

When Captain Sulu was returned to the away team's two room quarters, he found himself sitting on his own bunk. All but two of the men of the team gathered around to hear what had happened. Sulu looked from face to face.

"Where are Silverman and D'Amico?"

"They were taken about fifteen minutes ago." Chekov reported.

"Together?"

"Yes Sir." Chekov nodded. "Did you see Gonzoles or Briscoe?"

"Gonzoles." Sulu nodded. "There has been a change in their experiment. Gonzoles had lobbied for a courtship period."

"So, while we've been sitting here worrying about you, you've been on a date." Patrick winked.

"Yes and no." Sulu said. "While we were allowed to have our clothes, they expect us to move along towards intimacy fairly quickly."

"Nice." Mr. Huynh shook his head.

"It's very quiet in here without Silverman and D'Amico." Sulu said pointedly to Huynh and Patrick.

"That's because they are always arguing." Huynh said loudly as he walked towards the other side of the room.

"You are just jealous, Huynh." Patrick also raised the volume. "Haven't you ever been close to someone?"

"Not with another man!"

"Pavel." Sulu whispered. "Excelsior is attempting to break through the sensor shield."

"Then they have found a way to read it at the very least." Chekov grinned. "What else did Gonzoles find out?"

"She is trying to get into their defense center." Sulu said. "Obviously Excelsior hasn't made it through, but she said Suran is worried."

"A good sign." Chekov nodded. "Damn. I hate to sit here doing nothing!"

"I know." Sulu nodded. "Tell them they can stop." Sulu got up and walked into the darkness of the eating area to be alone.

"Pat." Chekov said. Dr. Patrick and Mr. Huynh immediately ended their loud conversation and turned toward Chekov. "Enough on the definition of friendship."

"They took him again?" Pat asked.

"No." Chekov nodded towards the hallway.

"Oh." Pat nodded.

"Dave." Tony D'Amico whispered. But his friend appeared to be unconscious. He tested the force field that surrounded Dave Silverman. The electric shock made him jerk his hand back. They were in a cell together. Silverman hung upside down in the center of the cell. His hands dangled a few inches from the floor. "Davey. Wake up."

"Tony?" Silverman said slowly. He opened his eyes and looked around. "What's going on?"

"Got me." Tony sat down on the floor. "Are you ok?"

"I guess." Dave tried to look at his feet. "What's holding me? Something's got me by the ankles."

"Nothing that I can see." Tony said. "Probably another force field of some kind."

"So, what's the test?" Dave asked. "To see how long it takes all the blood in my body to pool in my head?"

"Don't know." Tony smiled. He hoped it was an encouraging smile. "If that's all it is, why do they want me here to watch?"

"Damn." Dave closed his eyes.

"Davey!" Tony shouted getting up on his knees. Silverman did not respond. "Are you ok? Is something hurting you?"

Silverman opened his eyes. He was gasping for air. "It's hard to breath like this. I got to get down."

"Relax Dave." D'Amico ordered. He got up and started walking around the outer perimeter of the force field. "Concentrate on breathing normally."

"Right." Silverman closed his eyes for a minute and took deep breaths. When he opened his eyes, he asked. "Tony, where'd you go?"

"I'm here, Dave." Tony said from behind him. "I'm looking for a way to get to you. You just concentrate on breathing. I don't need you blacking out on me."

"Right."

D'Amico touched the force field again. It shimmered that familiar blue. But it had changed since the last time he had tested it. It was no longer solid. It now was solid at the bottom and solid about five feet from the floor. But in between there were holes in it. When it shimmered it looked like a very large bird cage.

"Dave." D'Amico walked around so Silverman could see him. "I think I can get through the force field. There are gaps."

"So that's the test." Silverman said. "To see if you can get through the field?"

"Maybe to see if I want to." Dave grinned and tested the field again trying to measure the gaps. "So what will you give me if I do?"

"I'll tell you how to tell when Briscoe is bluffing at poker." Dave said.

"She plays with her hair." Tony laughed. "I told you that."

"I told you." Silverman closed his eyes again.

"Stay with me, Dave." Tony said. He measured the gap one last time, then carefully climbed through. He yelled when the force field shocked his chest. He banged his knee into the field also. Falling against Dave when he finally was through.

"Graceful." Dave tried to smile.

"Like to see you do it better." Tony said. He started examining Silverman's ankles. He found the force field. This one did not shock. But there was no way to get Silverman out of it. "It's a force field all right. Give me your hand."

