

They were all still sitting at the table when Lt. Gonzoles was beamed out of the room. Ensign Briscoe and Mr. D'Amico, who had both been sitting next to her, couldn't help but startle when she disappeared. The lack of warning before transportation was beginning to take its toll on the away team's morale.

When Lt. Gonzoles materialized in the domed room, both Suran A'Gar and Genel were present. She met their gaze and waited. Suran A'Gar finally spoke. "Lt. Rosita Gonzoles, do you have a wife?"

"No." Gonzoles smiled. "If I were married, he would be called my husband. But I do not wish to be married at this point in my life."

"Then you mate with more than one man." Suran said.

"I have." Gonzoles nodded. "May I ask how a Jush.ra chooses her mate?"

"At the mating time the Jush.ra males display their strength in various contests." Suran explained. "Then the females at the height of their fertility mate with the most desirable males."

"Then your mating is for reproduction only?" Gonzoles asked.

"What other reason is there to mate?"

"Humans mate for many reasons." Gonzoles smiled as she explained. "Reproduction, comfort, emotional support, love, intimacy, just because it feels good."

"She speaks of la-hoo." Genel said. She added with a snarl of contempt. "They la-hoo with their males."

"I'm sorry." Gonzoles said. "That did not translate. What is la-hoo?"

Suran stared at Gonzoles for a time. Finally she said. "La-hoo is the physical expression of love between females. The adult females of the family come together to offer comfort and love to each other with gentle touch."

"Then I guess we do la-hoo with our males." Gonzoles nodded. "But not in groups. In pairs. Two of us would not mate while others are there to watch. It is private. And who you mate with is very complicated."

"Explain."

"It is not just physical attraction." Gonzoles tried to explain. "You have to like the guy. I mean, there has to be an emotional bond."

"Which of the available males would you choose?" Suran asked.

"I would not choose any of them." Gonzoles smiled.

"You do not like them?" Suran asked.

"Sure I like them." Gonzoles shrugged. "They are my ship mates."

"They are not desirable?"

"I never said that." Gonzoles laughed. "Each has his points."

"What point is most important to human females?"

"That depends on the female." Gonzoles explained. "I, myself, like my men tall. Other human females prefer different physical characteristics. Some think a man's sense of humor or intelligence is more important."

"Tall." Suran nodded. "Like the one called Dr. Patrick. Have you mated with Dr. Patrick?"

"No." Gonzoles shrugged. Suran and Genel both lifted their heads and closed their eyes. Gonzoles dematerialized.

Lt. Gonzoles and Dr. Patrick materialize in a small cell containing only a single bunk. To their horror they found themselves totally naked. Gonzoles immediately covered her breasts with her arms and sat on the bed, pulling her knees up modestly. Dr. Patrick turned his back to

her.

"Oh god!" Gonzoles moaned. "What do we do now?"

"You are the command officer here, Rose." Pat said. "What do you suggest?"

"Um." Gonzoles looked around for a blanket, pillow, or anything to cover herself. But there was nothing. "We have to send a real strong message to the Jush.ra that nothing is going to happen."

"Believe me." Pat looked down at the floor. "Nothing is happening here!"

"Humor. Great!" Gonzoles sighed.

"I'm not kidding." Dr. Patrick said. He took a deep breath and tried to concentrate on the problem at hand. "Ok. Ok. A strong message. You are right. How do we do that?"

"We both sit on the bed." Gonzoles said.

"What?!"

"Back to back, Pat." Gonzoles explained. Dr. Patrick backed up to the bed and sat down next to Gonzoles. They quickly turned their backs to each other. "This is awful! They have no compassion! How can they do this?"

"I feel more and more for those white mice every minute." Pat shivered.

"Don't they understand how embarrassing this is?" Gonzoles hugged her knees.

Dr. Patrick took a couple more deep breaths. "Rosita." He said. "This is more than embarrassing. This is abusive."

"This is all my fault." Gonzoles cried. "I told Suran that we couldn't make love in that crowded room."

"It is not your fault." Patrick leaned his back against hers to offer support. "We have no power in this situation. The only one to blame is Suran A'Gar herself. She has no right to treat us this way."

"Damn her!" Gonzoles could feel the tears welling up in her eyes. "I never in my life thought I would be in a position like this."

