

"Ensign Gonzoles." Sulu caught up with her in the corridor not far from the dining hall. "How was your mission with Admiral Kirk and Captain Spock?"

"Mr. Sulu." Gonzoles spoke quietly. "Is there somewhere we can speak privately?"

"My quarters?" Sulu suggested. In the turbo lift, Sulu requested deck eleven and waited for whatever Gonzoles had to say. But she waited until they were totally alone. Sulu leaned against the edge of his desk and asked. "So, what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong." Gonzoles tried to explain. "I just need to put everything that's happened into perspective without watching every word that comes out of my mouth."

"All right." Sulu nodded. "Don't worry about censoring yourself. Tell me about the mission."

"Does Admiral Kirk ever answer a question?" Gonzoles started. "When ever I asked anything he answered with another question. No that's not right. One question I asked he actually answered. It was about the identity he was using. He told me about his dead brother. I didn't know what to say about that."

"That happened a long time ago. Don't worry about that." Sulu dismissed her concern. "What kind of questions did he ask?"

"What was my analysis of the situation?" She walked around the room, unable to stand still any longer. "What would I do if I was in command of the Enterprise? I felt like he was constantly testing me."

"He was." Sulu smiled. "And that's good."

"It was exhausting." Gonzoles complained. "I couldn't relax for a minute."

"Maybe. But it means he sees your potential." Sulu explained. "I've seen Admiral Kirk snap short answers to an officer he didn't think was worth the trouble."

"So you are saying I should welcome these opportunities to make a complete fool of myself." Gonzoles stopped pacing to look at Sulu. He couldn't help but smile at her characterization. He knew exactly how she felt.

"I thought you wanted to command." he said seriously.

"I do."

"Well, command school is just the beginning." Sulu said. "Command track is even more demanding. And the testing is constant. You better get used to it."

"I hadn't noticed I was on any kind of command track." Gonzoles sat in his desk chair. "I've been in a holding pattern for the last four years. Command school seems like a life time ago."

"Well look again." Sulu said. "Because this special assignment has put you on that track."

"I'm not sure about that." Gonzoles sighed. "I'm not sure that I was even that much help on this mission."

"Why?" Sulu sat on his bunk.

"I just followed orders." she shrugged. "Anyone could have done that."

"Don't underestimate your contribution." Sulu said. "Could any one have advised the Admiral on the layout of the ship yards and the intricacies of the Community?"

"I had some experience there." Gonzoles nodded. "So do I earn command track by being in the right place at the right time? Is that what it takes?"

"That doesn't hurt." Sulu admitted. "But take the credit due you. You've actually gotten a

lot of command experience under your belt. Much more than an ensign on a starship could expect. That is not going to be ignored."

"What do I do about it?" Gonzoles asked.

"Basically what you've been doing." Sulu advised. "Pay attention. Think things through. And welcome the tests. Ask for them when you can. Take the initiative."

"Sounds...." Gonzoles hesitated. "Time consuming."

"When you are in command you are never off duty." Sulu said. "That's another thing you have to get use to."

"But everybody needs to relax." Gonzoles said. "I mean this mission went a lot faster than we anticipated and I feel like I'm tied up in a knot. Like three days were compressed into three hours."

"I've been there." Sulu smiled. He briefly considered massaging her shoulders, but decided against it. "I'd suggest you see Richie in sick bay. He gives a great massage. It will make you feel like new again."

"That sounds good." Gonzoles sighed, stretching a bit. "Good for the body, but..."

"But?"

"How can you live up to this ideal, do everything right, always be on duty, and not have a mental break down?"

"Not everybody does. You need to maintain an outlet for frustrations." Sulu nodded. "A few close friends and physical exertion work for me. I'm sure you'll find what works for you."

"So what happens now?" She asked. "Do I go back to Starbase 68 now that the special assignment is over?"

"You wait for new orders." Sulu said. "But we are not on course for Starbase 68. When I left the bridge, Mr. Spock was setting course for Starbase 12."