Silverman reached up to him. D'Amico grabbed his arm and pulled him up until his back was horizontal with the floor. He supported Silverman's back and head. "Thanks." Dave sighed as the blood drained from his head. "Now what?"

"I don't know." Tony said. "Maybe we can get you out of your boots."

"Dont think so." Silverman shook his head. "It's pretty tight. You took a hell of a shock. Are you ok?"

"Oh sure." Tony said. "Just second degree burns on my chest and knee. No problem. How are you doing?"

"Better." Silverman said. Moments later they materialized on a bunk in the away team's quarters.

When Rosita Gonzoles materialized back in the domed room, it was just as she had left it except the Maggie Briscoe was gone. Suran A'Gar reclined on one of the couches with a glass in her hand. Suran patted the cushion on the couch and said. "Come. Sit."

Rosita walked over to the couch and sat on the edge of the cushion by Suran's feet. "Where is Maggie?"

"With the family." Suran said. "I will take you there. But I wish to speak to you privately first. What is this touching with the lips?"

"Kissing." Rosita said.

"Your courtship with Captain Hikaru Sulu was most interesting." Suran said. "You told him you were sad and he acted protective. He put his arms around you as if to keep you safe. Is this normal human courtship?"

"No." Rosita shook her head. "Nothing about this is normal. But we are trying to cooperate with what you want."

"I understand, Rosita." Suran placed her hand on Rosita's arm. "Are all human females so emotionally involved in mating?"

"It is what we are most emotional about!"

"Rosita, calm yourself." Suran ordered. "You have done well. You will mate with him the next time you are together."

Rosita hung her head. Without looking up she asked. "May I ask one favor?"

"Ask."

"Please, let us disrobe ourselves." Rosita said. "Undressing can be part of mating. And being suddenly naked is very distressing."

"Very well. I will allow that." Suran reached out and stroked Rosita's hair. "Now. I have a treat for you. Stand."

Rosita stood up. Suran also stood. She closed her eyes. When they materialized, Rosita found herself in a smaller domed room. In the center was a round table. Three Jush.ra women leaned over it looking down. Rosita could see a blue light being emitted from the table top. the three fur covered women turned as one to look at Rosita. One with bluish grey fur came forward and took Rosita's wrist in her hand. She pushed up the long sleeve of the brown robe and examined Rosita's smooth skin.

"It is as you said Suran." The grey one said. "Most interesting."

"Yes, Tisda." Suran nodded. She stroked Rosita's hair again. "This is Rosita. She is the stronger of the females. The humans are most emotional and mate with their males for emotional comfort."

"No!" The shortest woman said. Her fur was a yellowish white. "And they react badly to isolation?"

"Yes Ardeja." Suran said. "Even the males crave each other's company. One of the males endured considerable pain to offer comfort to another male."

"May I see?" Rosita asked nodding towards the table.

"Quiet, Rosita." Suran said. "I believe the other female is younger. She looks to this one for approval."

"What about the males?" Tisda asked. "You will not exile them, will you? Yet you can not bring them to the family."

"I will not put the children in danger." Suran said. "However the humans claim the males and females raise their children together."

"Ridiculous." the third woman said. She was tall and had a light orange fur similar to Suran's. "You have only two choices, Suran. You must keep them as they are or terminate them."

"There is plenty of time to decide." Suran shrugged. "The human males are not as aggressive as expected. Not only did they not mate when they were all together, they still did not mate when I put one male and one female together."

"Perhaps there is a ritual involved." Ardeja suggested.

"Yes. Rosita calls it courtship and we have adjusted the experiment." Suran nodded. She turned to the tallest of the women. "Rosita is very interested in technology. Perhaps you could show her your work, Peretroh."

The tall orange Jush.ra woman studied Rosita for a moment. She turned to Suran. "You say they are technologically inclined?"

"They are very interested." Suran said. "It's ok, Rosita. You may look."

Rosita nodded briefly to Suran then walked up to the table. There were several readouts. Many were simply colors. Rosita had no reference to decipher them. But in the center of the table was a raised section that had three different graphs.

"Are you using cold fusion or a retro-oxygenation process?" Rosita asked Peretroh.

"Controlled cold fusion." Peretroh studied the human female and answered carefully. "Techrer infused with grade six essra."

"Those elements don't translate." Rosita studied the graphs. "You are getting an awful lot of power for cold fusion. How did you solve the influx problem?"

"Successive underground filters to slow down and control the reaction." Peretroh said.

