

When Commander Sulu walked into the Enterprise transporter room, Chief Petty Officer Angela Landon manned the transporter control console. She had spent much of her career on Enterprise. Her short black hair and deep olive skin had been a welcome sight to Sulu many times when returning from away missions. "Good morning Chief."

"Good morning, Mr. Sulu." Chief Landon looked up from her controls and smiled. "Starbase 68 has signaled. When ever you are ready, Sir."

"Energize." Sulu ordered. Chief Landon nodded. Her fingers moved expertly over the controls. Ensign Gonzoles materialized on the pad carrying her duffle bag.

"Permission to come aboard, Sir."

"Permission granted." Sulu said. "Welcome aboard, Ensign."

"Thank you, Sir." She said coming off the pad.

"Come on. I'll show you to your quarters." Sulu led the way and Gonzoles followed.

"Why didn't you tell me about my new orders last night?" Ensign Gonzoles asked as they got in the turbo lift.

"Deck six." Sulu ordered the lift on its way before answering her question. "I did not know last night. The Admiral does things in his own way and his own time. I received a copy of your orders when I got in last night. Meeting new personnel is one of my responsibilities on Enterprise."

"So you don't know what the special assignment is?" She asked as they left the turbo lift and walked down the hall together.

"I don't have any details yet. Here we are." Sulu stopped at the door to the cabin and touched the chime pad lightly. "You'll be bunking with Ensign Merrick. He's just out of the Academy. Assigned to Engineering, I believe."

The door opened to reveal a lean young man with dark brown skin and very short black hair. They had caught him in the process of getting dressed. He was wearing only his uniform pants. Merrick quickly pulled his t-shirt over his head. "Sir?"

"Your new bunk mate, Mr. Merrick." Sulu said. "Ensign Gonzoles."

Mr. Merrick stepped back to let them enter. He extended his hand to Gonzoles and introduced himself. "Stephen."

"Rosita." She returned his warm smile and shook his hand. Taking a quick visual survey of the room for two, Rosita noted that Thomas had pretty much spread his things out all over. It would take a little while to carve out an area of her own. At least he could only sleep in one bed and the bottom bunk was not yet made up. "Top bunk?"

"Yeah." Merrick nodded. "I'll consolidate after my shift. I've got to get back to engineering. Only came home for a fresh uniform."

"You'll have to stow your things later, Gonzoles." Sulu resisted the urge to ask why Merrick needed a fresh uniform so early into first shift. "You have five minutes to report to Admiral Kirk in briefing room two."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles said. She tossed her duffle on the top bunk and followed Sulu back towards the turbo lift. "Briefing room two is on deck ...?"

"Seven." Sulu said. "I have to get to the bridge. I'll see you later."

Gonzoles found briefing room two. Outside the door she ran her palms over her hair to check that her it had not come out of the neat braid. She took a deep breath, straightened her

jacket, and stepped into the door's sensor range. Admiral Kirk sat by himself studying a computer screen. She hesitated. She had expected Mr. Spock or Dr. McCoy. They had always been present before at any briefings she had been to with the Admiral. "Ensign Gonzoles reporting as ordered, Sir."

"Sit down, Ensign." Kirk directed. She sat and waited for the Admiral to continue. "Do you know why I had you transferred, Gonzoles?"

"The orders read special assignment." Gonzoles said. "I would speculate it had to do with the Della Mir and the cloaking device, Sir."

"Yes." Kirk nodded. The Admiral's manner was relaxed, but his gaze was intense. Gonzoles found it hard to look away. "I want you to tell me everything you know about the Della Mir and the ship yards. Every detail. Every impression."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles said. "But I'm not sure where to start."

"Let's start with the ship yards." The Admiral said. "First the layout then the personnel."

For close to two hours they talked about her recent experience and the other times she encountered Della Mir ships over the last four years. Kirk asked probing questions that required Gonzoles to put every thought and feeling she had about the Della Mir Community into words. They discussed details she did not even realize she had noticed.

As they talked Kirk started to take her into his confidence about the mission. The plan was vague and inadequate to the task he proposed. It surprised Ensign Gonzoles how intently Admiral Kirk listened to her input. It was the first time in a long time that Gonzoles felt that what she was doing might actually make a difference.

"I don't know about you, Gonzoles." Kirk smiled. He reminded her a little bit of her father. Charming, easy going. But that was hardly the Admiral's reputation. "But I could use a break."

"Yes Sir."

"Go get settled in." Kirk said. "Consider yourself on call."

"Aye sir." She got up to go. At the door she turned back to Kirk. "Admiral, there is one other person you should consider talking to before this mission."

"Who is that?"

"C.J. Vasco." Gonzoles said. "She is on the base and her family has done some business with the Community. She might have some suggestions. I could introduce you, Sir."

"I know Ms. Vasco, Ensign." Kirk said. "But thank you for the suggestion. I will talk to her. Dismissed."

Gonzoles found her way back to her cabin. It was empty. After stowing her gear, Gonzoles decided to look the starship over. It wasn't significantly different from the base, but just being on Enterprise made her smile. She had to summons all her self control not to skip down the corridor.

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When Admiral Kirk returned to the bridge the command station was empty. The senior staff was on duty but the Enterprise was still in orbit around Starbase 68 and everyone was rather relaxed. Kirk walked around the upper circle of the bridge to Mr. Spock's station.

"What have you got, Spock?"

"Our understanding of the Della Mir Community has grown considerably in the last four years." Spock turned his chair away from the computer to face Kirk. "Starfleet and the Federation Diplomatic Corp have encountered sixteen separate species that are members of the Community. Each has a distinct place in the hierarchy of their society."

