her fingers were abnormally long.

"I am Peleek. Dockmaster of Kali Guari." She said. "How can we be of service?"

"This is the U.S.S. Congo, out of Starbase Sixty Eight." Gonzoles said. "Ensign Gonzoles piloting. We've had massive system failures and request permission to land for

repairs."

Peleek hesitated. She consulted her computer. "U.S.S. Congo. Proceed to repair station seventeen on thrusters only. See the head technician in the landing bay. I am transmitting coordinates now."

After the screen went blank, Ensign McDuffie looked over at Gonzoles. "No hello, no goodbye. Friendly."

"Nobody in the Della Mir Community believes in small talk unless they think they can sell you something." Gonzoles laughed. "You'll get used to it."

They landed in the busy repair station bay. Several other ships of similar size to the runabout were being worked on by the Kalan crews. All the technicians wore blue coveralls. The Starfleet crew disembarked slowly, with Gonzoles in the lead. They found the head technician, Menha. He was an older Kalan man with a red graphic insignia on his coveralls. They discussed the necessary repairs and asked about contacting Starbase 68. Menha directed them to Market Exchange where they could purchase any services necessary.

The Market Exchange was quite extensive. You could purchase anything from a good meal, to a hotel room, to the latest technology. Gonzoles inserted her Starfleet ID card into a communication isolation booth and requested connection to Starbase 68. The rest of her crew waited outside the booth.

"Gonzoles." Commander Von Maltz answered her call. "Report."

"Sir, we were returning to base when the proximity alert sounded. However when we asked the computer to identify, whatever it was had gone. It was then that we passed through a helium plasma flow of unidentified origins. Hull temperature and radiation spiked, causing damage to several of our systems. We managed to repair nav com and engines enough to reach the ship yard as Kali Gauri."

"How long?"

"The chief technician promises an estimate within the next two hours." Gonzoles said. "But I'd say a couple of days at least, Commander."

"Advise me when you have that time estimate, Ensign." Von Maltz said. "Don't authorize any work until you've reported back."

"Aye sir."

"And Gonzoles." Von Maltz gave her a rare smile.

"Sir?"

"Good work."

"Thank you Sir." She said "Gonzoles out."

On Starbase 68, Commander Von Maltz turned to Lt. P'rey. She was his third officer, a Vulcan woman who had been in the service for ten years. She was presently manning the lead science station and in charge of all flight operations on the base.

"What do you make of that P'rey?"

"The most obvious possibility would be that the Congo came very close to a cloaked ship then was caught in the impulse engine's backwash as the ship moved away." Lt. P'rey said. "Of course the proximity alert may have been a coincidental malfunction."

"I doubt that." Von Maltz said. He hated the way Vulcans were always covering their

bases. They had both been thinking the same thing. There was no need to muddy the waters with other possibilities, logical or not. "Are there any starships in the area?"

"The Saratoga was called to the Neutral Zone just after she left here." Lt. P'rey said. "However the Enterprise is last reported in sector thirty."

"Lt. Piesto, get me the Enterprise right away." Von Maltz said to the communications officer on duty.

"Aye Sir." She responded. It only took a moment before the bridge of the Enterprise appeared on the main view screen. Admiral Kirk was sitting in the center seat.

"What can I do for you Commander?" Kirk asked.

"One of my runabouts has run into a problem, Admiral." Von Maltz said. "The Congo experienced major systems failure after encountering a helium plasma flow near the Kalan System."

"A plasma flow?"

"Yes Sir." Von Maltz said. "Radiation effected most of the Congo's systems. But Ensign Gonzoles managed an emergency landing at the ship yards at Kali Gauri."

"What are you suggesting, Commander?"

"I am sure the Kalans can handle the repairs." Von Maltz said "But I am reluctant to give the Della Mir access to a Federation vessel unless absolutely necessary. I also have concerns about the origin of the plasma flow, Sir."

"I see your point Commander." Kirk nodded. "Mr. Chekov set course for the shipyards at Kali Guari. How soon would we be there at warp six?"

"Eight hours twenty three minutes, Sir." Chekov responded.