"That's another thing about the mission." Gonzoles said quickly reverting back to their previous topic. "I've never heard of a Vulcan with a sense of humor before. Lt. P'rey certainly showed no sign of one. But there were several times I wasn't sure how to take what Mr. Spock said."

"He's a Vulcan." Sulu shrugged. "You take him at his word."

"Well that's been my experience with Vulcans before this." Gonzoles agreed. "But when Mr. Spock looks at me with his eyebrow raised... I don't know. I feel like there's a joke and I'm just not getting it."

"Like what?"

"When he bypassed the repair stations security system. I asked him how he did it and he gives me that look and says anyone with a little motivation could do it."

"He's an expert in that kind of computer work." Sulu said. "Of course it seems easy to him."

"I understand that." Gonzoles said quickly. "But later when security had tightened at the station and Spock suddenly couldn't bypass the systems he was frustrated. But Admiral Kirk was amused."

"And you were?" Sulu laughed.

"Confused." Gonzoles said. "I mean I thought they were friends."

"They are." Sulu nodded smiling.

"But..."

"You realize of course that Spock is half human." Sulu said as if that somehow explained it all.

"No, I didn't know that." Gonzales couldn't imagine what difference that really made in how the Admiral treated his second in command.

"I wouldn't bring it up to him if I was you. Come on. Let's get some dinner." Sulu stood up abruptly. As they walked down the hall together, he asked. "So tell me about the Bird of Prey. How did she handle?"

"Awful!" Gonzales said. "Of course the Klingons had gutted her. But she was sluggish and cumbersome. And every few minutes something else went wrong."

"I'd love to get my hands on one." Sulu grinned. "There's a lot we don't know about Klingon technology."

"Some of the controls were Della Mir. I had at least seen them before." Gonzales said as they walked into the dining hall together. "Mr. Spock had managed to rig a Klingon to Standard translation for the rest. But I prefer knowing what I'm doing without having to constantly check. And it's been a long time since I flew anything with variable wing configurations."

"Yeah." Sulu nodded. He pointed to an open table. She nodded and followed him. "I'd rather not fly a new ship cold, but you have to be flexible."

They settled in at their table with their dinner trays. Gonzales sat lost in thought for a few minutes before asking tentatively, "About these tests? What happens if I fail them?"

"You assess the situation and learn from the experience." Sulu said without hesitation.

"You make that sound easy." Gonzales smiled at him. "What would you know about failure?"

Sulu laughed out loud. "More than you obviously think."

"I find that hard to believe."

"Oh, you want examples?" Sulu was still laughing. Gonzales nodded. "Ok. Most of the errors I made early in my career I can put down to inexperience. I won't bore you with those. But later, when I should have known better, I had several major lapses in judgment. To the point where Admiral Kirk called me in and asked if I was deliberately trying to throw my career out the airlock."

"What did you do?"

"My personal life was distracting me." Sulu did not want to give her too much detail. "I straightened it out and got my mind back on business. Now I'm much better at handling that aspect of my life. Although it still cost me sometimes."

"Like pulling extra duty when the ship was at Starbase 12 in July?"

"You heard about that?" Sulu grinned sheepishly.

"Everybody heard about that." Gonzales laughed. "I saw the Admiral that morning. He expressed surprise at seeing someone ready for duty. It sounds like I missed a really good party."

"Too good." Sulu shook his head. "I don't ever want to stand my watch with a hangover like that again."

"Sounds like you need a plan for those long evenings in the Cafe."

"Yeah." Sulu smiled. He had already considered several options. "Either that or a girlfriend with a different profession."

"Are girlfriends that interchangeable?" Gonzoles smiled.

"So how did you manage to hook up with Lenny Vasco?" Sulu changed the subject abruptly.

"He asked me to dance." Gonzoles shrugged and concentrated on her dinner. "I enjoyed the time we spent together. L.J. is a nice guy."

"So I've been told."

"Are you passing judgment?" Gonzoles asked calmly eating her dinner.

