

"Ensign Gonzoles. Report to transporter room three."

"On my way."

Ensign Gonzoles hurried to the transporter room. It was late afternoon and first shift was due to go off duty in less than an hour. Chief Landon was still stationed at the transporter controls. Admiral Kirk, Mr. Spock, and Dr. McCoy were standing between the control console and the transporter pads. Much to the ensign's consternation, they were waiting for her.

"Good of you to join us, Gonzoles." Kirk said as he walked up the two steps to the transporter pads. McCoy and Spock followed him. Gonzoles hurried after them. Kirk had not told her where they were going or why, but as an ensign that was not unusual. Kirk gave the order and they beamed over to Starbase 68.

She followed them to one of the Starbase's many meeting rooms. It was one of the smaller ones with a round table and five chairs. The colors were the theoretically calming colors of beige and slate blue. Diplomats colors, Gonzoles thought. The room was also equipped with a full computer interface at a counter on the far wall.

"Record the meeting, Ensign." Kirk ordered.

"Aye Sir." Gonzoles immediately went to the station, sat down, and made the necessary adjustments to the equipment. Before the senior officers had taken their seats, Cathy Vasco walked into the room. She was dressed casually in light brown slacks with matching vest and a soft rose colored blouse. Her ashen blond hair hung loosely around her shoulders.

"Good afternoon Doctor McCoy, Mr. Spock." Cathy stopped just inside the room and smiled at the Starfleet officers. "Admiral Kirk, it's been awhile. Hi Rosey."

"It's nice to see you again, Cathy." The Admiral gave her one of his most charming smiles. "Please have a seat."

Cathy took a seat as did the senior officers. Dr. McCoy smiled warmly at the young woman he had known since she was a girl. "I saw your mother yesterday, Cathy. We had a nice long talk."

"Yes. She told me she enjoyed your visit very much, Doctor." Cathy smiled and turned her attention from McCoy to Kirk. "But I don't think you called me in here just to chat."

"No. I did not." Kirk looked Cathy Vasco in the eye. "I want to know about your dealings with the Della Mir."

"They've been limited." Cathy answered readily. "I had three ships in the last three years in their ship yards for various reasons. We've delivered a couple of loads of spare parts they've ordered from suppliers we deal with. But I don't foresee a big market for Vasco Enterprise in the Community."

"Why not?" Kirk asked.

"I thought dealing with Starfleet entailed red tape." Cathy said. "But it is nothing compared to the Della Mir."

"Can you explain further, Ms. Vasco?" Spock asked.

"Sure." She said. "First you have to get permission to fly in their space. For that you have to talk to the Mirta. Then you need permission to trade in the community. For that you talk to the Yortem. If you want to do a retail business, see the Lirta. Wholesale, that's the Yortem again although it's a different ministry than the first ones you talked to. Shipping and repairs falls in the hands of the Kalans. And if you get past all that, but the Drax'l say you have no right to be

there, you pack up and go home."

"Why do they make it so difficult?" McCoy asked.

"I used to think they just wanted you to buy and not sell. Which is true." She said. "But it's deeper than that. They have a totally different mindset."

"That is only logical." Spock said. "Their society is based on different values."

"It sure is, Mr. Spock. And they don't particularly like someone coming in with different ideas." Cathy smiled at him. "They actually believe it is morally wrong for an individual to aspire beyond the station they were born to. Heaven help you if you innocently suggest to a Barchin that they might have a head for business."

"Their society is highly structured." Spock acknowledged. "But it is not an inefficient system."

"And if anybody thinks differently," Cathy said. "The Drax'l are there to keep them in line."

"Tell me more about these Drax'l." Kirk said.

"Well." Cathy said. "I think they all belong to the brotherhood, but they are not all priests. Some are also artist, writers, and philosophers. They aren't very friendly. What else did you want to know?"

"How about this empathic ability?" McCoy asked.

"They have something." Cathy nodded. "They do seem to be capable of reading you, but it's more than that."

"What do you mean, Cathy?" Kirk asked.

"My mother was negotiating with the Mirta a few months ago. Just normal business, flight paths etc. She talked to one of the Rati. That's the ruling body of the brotherhood. I think her name was Estre." Cathy said. "Anyway, Mom said when she spoke to this woman she felt like she was being probed."

"Probed." Gonzoles repeated softly nodding to herself.

"Ensign?" Spock turned towards the ensign who had been silent up until this point. Gonzoles thought the arch of his raised eyebrow accented the question.

"I couldn't explain the feeling I had when Thoren looked in my eyes, Mr. Spock." Gonzoles said. "But that describes it exactly. I felt like he was probing my thoughts. He was looking for something."

"What was he looking for?" McCoy asked.

"I don't know, Sir." Gonzoles said. "But a Lirta woman suggested he was looking for my soul. Although she wasn't sure humans had them."