"We are on our way, Commander. Enterprise out." Kirk said. "Warp Six, Mr. Sulu."

"Warp six, aye."

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Ensign Gonzoles came out of the isolation booth designed for private communications for the second time in two hours. The Market Exchange was crowded with the different species of the Della Mir Community. The four Starfleet officers stood out like a sore thumb. Many of the patrons of the market stared at them openly.

"What did he say?" McDuffie asked.

"The Enterprise is on her way to pick us up." Gonzoles reported. "We are not to let anyone here have any access to our computer systems. Especially the logs of the incident that brought us here."

"When will Enterprise arrive?" Dr. Levy asked. "I wouldn't mind exploring this market a bit."

"Another six to seven hours." Gonzoles said. "So while we wait, no one goes anywhere alone. McDuffie and I will return to the repair station and explain the situation to the head technician. We will also secure the ship. I don't want to leave the Congo unmanned. You two relieve us in a couple of hours. Enjoy yourselves but stay in touch."

"Sure thing, Mom." Allen Young laughed. "We'll stay out of trouble."

Gonzoles and McDuffie walked into repair station seventeen to see a technician in blue coveralls coming out of the U.S.S. Congo. Gonzoles barred his way. He was tall for a Kalan,

almost five and a half feet. He carried a diagnostic padd with information on the Congo's engine systems. Gonzoles took it out of his hands.

"What are you doing?" Gonzoles demanded.

"Diagnostic." He answered with confusion. His long fingers attempted to take the padd back, but Gonzoles handed it McDuffie. "Menha is waiting."

"I need to speak to Menha anyway." Gonzoles said. "Get him."

"A little rough, wasn't it?" McDuffie asked after the technician had gone scurrying away to find his boss.

Gonzoles looked around to make sure they were alone. She responded in a hushed tone. "The Kalans respect authority, Jamey. You have to take command."

"Then they do what ever you say?" He asked matching her tone.

"Oh, no." She grinned. "It's a game with them. They pretend to do what you say and then they do whatever they want. And they try to tell you it's what you wanted all along."

"I don't get it."

"Wait until you meet the Mirta." Gonzoles said. "They set the tone for the whole Community. It's a very structured society."

"There is a problem, Ensign Gonzoles?" Menha walked up to them smiling, his hands open wide in a gesture of appeasement.

"I have received new orders." Gonzoles said. "A Starfleet ship will be here in a few hours to recover the Congo. Until the starship arrives, only Starfleet personnel are to have access to this ship."

"Of course, Ensign. Of course." Menha said. "Now, who will be paying for the time my crew has spent on your ship already?"

"You may charge Starfleet for the time." Gonzoles said. "You will include with that charge a detailed breakdown of all procedures followed and all systems inspected. My superiors will require to know all that you know."

"There will be a docking charge of course."

"Of course." Gonzoles smiled. She nodded to McDuffie to go into the ship. He did and she followed. She breathed a sigh of relief and locked the door. "Computer, any non-starfleet personnel onboard?"

"Negative." the computer responded.

"Good." Gonzoles said heading toward the very back of the runabout. "You might as well relax, Jamey. We're going to be here a while."

"What are we going to do alone in a derelict ship for a couple of hours?" Jamey asked following her.

"I, for one, am going to take a nap." Gonzoles said sitting down on one of the two bunks. She took her boots off and laid down.

"How can you sleep?" McDuffie paced. "What's going to happen next? What is going on at that Market Exchange? All those aliens out there? Shouldn't we stay on our guard?"

"Jamey, we've been on duty for six hours. The Enterprise will be here in another seven." Gonzoles leaned on one elbow and looked over at McDuffie as she spoke. "I don't intend to report to Admiral Kirk in anything but top form."

"You think we'll talk to Admiral Kirk himself?" McDuffie asked in awe.

"Count on it." Gonzoles laid down and closed her eyes.

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When Ensign Gonzoles woke up, she heard voices in the forward compartment of the runabout. It took her a moment to remember where she was and what had happened. She checked her chronometer. She had slept for a little over three hours. The voices belonged to her crew. The two doctors had returned as ordered.

"Have a good nap?" Dr. Allen Young asked when she joined them.