Rosita looked up at Peretroh. "That takes a lot of space. Miles."

"We have space." Peretroh shrugged. "How do you know this?"

"I'm no engineer." Rosita said. "But I know a power grid when I see one. And that's a lot of power. It's for the shield. Isn't it?"

"Suran." Peretroh turned away from Rosita. "When you are finished with your experiment, I'd like to probe her."

"Probe?" Rosita looked to Suran.

"Don't worry, Rosita." Suran reached her hand out to Rosita. Without thinking, Rosita took the hand and let Suran pull her back to her side. "I won't allow it."

"Don't be greedy, Suran." Tisda said. "You won't have any use for her when your experiment is done."

"You are becoming attached." Ardeja said to Suran.

"Rosita, I need to speak to my sisters privately. Go over there and stand against the wall." Suran said. Rosita nodded and stood against the wall on the other side of the table. Suran turned to the three Jush.ra women. She spoke quietly but quickly. "Do you see?"

"What?" Asked Tisda.

"They can be trained." Suran said. Rosita discreetly looked around. On her side of the table were several more readouts. One graphically showed the sensor shield's status. "It wasn't

easy, but I've trained her."

"The younger one?" Ardeja asked.

"Also trained. Once Rosita gave in, Maggie fell in line." Suran said. Two of Starfleet's communicators laid on the table along with a standard tricorder and the medical tricorder. "I plan to try to train on of the males next."

"You can't be serious." Tisda laughed. "A trained male? What would you do with him? For that matter what would you do with her?"

"Don't you see what a find this is?" Suran smiled.

"Be careful, Sister." Peretroh warned. Rosita checked to see if the Jush.ra women were watching her. "How can you be sure of her?"

"When you threatened her with the probe, she looked to me." Suran said. Rosita slipped one of the communicators into the sleeve of her robe. "She has become totally dependent on me for her existence. I will present my proposal to the science council. They will decide what should happen to our humans."

"Agreed." Peretroh nodded.

"Rosita." Suran raised her voice and looked over to Rosita standing against the wall. She reached out to the human. "Come. It is late."

Rosita went to her. Her robe had no pockets. She clutched the communicator in her hand with the sleeve pulled down as long as possible. Suran closed her eyes. When they materialized, Suran and Rosita were in a large well lit room. Arches along the far wall led onto a patio and to other rooms. Children of all ages ran to them, some of the younger ones were boys. They were dressed in soft light weight shifts of various lengths and styles.

"Mother. Mother. You missed the evening meal." They all were talking at once.

"Yes, I know." She hugged or touched each one. "Some of you should already be asleep. Maj, bring food. Rosita and I are very hungry."

Three of the oldest girls hurried off to bring the meal. Suran sent the youngest of the children off to bed. When the three adolescent girls returned with food, Maggie Briscoe came with them. She was now wearing one of the light weight shifts. It had short sleeves and came down just below her knees. Like all the children she was bare foot and her hair was again braided.

The three girls each carried a tray with food. Maggie carried a pitcher. Suran led Rosita to a couch with a wide low table. The girls put their trays down and sat on the floor across the table from the couch. Maggie filled the two glasses with the light green liquid from the pitcher. She then put the pitcher on the table and sat with the girls.

Suran handed a plate to Rosita and started filling her own with the sliced meat, vegetables, and fruit. "Rosita, these are my oldest daughters. Maj, Raj, and Haj."

"Those aren't our real names." Haj laughed. "But that is what everyone calls us."

"Nicknames." Rosita smiled and nodded as she ate. "My real name is Rosa. But everyone has called me Rosita since I was very young."

"Mother." Raj said. "Did you see? You can do things with Maggie's hair. After we bathed, we braided it. She says there are many more ways to style it."

"And it never stops growing." Maj added emphatically. "She has to cut it to keep it from getting too long. I think it's very pretty. I don't think we should let her cut it."

"Mother, can Maggie sleep with us tonight?" Haj asked.

"Can she, please?" Raj echoed.

"Of course she can." Suran nodded.

"That is a mistake, Sister." Genel said from behind the couch. "The humans should be secured while we sleep."

"Not Maggie!" Maj cried. She got up on her knees and put her arms around Maggie's shoulders. "We love her, Terra Genel. She wouldn't hurt us."

"Maj you do not know these humans." Genel said. "They can be dangerous."

"You worry too much, Genel." Suran said. "Has Maggie done anything since we brought her home to make you think the children are in danger?"