"Sorry." Sulu smiled and shook his head. "Conditioned response."

"C.J. suggested you were jealous of her brother." Gonzoles said.

Sulu glanced over his shoulder at Cathy and Chekov having dinner together in the corner. "I wouldn't believe everything Cathy said."

After dinner Ensign Gonzoles excused herself, leaving Commander Sulu to pace about the corridors of Enterprise uncharacteristically nervous. He had made up his mind but that didn't make the task any easier. It was well into second shift when he finally took a deep breath and touched the signal pad on Dr. McCoy's cabin door. McCoy came to the door with a book in his hands..

"Sulu." McCoy raised his eyebrow in surprise. If Sulu needed to talk to him he usually came to his office in sickbay. "What can I do for you?"

"Could I talk to you, Doc?" Sulu asked. "Privately?"

"Of course. Come in." McCoy backed up and let Sulu into his cabin. "Sit down."

"Sorry." Sulu did not sit down. He was too nervous for that. "I didn't mean to interrupt. What are you reading?"

"Tennessee Williams." McCoy cradled the book with one hand, running his free hand along the binding. "An old friend. But that's not what you came for."

"No it isn't." Sulu slid his hands into his pants pocket then abruptly pulled them out. He straightened his uniform jacket. "Doc, I don't know how to say this."

"Just say it." McCoy said. He went over to his desk and sat down. The doctor gently laid the book on the desk closing it on a gold bookmark.

"Right." Sulu smiled self-consciously. He took a deep breath and said. "Well. I've been thinking... Um, when we get to the Café, I'm planning.... I mean, I want to....damn it. I'm going to ask Jimmi to marry me. I just wanted to clear it with you first."

"Sit down, Hikaru." McCoy said calmly. Sulu sat gingerly on the edge of the chair in front of McCoy's desk. It wasn't a totally unexpected development, but McCoy had not anticipated Sulu's timing. "You're asking my permission?"

"Yes Sir. I guess I am asking." Sulu said.

"What do you suppose Jimmi would say about this conversation?" McCoy asked.

"The term 'paternalistic macho attitude' comes to mind." Sulu smiled. He was

relaxing a bit. He had talked to the doctor about Jimmi many times before. And they both knew that Jimmi would not understand Hikaru's need to have this conversation. "And I can hear her history class lecture on marriage as bondage."

"I'm not sure if I want to hear that one." McCoy laughed.

"Are you planning on answering the question, Doc?"

This time it was McCoy who took the deep breath. "Hikaru, if you had suggested this when you two first started seeing each other, I would have said you were crazy. But now, how can I object? Jimmi has grown up quite a bit. And you have made her happy, as far as I can tell."

"Thanks Doc." Sulu said. He stood to go.

"I'm not done." McCoy said dryly. Sulu sat back down warily. "I'm sure I don't have to tell you that marriage brings more responsibility to the relationship."

"I believe I am aware of what's involved." Sulu said carefully.

"No, you're not." McCoy dismissed his statement. "Any one that was really aware of what's involved would never get married. It amazes me that anyone tries to do it at all any more."

"Are you trying to scare me, Doc?" Sulu asked.

"Maybe." McCoy smiled. "I certainly found my short lived marriage scary enough. But that is irrelevant. You have reason to believe she'll say yes?"

"She's brought it up before." Sulu said. The times they had spent together on Earth had been satisfying to both of them. Jimmi had made it clear she wanted more from him than vacation time.

"So why the sudden turn towards tradition?" McCoy asked. "It's not something either of you has been concerned with before."

"I don't know, Doc." Sulu shrugged. It wasn't something he could easily explain. But he wanted a family as well as command. "It's not any one thing. The time just seems right. And I can't imagine spending my life with anyone but your daughter."

"You're really set on this?" McCoy asked.

"I bought her a ring." Sulu smiled.

"You are serious." McCoy laughed. "Well...good luck."

"Thanks Doc." Sulu stood up, unsure what else to say. "Thanks." He added and retreated to the safety of the corridor.