"Yeah." Gonzoles stretched. She went over to the replicator. "Hot coffee, black. Was the market interesting?"

"Oh yes!" Ruth Levy smiled. "You'll be amazed at the variety of merchandise they are selling. And we cataloged several species we've never seen before."

"Evidently from the other side of Della Mir space." Allen added. "And there are other humans here."

"Humans?" Gonzoles said. "What did they have to say?"

"When we tried to talk to them they disappeared into the crowd." Allen stood up and stretched. "I think I'm going to catch a couple hours in one of those bunks."

"So, Rosita, are you ready to go explore this Market Exchange for yourself?" Ensign McDuffie asked.

"Give me a minute to drink my coffee, Jamey." Gonzoles laughed. But McDuffie was not one to sit still easily. While she sipped her coffee he reported on the ships systems. He had spent the last couple of hours doing diagnostics and minor repairs. He had accomplished a lot of the preparations work for the major repairs. "Wow, you've been busy. Mr. Scott will be impressed."

"Mr. Scott?"

"Chief engineer on Enterprise." She explained. She turned to Dr. Levy. "We're going to get out of here for a little while, Ruth."

"Ok." She said bringing up her database at one of the scientific stations. "I'm going to see if we lost much data. I'll yell if there are any problems."

Gonzoles and McDuffie retraced their steps back to the Market Exchange. It was a very busy place. The species of the Della Mir Community that Gonzoles had met were all there in their official capacities. The Mirta were in charge, of course. As members of the military they evidently provided security here at the ship yards. The Lirta, who weren't quite as tall or quite as green, not only served as assistants in diplomacy, but also manned the shops and service booths of the Exchange. A young Barchin girl with her golden skin and bronze colored hair bumped into McDuffie. Horrified, she stopped and bowed. She apologized profusely and hurried off clutching her package.

"Do I look that scary?" McDuffie asked after the young girl had disappeared.

"Well, you are a half meter taller than her." Gonzoles said as they wound through the crowd. "I've noticed that the taller the species is the higher their place in the structure of this society."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's a coincidence." Gonzoles shrugged. "But it seems to work that way. And the Barchins and the Kalans are on the bottom of that social ladder. But don't take my word for it."

"Why, aren't you telling me the truth?" McDuffie smiled. Ensign Gonzoles was so straightforward and serious he couldn't imagine her lying.

"My first year out here, I was told to question everything." She continued. "It was good advise. Humans are visual beings. We are effected by how things appear."

"I'll keep that in mind." McDuffie said. He stopped, putting his hand on Gonzoles's arm to stop her too. "What's that?"

The crowd parted as a humanoid man of odd coloring walked through. He was close to two meters tall and wore a dark garment that reminded Rosita of the monks of ancient Earth. His skin color was similar to the clay pots her mother used on her patio. He stopped in front of the two Starfleet officers. He looked Gonzoles in the eyes. She felt like she could not turn away.

"Your curiosity is strong, friend." His voice was deep and melodic.

"Excuse me, Sir." Gonzoles tore her eyes away from his. A chill ran down her spine. "I did not intend to block your path."

"I am Thoren." He said, ignoring her statement. "Rati of the Drax'l Brotherhood."

"I'm Ensign Gonzoles. This is Ensign McDuffie." Gonzoles said. She noticed the others in the market were avoiding them now. "Is there something you want, Thoren?"

"The Brotherhood seeks truth and knowledge." Thoren said. "As do you. You are curious about the others of your homeworld here at the ship yards."

"How do you know that?" McDuffie asked.

Thoren slowly shifted his intense gaze from Gonzoles to McDuffie. "There is no danger here, Ensign McDuffie. Protection is not necessary."

"Maybe not." McDuffie said. "But it is my job."

"It's all right, McDuffie." Gonzoles said quietly. She turned back to the Drax'l man "Mr. McDuffie is correct. As second in command of our mission, security is his concern. What can you tell me about the other humans on this station?"

"There is nothing to tell." Thoren said. "As with any here who are not of the Community, they are merely in business for themselves."

"What about you?" McDuffie asked. "What is your business, Thoren?"