"Religious fanatics." McCoy shook his head. He couldn't help but add. "Saints preserve us."

"Have you had any experience with telepathic beings before, Ensign Gonzoles?" Spock asked.

"No Sir." Gonzoles said. "Anybody that I've ever met that had that kind of ability said it was an intimate experience, not to be shared lightly."

"Indeed." Spock nodded. "Perhaps that is a cultural bias."

"Cathy." Kirk said. "Could you give me a name of someone to deal with on Kali Guari?"

"A name?" Cathy asked confused. "That depends. What type of dealing are you talking

about Admiral?"

"As I've explained, this is highly classified." Kirk proceeded slowly. "I need to contact someone at the ship yards about purchasing a ship built with very specific specifications."

Cathy sat back in her chair and thought about it. "I would say Sasal, but I doubt he will talk to Starfleet."

"But he would talk to you?" Kirk asked.

"Probably. Last year one of my freighters needed major repairs. Rim Sasal was the cultural liaison. Which just means he sells to people outside the Community" Cathy said. "He suggested I buy Della Mir ships if I wanted to trade in the Community. He also suggested that a ship built there would not have to conform to Federation standards. And that any registration or manifest could say what ever was necessary to trade in Federation space."

"Sounds like our man." Kirk grinned. "If he did not know I was Starfleet and I used your name, then would he talk to me?"

"Perhaps. With the proper introduction."

"Will you be on the base long, Cathy?" Kirk asked. "I may have more questions later."

"I'm not in a rush." Cathy shrugged. "Another day or two."

"Thank you for your cooperation." Kirk smiled. She could almost hear him saying dismissed. Murmuring a your welcome, she left the officers to finish their meeting without her.

"You are really going to go through with this hair brain idea." McCoy complained. "Aren't you?"

"You worry too much, Bones." Kirk stood. "We'll continue this discussion back on the ship."

Gonzoles followed the three senior officers silently from Starbase 68. McCoy was not silent. He raised one point after another against the Admiral's plan. She was sure the Admiral was going to angrily dismiss the Doctor, but he did not. Either Spock or Kirk patiently answered each objection. They walked into the briefing room to find Mr. Sulu waiting for them.

McCoy did not even stop to acknowledge Sulu. He continued. "And what about Gonzoles?"

"What about her?" Kirk asked as he took his customary seat at the table. Spock and McCoy followed suit. Gonzoles was unsure. She glanced at Sulu who nodded to the seat next to him. She quietly sat next to him.

"Uniform or no, I don't forget a beautiful woman." McCoy said. "Someone is going to recognize her."

Everyone looked at her. Rosita tried her best not to blush. Kirk's gaze was intense. The Admiral shrugged, "We could cut her hair."

"My hair?" Gonzoles asked softly. She couldn't help but reach for the black braid that now fell well below her shoulders.

"It's not a requirement, Ensign. Only a suggestion." Kirk smiled at her. "We'll find another disguise."

"My hair." She said to herself. She took a deep breath and looked Kirk in the eye. "I could do that Sir. I could cut it."

Kirk smiled at her when he said. "It's a minor detail, Ensign. Think it over."

"Well, how are you going to get out of the ship yards if something goes wrong?" McCoy

asked. "That, Admiral, is not a minor detail."

"Sulu?" Kirk said.

"The number of Mirta military personnel on the ship yards varies, but it is never less than a full regiment. And there is a large base on the planet that the ship yards orbits. A direct military assault would have to be large scale to be effective." Sulu said. "The station that houses the ship yards has full defensive shield capability, Sir. Because of the high traffic, the shields are generally down. But their shield technology is on par with our own."

"The shields will have to be deactivated." Spock said.

"A solution to that problem will be your responsibility, Spock." Kirk said. Spock merely nodded. "Are you prepared to proceed as we have discussed?"

"Yes Admiral." Spock said. "From all reports I believe the majority of the inhabitants at the repair station would simply ignore me. As for the Drax'l, my presence will distract them."

"What about the empathic abilities?" Kirk asked.

"The extent of the empathic abilities are still not known, Admiral." Spock said. "How ever we now have evidence of telepathic abilities also. I believe this works in our favor."

"Are you planning on playing Vulcan mind games with these priests?" McCoy asked.

"I would hardly call it playing, Doctor." Spock said. "However I will be able to give any Drax'l I meet appropriate answers to any probing questions. And that could buy us time."

"Good." Kirk said before McCoy could offer another opinion. "Sulu, get me a list of all ships traveling from here to Kali Guari, or even in that general direction. Our arrival at the ship yards should be low profile."

"Aye Sir." Sulu nodded. "The Enterprise will be close at hand, but out of sensor range."