"Gonzoles was telling me about her meeting with a Drax'l. Some kind of priest." Kirk said. Kirk had found Gonzoles's information to be precise with the exception of her impressions of the Drax'l. She had obviously been confused and unsettled by the encounter. "Do you have anything on them?"

"The Brotherhood of the Rati." Spock nodded and folded his arms across his chest. "The only specie in the Community that we are aware of that have empathic capabilities. How far those capabilities go, remains unknown."

"What is their role in the power structure?" Kirk asked.

"Indirect." Spock said. "They do not hold positions in the government or the military. However our best reports suggest that nothing happens in the Community without the Rati's approval."

"The keepers of the faith." Dr. McCoy said.

Admiral Kirk turned around. He hadn't noticed the Enterprise's CMO coming onto the bridge. With a casual friendly smile, Kirk said, "Morning, Bones."

"Good morning." McCoy gave Kirk the slightest nod of his head. "Missed you at breakfast."

"I got an early start this morning." Kirk said. "I've just spent the last two hours talking to Ensign Gonzoles."

"I can think of worse ways to pass a morning." McCoy balanced himself gingerly on the railing that circled the upper bridge and folded his arms across his chest. "I assume she gave you what you want."

"She had some interesting input." Kirk nodded.

"Uh huh." McCoy nodded. "This means you are going forward with this, for lack of a better word, plan?"

Kirk laughed and walked away from McCoy and Spock. "Uhura, contact Cathy Vasco. I understand she is on the base. See if she can spare me a few minutes this afternoon."

"Aye Sir."

Kirk continued down to the command station. "Sulu, I want a detailed report on the defensive systems of the ship yards at Kali Guari. Everything you can find out."

"Aye Sir."

Chekov stifled a yawn as McCoy joined Kirk at the center seat. The doctor leaned over Chekov's shoulder and asked quietly. "Are we keeping you up, Mr. Chekov?"

"A late night, Doctor." Chekov smiled over his shoulder. "But I will survive."

"Spock." Kirk turned his chair back towards the science station. "Can an empath read a Vulcan?"

"The question is too general. Empathic abilities vary greatly." Spock said. "To my knowledge, a Drax'l and a Vulcan have never met."

"Why not?" McCoy asked. "There were certainly plenty to go around the last time we

talked to the diplomates in this area."

"There are still Vulcans assigned to the diplomatic offices here." Spock said. "But the Drax'l prefer to keep their distance."

"Find out everything you can about them, Spock." Kirk said. "There will be a staff meeting at end of shift."

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It was the middle of first shift's lunch break and the mess hall was crowded. Ensign Gonzoles picked up a lunch tray and looked around for a place to sit. Her new bunk mate, Ensign Stephen Merrick waved her over. He was sitting with two other human men, a Latin ensign and an Asian ensign. Merrick was the tallest of the three young officers.

"Rosita Gonzoles." Merrick introduced her as she took the only empty seat at their table. "This is Jun Yamato and Jose Cubano."

"Gentleman." Gonzoles nodded with a smile.

"Steve tells us you just transferred in from Starbase 68, Gonzoles." Yamato said.

"Special mission."

"You've been talking about me?" She asked Merrick.

He shrugged. "New kid on the block."

"Can you blame him for bragging?" Cubano laughed. "First he gets a room to himself. And when he does get a room mate, she looks like you."

Gonzoles looked Cubano in the eye and asked. "And I guess I'm suppose to be flattered by that?" Ensign Cubano stopped laughing, not sure what to say. He turned his attention to his lunch.

"So, what's the special mission?" Yamato jumped in to the silent void.

"I spent the morning briefing Admiral Kirk on the ship yards at Kali Guari." Gonzoles said. The Admiral had not ordered her to keep the details confidential, but Gonzoles wanted to be careful on her first starship mission. She decided to talk to Mr. Sulu before revealing anything more to anyone not involved in the mission. "But I don't know anything more about it yet."

"You briefed the Admiral?" Cubano looked back up at Gonzoles. The surprise was obvious on his face. "I haven't even seen him except for that lecture before that first night of extra duty."

"What did you do?" Gonzoles asked. Her amused smile did not bother him. It was better than the cold stare she had given him for his first comment.

"More what he didn't do." Merrick answered when Cubano did not.

"We both had a little trouble getting up and reporting for duty that first morning." Ensign Yamato explained. "I guess we stayed too late at the No Ranks Cafe."

"That's a new bar on Starbase 12." Cubano said. "Big celebration."

"I see." Gonzoles sipped her drink. "So all you got for that was a lecture. That's not bad."

"That and two weeks of extra duty." Yamato said. "I'm glad that's over."

"Yeah." Cubano shuddered at the memory. "We did every dirty detail Commander Sulu could think of."

"Really?" Gonzoles laughed.

"What's so funny?" Merrick asked.

"Nothing." Gonzoles smiled and lowered her eyes to her plate. To distract herself and the others, Gonzoles picked at her salad. She drank her iced tea.

Ensign Merrick studied her as she tried not to laugh again. His question was more insistent the second time. "What?"

Commander Sulu followed Commander Uhura through the crowded mess hall. Uhura headed for one of the few open tables. Sulu detoured by the ensign's table. He nodded to the three men. "Gentlemen."

"Sir." The three Enterprise ensigns answered.

Sulu smiled at Rosita. "How's it going, Gonzoles?"

She looked up and returned his smile. "I'm having fun, Mr. Sulu."

"Glad to hear it, Ensign Gonzoles." Sulu laughed. It was the first time he had seen her really enjoying herself in a long time. Before joining Uhura, he nodded and said. "See you later."

"Known Mr. Sulu long?" Yamato asked.

"About four years."

"I'm due back." Ensign Cubano laughed and got up from the table. "Welcome aboard, Gonzoles."

"Thanks Cubano." Gonzoles smiled.