"I have said." Thoren replied. "I am Rati."

"Rati?" Gonzoles asked.

"A spiritual leader." Thoren explained.

"Uh-huh." Gonzoles said.

"You do not trust easily, Ensign Gonzoles." Thoren said.

"Hazard of the profession." She shrugged off the remark. "Nice talking to you."

Gonzoles strode off towards the nearest food vender. McDuffie followed. He looked over his shoulder to see Thoren still standing there watching them. The crowd circled around him, careful not to get too close.

"What may I serve you?" A Lirta woman asked from behind the counter.

Nothing looked familiar. Gonzoles indicated a drink the previous patron seemed to be enjoying. "What's that?"

"Raktajino. Imported across many light years at great expense." She answered. "Very popular. Perhaps because of the stimulating effects."

"Two." Gonzoles ordered.

"If he's a spiritual leader," McDuffie asked Gonzoles. "Why is everyone doing their best to get away from him?"

"Guilty conscience?" Gonzoles suggested as the two drinks were served.

"The Drax'l are empathic." the Lirta woman explained in a hushed tone as Gonzoles paid her. "And it is said the Rati can look into your soul."

"Your soul?" McDuffie laughed.

"Perhaps humans don't have souls." The Lirta woman said. "But one is wise not to look him in the eye."

"Thank you." Gonzoles took the drinks and handed one to McDuffie. It was cold and a bit bitter, but the stimulation effect similar to three strong cups of Earth coffee was almost immediate.

"This isn't bad." McDuffie said. They found a counter to lean against while they drank their raktajino and watched the crowd go about their business.

"So, what do you think Jamey?" Gonzoles asked. "Does it seem so dangerous to you now?"

"Yes and no." McDuffie said. "That Rati guy was a bit spooky. I didn't like it when he looked at me."

"I didn't either." Gonzoles agreed. "He reminded me of one of the priest at my primary school. I always felt guilty when he looked at me, regardless of the circumstances."

"Rosita." McDuffie straightened up and nodded to the left. "I swear I just saw a human woman over by that pottery booth."

Gonzoles looked, but saw nothing. "Are you sure, Jamey?"

"I don't see her now, but I saw a tall human woman wearing civilian clothes." McDuffie put his cup on the counter and started in that direction. "I'm going to check it out."

"Wait for me." Gonzoles also left her drink and followed after him. "Remember, we stay together. You are sure she was human?"

"Definitely humanoid." McDuffie said as he visually scanned the crowd for her. "I may not have been out here long, but an old fashioned bomber jacket says home to me."

"Sounds human." Gonzoles agreed. They searched through the crowd. Finally Gonzoles caught sight of the woman. "There she is. Going into that.... I think it's a bar."

"Let me walk in ahead of you." McDuffie suggested. "Maybe she's looking for some company."

"I won't be far behind you." Gonzoles said. "We have no official function here. So don't go throwing any weight around."

"I wasn't thinking along official lines at all." McDuffie grinned and walked into the bar. Gonzoles waited a minute or so before following him.

The lights of the bar were subdued. Once her eyes adjusted, she saw a small crowd of various species. Most of the crowd was not of the Community. This was obviously a bar that catered to transients who were waiting for their ships to be repaired. There were games of chance that Gonzoles did not recognize being played towards the back and some holographic

computer games at some of the tables. There were no stools in front of the bar, but several patrons leaned against it.

Jamey McDuffie stepped up to the bar next to the mysterious human woman. She was young, not more than twenty five with honey blond hair that came to her shoulders. When she glanced his way he smiled. "Hi." She looked him over but did not comment. "Any suggestions on what's safe to drink in this place?"

"Try a Kalan Nog." She said as the Kalan bartender places a glass in front of her. "Give the Starfleet officer one of these on me, Iris."

"Thanks." McDuffie said. Iris gave him the drink. "I'm Jamey McDuffie."

"I'm Lucus." She smiled. "Maryann Lucus. You don't usually see Starfleet types around here."

"Any port in a storm." McDuffie shrugged and sampled the nog. It was remarkably similar to an English ale in taste, but a thicker texture. He smiled appreciatively. "I was surprised to see other humans here at all. Are you just passing through?"