"Don't cry." Pat leaned his head back on her shoulder. He stared at the ceiling. "I'm barely holding it together. If you cry, I will too. Come on Rosey. Let's talk about something else."

"Like what?" Gonzoles asked. She took a couple of quick deep breaths to regain some of her composure. "I honestly can't think of anything else right now."

"I know. Ok, let's think." Pat said. He closed his eyes and searched his mind for a topic. When he opened his eyes, he said. "I got it. There is something I always wanted to ask you, but I did not want to get too personal."

"We can't get much more personal than this." Gonzoles laughed trying not to sound too desperate. "Go ahead. Ask."

"Why won't you date men on Excelsior?"

"Personal reasons. Why?" Gonzoles leaned her head back on his shoulder. Her long black braid was trapped between their shoulder blades.

"Just curious." Pat shrugged, "It seemed that once you decide on a rule for yourself, you stick to it. I just wondered where this particular rule came from."

"It's just too messy." Gonzoles said. "If I am going to captain my own ship one day, I have to do everything right. I am not going to chance that for some short term love affair."

"What about long term?"

"I've never met anyone that made me think long term." Gonzoles admitted. "And since the day that Mr. Sulu kissed me, I've lived by that rule."

"Sulu kissed you?!" Pat sat up straight almost knocking Gonzoles over. He started to turn around, but remembered his lack of clothes and returned to the agreed position.

"Damn." Gonzoles said. "Did I say that out loud?"

"Hey, I am a doctor." Pat leaned against her again. "Consider it doctor patient privilege and give me all the details."

"He was a commander. I was an ensign." Gonzoles said. "We had both had a couple of beers. It was one kiss and it was a mistake. We decided our relationship should be all business and that's all the details."

"Now this is interesting." Patrick said. "How did that lead to your rule about not dating men on your ship?"

"Think about it Pat." Gonzoles explained. She had almost forgotten that she was naked. Concentrating on the conversation was helping. "Had I had an affair with Mr. Sulu, it would have been short term. I didn't know it at the time, but he was already involved with Jimmi. It would have ended badly and he would not have wanted me on his ship. Certainly not as a command officer. And I would not have had the benefit of his experience. And as far as my career is concerned, his experience has proven invaluable."

"Fascinating." Pat laughed. "You really are very calculating. Aren't you?"

"I am a command officer." Gonzoles said. Then she yelled at the ceiling. "And if I could just have my uniform back, I would feel like a command officer."

"We are talking about other things." Pat said. "Remember?"

"Right." Gonzoles nodded. "Right. Ok, then it's my turn. What is it between you and Jenna Lee? I mean you two always look like you have a secret."

"Look who is talking about secrets." Patrick laughed.

"Fair is fair, Doctor."

"All right." Pat said. "She and I had a short fling. She was at the Academy. I was in my first year of medical school. We met on a break in Paris. Spent every minute together for one week. Then never saw each other again until we were both assigned to Excelsior."

"So why the big secret?" Gonzoles asked.

"It's that command officer thing again." Pat said. "She wanted to keep it quiet. But it was one hell of a week. And don't you dare tell her I told you. Got it?"

"Got it." Gonzoles nodded. She shivered. "Is it cold in here?"

"A little." Pat nodded. They sat in silence for a few minutes. The Jush.ra must have become bored. Patrick and Gonzoles were transported back to the eating area. Both were relieved to find themselves in full uniform.

"Thank god that is over!" Gonzoles cried.

"What happened?" Sulu asked.

Gonzoles stared at Sulu for a minute. She tried to think of how to explain. Finally she said. "I don't want to talk about it." She turned and walked stiffly into the other room.

They all watched her go, staring in disbelief. Sulu turned back to Dr. Patrick. "Well Pat?"

"I don't particularly want to talk about it either." Pat shrugged. "At least not with a big crowd."

"I see." Sulu nodded. "Come on then."

Dr. Patrick followed Captain Sulu into the sleeping quarters. The rest of the away team remained in the eating area. Lt. Gonzoles sat on the furthest bunk with her back to them. Sulu sat down on a bunk on the other side of the room and motioned Patrick to sit down too.

"We were beamed into a cell with just a bed." Patrick spoke quietly looking down at his hands. "We beamed in without our uniforms."

"What?"

"Naked." Pat explained. "Nude. Birthday suit."

"How did you handle it?"