"She has not been alone with them." Genel said. "Anything could happen."

"Maggie." Suran smiled at her. "What do you think I should do?"

"I would never harm any children, Terra Suran." Maggie said. Maj was still hugging her. Raj reached out to hold her hand. "But if you don't trust me, return me to a cell. It is your choice, not mine."

"Please Mother!" The three girls cried together.

"Yes. She may spend the night with you." Suran smiled at her daughters. They cheered. "But first! Take Rosita to bathe and get ready for bed. Then bring her back to me."

"Yes Mother." Raj got up and grabbed Rosita's hand. Rosita left her half eaten dinner and let the three girls and Maggie take her away. They went through an arch and down a hallway. The three girls talking rapidly to each other.

"How are you, Maggie?" Rosita asked.

"I'm fine. But let me warn you. There isn't much in the way of privacy around here." Maggie said as they walked down the hall. The bathroom was almost as large as the room they had first met Suran A'Gar. Most of the space was taken up by a large deep tub. It was already full of steaming water.

"Maggie, help Rosita with her robe." Maj ordered as she leaned down to test the water temperature. Maggie stepped behind Rosita to undo the back.

"Um, wait." Rosita said. "I don't need this much help. I am perfectly capable of taking a bath by myself."

"Why do you want to be alone?" Haj asked.

"For one I'd like to relieve myself." Rosita said. The three girls looked at each other then back to Rosita. "Please. May I just have a minute alone?"

Maj, Haj, and Raj put their heads together and whispered to each other. They went to the door. After the other two left, Maj turned and said. "Maggie will stay. And she will tell us when you are ready to bathe. Just a moment, understand?"

"Yes Maj." Maggie smiled. After the door closed. Maggie turned her back to Rosita to give her as much privacy as possible. "They just don't understand the concept of privacy."

After Rosita had relieved herself, Maggie started towards the door. Rosita stopped her and whispered. "Wait. Are you still with me, Briscoe?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do you want to be their pet?" Rosita whispered. "Or do you still consider yourself a starfleet officer?"

"I am cooperating." Maggie said. "Weren't those your orders, Sir?"

"Good." Rosita grabbed her hand and put the communicator in it. "Hold onto this while

I'm in the tub. Get it back to me discreetly afterwards."

"Yes Sir." Maggie nodded and opened the door. The three girls came back in. Maggie started undoing the back of Rosita's robe. Haj took a large bath sheet out of a closet and put it on the bench. Raj helped take Rosita's robe off. The girls oohed and aahed over her. She stepped into the tub. Walking down the wide steps until the water came up to her shoulders. Rosita dipped her head under water letting the steaming water filter through her black hair.

"Oh, that feels good." She smiled when she came up for air.

"Look how her hair shines when it's wet." Haj smiled at her sisters. She handed Rosita some soap.

"Can I ask a question?" Rosita asked.

"That was a question." Maj said. Rosita just nodded. "Go ahead, ask."

"Are your people telepathic?" Rosita asked.

"Telepathic?" Maj asked. "That is only in stories. No one can really read minds."

"Then how does your mother transport around from room to room just by closing her eyes?" Rosita asked nonchalantly soaping a wash cloth Raj had handed her.

"It is because mother is a member of the council." Maj explained. "The control is in her ear. She uses her ear muscles to activate it. Closing her eyes just helps her concentrate on the correct movements."

"Oh." Rosita said. "That explains it. I thought she had some power that I didn't understand. You don't have one of those ear controls?"

"Of course not." Maj laughed.

"What if you needed your mother?" Maggie asked. "If it was an emergency."

"There are hand held controls." Raj said. "But you have to be of age to use them. There is always someone here if we have a problem."

"That's good." Rosita said. "I better get out of here before I turn into a prune."

"What?" The three girls asked in one voice.

"It's just an expression." Maggie laughed and picked up the bath sheet. "She means her skin will wrinkle if she stays in the water too long."

"Really?" Raj asked. "We will have to tell Mother."

"Does it last forever?" Maj asked.

"No." Rosita stepped out of the tub and wrapped herself in the bath sheet that Maggie held up for her. "It goes back to normal after a few minutes."

"Sit, Rosita." Maj ordered. "We will comb your hair."

Rosita sat on the bench and let the girls dry, comb, and braid her hair. They were very excited about the way it felt and looked. They redid it three times so that each got a turn. After awhile a brown furred little girl about half Maj's size came in.

"Mother wants to know what's taking so long." She demanded.