"I just finished a job. And I am waiting for my partner to pick me up." She explained. "I take it that other officer is with you."

"My boss." McDuffie sighed and turned away from Gonzoles. "If we ignore her maybe she'll go away."

"Problems?" Maryann Lucus laughed.

"I'm off duty." McDuffie grumbled. "And the systems failures that caused us to land here were not my fault."

"Just a sailor out for a good time?" Lucus asked with a smile. He shrugged again and drank his nog. "But you haven't even asked me what job I just finished or who my partner is."

"Was I suppose to?" McDuffie asked innocently.

"This is a fact finding mission, isn't it?"

"Only on a personal level." He smiled at her. "I'm just out of the Academy. They don't even let me out by myself, much less give me important missions."

"Too bad." She finished her nog. And started to go. "It was nice talking to you, Jamey, but I have to be going. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow."

"I'll be gone in a couple of hours."

"That's interesting." Lucus stopped. "I understood your ship would require several days to repair. How do you plan to leave in a couple of hours?"

"Now who is on the fact finding mission?" McDuffie asked looking into his glass to avoid her gaze.

"Touche'." She smiled. "But your ship being here is big news. It has been the subject of gossip and speculation since you arrived. So can you give me the straight story?"

"Just an emergency landing. The nav comp. crashed." He tried to sound as nonchalant as possible. "While we're trading information, what is with this Drax'l priest?"

"Thoren. Being the Rati, he is at the highest level of their spiritual training." Lucus explained. "He scares the locals to death."

"So he's empathic. Big deal."

"All Drax'l's are empathic." Lucus said. "But Thoren... he can implant ideas in your mind."

"Telepathy?"

"Something." She shrugged. "Their religion is a mystery to me. But I do have to go. Matthew is not a patient man when it comes to money."

"That would be your partner, right?"

"Yes." She smiled. "We have a nice little business procuring and delivering freighters to companies expanding into this area. The Della Mir like to do business with people flying ships built by the Community."

"Interesting."

"And entirely legal." she pointed out. "Almost above board."

"I didn't suggest otherwise." He leaned on the bar on one elbow. "But don't shipping companies usually employ pilots? Why not just send one of their own to pick up a new ship?"

"Different control boards, I suppose. Now I am officially late." Maryann Lucus laughed lightly. "Too bad you're leaving so quickly, Jamey. It's been fun."

"Nice to meet you too." He smiled and she left the bar. He waited for Gonzoles to pick up her glass and join him. They leaned on the bar and spoke quietly. "Maryann Lucus. She's working with someone named Matthew to buy and deliver freighters. Evidently if you want to do business with the Della Mir, you fly their ships."

"That's it?" Gonzoles asked. "You two were awfully cosy."

"She also told me that the Congo is the talk of the station. But she was surprised we were leaving so quickly." McDuffie reported.

"What did you tell her?" Gonzoles asked.

"Nothing. I changed the subject and asked about Thoren." McDuffie continued. "She said that all Drax'l were empathic, but Thoren as a leader was also telepathic. He scares the locals."

"That's all?" Gonzoles asked. McDuffie nodded. "Good. I don't know about you, but I'm starving. I wonder what's edible on this station."

"Let's find out." McDuffie agreed.

By the time they returned to the ship, McDuffie had decided he would benefit from a couple hours sleep as had Dr. Levy. For a short while, Gonzoles was the only one awake aboard the Congo. After recording a report on her encounters at the Market Exchange, Gonzoles took the time to meditate to center herself. She wanted to be ready when Enterprise showed up. By the time the starship did arrive, the Congo's crew was up and ready. Gonzoles answered the hail.

"Ensign Gonzoles." Admiral Kirk said. "Do you require assistance, or can your ship rendezvous with Enterprise?"

"We have full thrusters, Admiral." Gonzoles reported. "It may take a few minutes, but we can come to you Sir."

"Good." Kirk smiled. "Bring her home, Ensign."