"We sat on the bed with our backs to each other and distracted ourselves with meaningless conversation." Pat said. "I did not enjoy it. But it was really hard on Gonzoles."

"All right, Pat." Sulu nodded. "Thanks."

The lights dimmed in the sleeping area. Pat stood up. "Must be feeding time."

"I'll be there in a minute." Sulu said and waited until Patrick had left the room. Captain Sulu slowly walked over to Lt. Gonzoles. "Mind if I sit down, Rosita?"

"Please." Gonzoles wiped a tear from her eye. Sulu sat down. "I'm sorry, Captain. My behavior was uncalled for."

"I don't think so." Sulu said. "Pat told me what happened. Your immediate reaction is understandable. The very idea is unthinkable. But I need to know, Lieutenant, are you still with me? Can you handle your duties?"

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles wiped her eyes again. The lights dimmed more. They were sitting in almost complete darkness.

"Good. Because I need you, Lieutenant." Sulu said. "These Jush.ra women don't think much of men. I need your experience and instincts in dealing with them. I'd rather not have to rely on Briscoe."

"Captain." Gonzoles sat up straight and tried to look at him in the dim light. "Briscoe is a good officer."

"I agree." Sulu nodded. "But she's only two years out of the Academy. If we are to get out of here, I need every ounce of experience on this team. I've always been able to count on you."

"I understand, Sir." Gonzoles nodded in the dark. "I'm all right now."

"Good." Sulu stood up. "Let's get something to eat and see if Chekov has anything for us."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles stood also. "I'm just going to wash up first."

When Gonzoles walked into the eating area, the food trays appeared on the counter. She took the first tray and sat next to Captain Sulu. It was the only empty seat at the table. The rest of them got their food and returned to their chairs except for Commander Chekov. He walked down to the far end of the table and leaned between Mr. Silverman and Mr. D'Amico.

"Gentlemen." Chekov whispered. "I need you to have a very loud conversation so that I can have a private word with the Captain. Understand?"

"Yes Sir." Silverman whispered. He waited until Chekov was at the other end of the table before yelling. "I don't care what you say, Tony. He won that race and you owe me twenty five credits."

"You are crazy, Dave." D'Amico yelled back. "You can't win a race without a jockey. When the jockey fell off he was disqualified. You owe me twenty five credits and three straight night shifts."

Chekov crouched between Sulu's and Gonzoles's chairs. Dr. Patrick leaned across the table to hear. Chekov said. "It is not a replicator."

"What do you mean?" Sulu whispered.

"It is a transporter." Chekov explained. "They have been transporting the meals in. And

they have been using it to transport us. I noticed a power surge when they took Gonzoles, then again when they took Pat."

"Can you control it?" Sulu asked.

"I can activate it." Chekov said. "But I don't know where to send us. There is still the sensor shield, so I can't find the ship to send us there. We need to find the control room or power source, so we can knock out that shield."

"Good work, Pavel." Sulu nodded. He raised his voice. "Belay that argument. The bet has been declared null and void. We need to work together here."

"Aye Sir." Silverman and D'Amico said simultaneously.

"Lt. Gonzoles." The Captain said. "You were taken a short time before Dr. Patrick. Did you speak with Suran A'Gar?"

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles nodded. "She questioned me about marriage and mating. I learned that Jush.ra women only mate with the men for purposes of reproduction. All other physical expressions of intimacy, love, support, comfort are exclusively between the women. They call it la-hoo. I hope I am saying that right. And from the sound of it la-hoo is expressed with all the adult females of the family."

"Sounds interesting." Huynh said to D'Amico.

"I doubt they'd let you watch, Nguyen." Briscoe's voice was edged with irritation. Huynh just smiled and shrugged.

"That's it?" Sulu asked.

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles nodded. "After that I was beamed into the cell with Pat."

"All right." Sulu said. "The time has come. All cooperation stops right now. We will do nothing. Including being shepherded back and forth between these two rooms. If the lights go out, we will sit in the dark. Finish up. Because this is the last meal."

"If they take us for testing?" Briscoe asked.

"Short of dying, do not cooperate." Sulu said. "The last test was unconscionable and we will not put up with this treatment any longer. If they question you as to why, tell them they can talk to me."

Sulu got up and left the eating area. He sat on his bunk and waited. One by one the away team finished their meals and silently joined Captain Sulu. No one said anything.