"Good." Kirk said. "While you are at it, Sulu, establish a back up plan of rendezvous points and emergency codes."

"Aye Sir."

"So the plan now stands that Spock will go in first. His mission will be to deactivate the shields and try to get a look at the cloaking device. Disable or destroy it. Gonzoles and I will go in posing as buyers looking for a cloaking device. Try to find out how readily available it is and where it is coming from. Before any one is the wiser all three of us get out." Kirk summarized. "That's all for now. Dismissed."

"Want to get some dinner?" Sulu asked Gonzoles after they had left the briefing room.

"Sure."

"So how was your first shift on a starship, Ensign?" Sulu asked as they walked into the mess hall.

"Interesting." She smiled at him. "Intense at times. I didn't realize how exacting the Admiral could be. But there is one thing I don't understand."

"What's that?" Sulu asked after they had gotten their dinner and found a small table.

"How can the Admiral allow such insubordination from Dr. McCoy?" Gonzoles asked. "Several times today, I thought the doctor had stepped over the line. Captain Spock challenged him vigorously, but the Admiral just let it go."

Sulu waited patiently for her to finish. He put down his fork and looked Gonzoles directly

in the eye. "You have a unique opportunity here, Gonzoles. To have such intimate contact with the senior staff of this ship at this point in your career. Take advantage of it. You will not find a better command team in the fleet. Listen and evaluate everything you hear."

"That may be difficult." Gonzoles complained. "They don't always talk in complete sentences."

"Well, they've known each other a long time." Sulu laughed. He continued more seriously. "But watch. You'll see that Kirk listens to everything McCoy and Spock say until he makes a decision. Once the decision is made, McCoy follows orders. There is no insubordination."

"I will pay attention." Gonzoles nodded. Sulu resumed eating his dinner. Gonzoles watched Commander Uhura come into the dining hall. After getting her meal, she headed their way.

"Mind?" Uhura asked but did not wait for an answer before sitting down. "What a day. The endless chatter between base and ship. It just drives me crazy."

"Why's that?" Sulu asked.

"Everybody is talking but nobody is saying anything." Uhura sighed. She sampled her salad. "I am so glad to be off duty. I think I'll go to the officers club tonight. Want to join me?"

"Can't." Sulu shook his head. "I've got work to do."

"Gonzoles?" Uhura asked.

"She has to work too." Sulu answered. Gonzoles looked up from her dinner at Sulu. He ignored her surprised smile. "Chekov went. You could join him."

"I don't think Pavel would appreciate the intrusion." Uhura laughed lightly. "Scotty is off duty. Perhaps I can entice him into joining me."

"It doesn't take much to get him into a bar." Sulu agreed.

"Well! That doesn't say much for me." Uhura said with an indignant toss of her head. Sulu just laughed. Suddenly smiling again, Uhura leaned towards him to ask, "As far as Pavel is concerned, have you gotten anymore details?"

"No." Sulu pushed his empty plate away and cautiously sipped some of his still steaming coffee. "He is not talking."

Gonzoles had only been half listening to the conversation. Thoughts of the evening's work with Mr. Sulu filled her head. Rendezvous points. Emergency codes. Backup plans. She suddenly became aware that she had lost track and wasn't sure why they were laughing. "Not talking about what?"

"His date last night." Uhura explained. She shrugged when she added. "We've been giving him a bit of a hard time about it."

"Why?"

"Why not." Sulu smiled. Uhura put her fork down to playfully smack Sulu on the arm. He replied with exaggerated indignation. "Hey!"

"Mostly because he isn't telling us anything." Uhura said ignoring Sulu's protests. "And he has always told us before. You're friendly with Cathy, Gonzoles. Has she said anything?"

"I only met her on Starbase 12." Gonzoles said. "We've talked but she's never said anything about Mr. Chekov to me."

"Too bad." Sulu said.

"You could ask Jimmi." Uhura suggested.

"You ask her." Sulu said. "Sounds like girl talk to me."

"Maybe I will." Uhura shrugged. "There's Scotty. Excuse me."

After Uhura had left the table. Gonzoles smiled at Sulu. "Emergency codes and rendezvous points?"

Sulu nodded. "Admiral Kirk will want them first thing in the morning. This could take awhile."

"No problem, Sir." Gonzoles said quickly. "Where do we start?"

"Relax Rosita." Sulu laughed. "You've got the job."

"Yes Sir." She nodded and took a long deep breath.

"You will be the pilot on the mission." Sulu said. "You and I have to be on the same frequency. And we have to be prepared for any outcome. Start thinking about all the systems you've surveyed in the immediate area."

"I can think of several good rendezvous points right away." Gonzoles said.

"Good." Sulu nodded. "I have a few things to take care of. I'll meet you in one hour in briefing room six. We'll look at what can go wrong and decide what we can do about it."

"Yes Sir."