"Aye Sir." Gonzoles terminated the connection with Enterprise and immediately requested departure from the dockmaster. Only moments later, the Congo was on her way. They left the artificial light of the repair station for the blackness of space. The pinpoints of light that were the stars were small and far away compared to the illuminated presence of Enterprise. The crew breathed a collective sigh of relief at the sight of the huge starship.

They were met on the shuttle bay by Commander Scott. Since McDuffie had done the

diagnostic and prep work, he took a few minutes to discuss the necessary repairs. But before anything else could be done, the four officers had to report to sick bay. When Dr. McCoy was assured there was no radiation poisoning, he escorted them to Admiral Kirk and Mr. Spock in the conference room.

"Ensign Gonzoles." Admiral Kirk said after everyone was seated. "We have reviewed your reports and the flight record of this incident. You handled the situation well."

"Thank you Sir."

"There was no indication of a ship in the area prior to the proximity alert?" Kirk asked.

"No Sir." Gonzoles answered. "Our sensors were clear."

"Your heading at the time, Ensign, was not directly back to Starbase 68." Captain Spock observed.

"No Sir." Gonzoles said. "The space around the Kali Guari ship yards is often congested. I avoid it whenever possible and had adjusted course to give it a wide berth."

"Is that standard procedure for all the astrocartography teams operating out of the Starbase?" Spock asked.

"Yes Sir."

"How often do the runabouts go by the ship yards?" Kirk asked.

"Fairly regularly, Sir. But schedules vary." Gonzoles said. "However our last six missions have gone that way."

"In other words." McCoy said slowly. "If there was a cloaked ship, your presence should not have been a surprise to them."

"Yes Doctor." Gonzoles said. "I don't understand why a cloaked ship would allow us to get close enough to set off a proximity alert."

"That is the question." Kirk smiled and nodded. "Possibilities?"

Gonzoles thought for a minute. "Perhaps the ship was damaged. They could have been attempting to reach the ship yards for repair."

"Perhaps." Kirk nodded slowly.

"Sir." McDuffie spoke up hesitantly. Kirk looked at him questioningly. "They also build and sell vessels at the ship yards. Perhaps the pilot of the cloaked ship was simply inexperienced."

"What gives you that idea, Ensign McDuffie?" Kirk asked.

"I met a young woman whose business it was to procure and deliver ships to companies wishing to trade with the Della Mir." McDuffie said. "And it does take time to get used to new readouts and control panels, Sir."

"She told you the Della Mir were selling ships equipped with cloaking devices?" Kirk asked.

"Not exactly Sir." McDuffie said. "It was more how she said it."

"Just what did she say, Ensign?" McCoy asked.

"That her business was entirely legal and almost above board." McDuffie was starting to regret having said anything.

"This woman has a name, Ensign?" Kirk asked.

"Maryann Lucus." McDuffie reported. "She had a partner, but I only got his first name. Matthew."

"Humans?" McCoy asked.

"Yes Sir."

"Anything else, Ensign Gonzoles?" The Admiral asked.

"No Sir."

"We will be back at Starbase 68 within three hours." Kirk said. "Dismissed."

When they left the conference room, Dr. Levy and Dr. Young headed for the dining hall. Gonzoles and McDuffie decided to see what entertainment the rec rooms offered. They walked silently until they got into the turbo lift.

"Ok," Rosita smiled. Jamey had told her Kirk was a personal hero of his. "What did you think of the Admiral?"

"He wasn't what I expected." McDuffie said thoughtfully.

"What did you expect?"

"I don't know." McDuffie sighed. "But I didn't expect him to seem so normal and ordinary."

"Normal yes." Gonzoles agreed. "But Admiral Kirk is hardly ordinary. Computer, what is the location of Commander Sulu?"

"Commander Sulu is on the bridge." the computer responded. The turbo lift door opened onto deck ten.

"Who's that?" McDuffie asked.

"A friend." Gonzoles replied as they walked into the rec room. Only a few crew members were using the facilities. Not only was it one of the smaller rec rooms aboard Enterprise but the day shift was not quite over. It would become more crowded in a couple of hours. "How about a game of battle royal?"

"British rules." McDuffie said. He sat down at the game table and punched up the computer game.

"Are there any other kind?" Gonzoles smiled "Prepare to die."

"In your dreams."

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"Damn you, Jamey." Gonzoles laughed as he beat her again.

"Your king is dead, Gonzoles." Commander Sulu said from behind her. She turned in her chair to smile at him.

"I either have to get better at this game or give it up all together." Gonzoles laughed. "Commander Sulu, this is my copilot Ensign McDuffie."

"Nice to meet you, Ensign McDuffie." Sulu said. McDuffie stood and shook Sulu's offered hand. "That was good work bringing the Congo in to Kali Guari."

"Gonzoles brought us back, Sir." McDuffie said. "I only followed orders."

"Would you give us a few minutes, Ensign?" Sulu asked. McDuffie nodded and went over to the replicator. He had no place to go on this ship. He ordered an Altair water, found a seat on the couch, and closed his eyes. Sulu and Gonzoles walked over to the port to look at the stars. "I saw the flight record."

"And?"

"I knew you had a cool head. I knew you were a good pilot." Sulu said. "But your

command skills have improved remarkably."

"Thank you, Sir." she smiled. "Your opinion means a lot to me."

"It's not just my opinion." he returned her smile. "Admiral Kirk was also impressed. His report will certainly look good on your record. But what I want to know is what were the ship yards like?"

"It was different." She said "The Kalans seem eager to please, but I have a hard time trusting them."

"You've now had more experience with them as anyone in the fleet, maybe the Federation." Sulu said. "What makes you uneasy?"

"Except for the dockmaster, who wasn't too happy to see us, they smile all the time." She explained. Sulu raised his eyebrow questioningly. "Not a happy smile. It's more servile and submissive. But sneaky too."

"They are at the lower end of their society's hierarchy." Sulu said. "And people without power often use indirect means to get what they want."

"That's true." She said thoughtfully. After a moment she brightened and continued. "But, I met this really different character. He called himself Thoren, Rati of the Drax'l Brotherhood. Some kind of priest. Definitely empathetic, possibly telepathic."

"Go on." Sulu leaned against the bulk head.

"He was walking through the crowd and everyone just got out of his way." Gonzoles said. "Except for me and Jamey. He walks up to me, stares straight into my eyes, and proclaims that I am curious."

Sulu laughed. "Good guess."

"That's what I thought." she nodded. "But he gave me a very eerie feeling when he looked at me. A Lirta vendor said he looks into your soul. He would be one to be aware of if you go there."

"You think I'll be going there?" Sulu asked.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the Admiral didn't want to investigate the possibility of cloaking devices being sold from the ship yards." Gonzoles ship.

"No, that wouldn't surprise me either." Sulu said. But this wasn't the time to discuss possible upcoming missions. "So how's the new kid? McDuffie."

"He's ok." Gonzoles said. "He talks a lot. But he definitely knows his way around a runabout. And since he's been along, the missions have been more ... interesting."

"Oh?" he asked with just a hint of a grin.

"He just has a very different perspective on base personnel than I do." She said a bit defensively. "Nothing personal. But speaking of personal..."

"What?"

"Maybe I shouldn't ask." She said trying to read his expression. The line between professional and private lives could get fuzzy sometimes. They were both careful in this area. "But I just wanted to know for my own--"

"Amusement?"

"No." she blushed a bit. "I just haven't been able to make anything personal work lately. I was wondering how you managed that."

"I don't know that I can give you any practical advise, Rosita." Sulu said quietly. "Jimmi

stubbornly refuses to acknowledge that anything could go wrong between us."

"So, this habit of keeping Starfleet business from her doesn't mean anything?"

"Oh, that." Sulu laughed. "I just don't want to worry her. And I don't have to remember what I've told her and what I haven't if I just treat everything as classified."

"Interesting." Gonzoles didn't think it would work with L.J. But then she wasn't even sure she would ever see him again.

"I haven't had a chance for dinner yet. Are you hungry?" Sulu asked. She nodded.

"What about your copilot?"

"He's always hungry."

"Hey McDuffie, come on. Chow." Sulu called. McDuffie jumped up and joined them. As they were leaving the rec room, Sulu asked. "So, what else did she say?"

"Nothing." Gonzoles grinned. "...much."