"Go to bed Fritzy." Raj said. "We will take Rosita to Mother as soon as she has some night clothes on."

"Mother says now." Fritzy wrinkled her nose at them. Haj took a shift out of the closet and held it up for Fritzy to see. The little girl just tossed her head and left the room. The shift she held up was sleeveless.

"Do you have one with long sleeves?" Rosita asked. "My arms get cold at night."

"Maggie was not so particular." Haj grumbled but looked for a different shift. She pulled

out one that three quarter length sleeves. "This will have to do."

"Thank you." Rosita smiled and slipped it over her head.

"Come." Maj said. "Mother is waiting."

While they walked down the hall, Maggie slipped the communicator back to Rosita. She slipped it up her sleeve between her upper arm and body to free her hands. When they rejoined Suran A'Gar, she was also dressed for bed. Her shift was floor length.

"I'm sorry we took so long, Mother." Raj said putting her arm around her mother's waist. Suran rested her arm on her daughter's shoulder. "We were braiding Rosita's hair. Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes, it is. Now, you girls go to bed."

"With Maggie." Haj reminded her.

"With Maggie." Suran nodded. She hugged each daughter affectionately rubbing her cheek against theirs. "Good night girls."

"Good night, Mother." The three said together.

"Good night, Terra Suran." Maggie added and followed the three adolescent girls.

After they were gone, Suran smiled at Rosita. "No questions, Rosita?"

"What did Maggie call you?" Rosita asked.

"Terra." Suran said. "It is a title of respect for an adult female who is not a child's mother."

Rosita wanted to ask if they were considered children or animals. Instead she sighed and said. "I am tired, Terra Suran. May I sleep?"

"You may." Suran put her arm around Rosita's shoulders and started walking her towards an archway. "You may sleep with me."

Rosita let herself be led through the archway and into a bedroom. She just hoped that Suran did not feel the communicator that she held tightly against her body with her arm. The bed was a large mattress mounted in a boxed frame on the floor. It could have easily slept five adults. Against one wall was a slanted table that appeared to be a writing desk that would be comfortable to use while standing. Against another wall was a mirrored vanity with cushioned chair. Several flat brushes were on the vanity table. Next to the vanity were two more arches. One led to another room, the other led to a patio.

"In bed." Suran ordered. Rosita sat on the edge of the bed. Suran sat down at the vanity. She selected one of the brushes and started brushing her fur. "There is no need for concern, Rosita. Get under the blankets. Go to sleep."

Rosita got under the blanket. While adjusting the blankets, she slipped the communicator out of her sleeve and stowed it between the mattress and its box frame. She pulled the blanket up around her neck and watched Suran continue to brush her fur.

Genel came strolling in from the patio. She was also dressed in a floor length shift. "It is a beautiful evening. We should take the children... What is she doing here?"

"I have explained that I need to keep Rosita with me." Suran said calmly brushing the back of her head. In the mirror she saw Rosita watching her. Suran spoke harshly to her. "I told you to go to sleep. I do not like to repeat myself."

"Sorry Terra." Rosita mumbled. She quickly closed her eyes and curled up on her side.

"So you bring her to our bed?" Genel demanded. "I won't have it."

Suran stood up and walked over to her. She stroked the fur on the side of Genel's face

lovingly. "Genel. Don't let her both you."

"Suran." Genel's voice softened. "You want her to depend on you. So put her in isolation. A night alone will make her very happy to see you in the morning."

"In return for her cooperation, I promised that she and Maggie would live with the family." Suran reminded Genel. She touched the side of Genel's face with her hand and ever so slowly rubbed her cheek against Genel's cheek. "Genel, my Hellah, indulge me in this."

"I have been indulging you too much lately, Hellah." Genel said softly. "I wish these humans had never come here. You are too involved with them."

"The humans coming is the most significant scientific event of our life time." Suran said. "We can't even begin to realize where this discovery will lead right now. There is so much to learn."

"They could destroy our society." Genel said. "I wish we had destroyed them as we did the others."

"I wish the others had survived." Suran smiled. "Think of all the things we could have learned, but now we never will."

"I am content. With my family and with my work." Genel said. "I do not need to learn from these humans. And I do not need one in my bed."

"Shh, Hellah." Suran cooed softly. "She is already asleep. Come to bed. We will talk more in the morning."

"I can not deny you, my Hellah."

Rosita lay on her side with her back to them and pretended to be asleep. She draped her arm limply over the side of the bed where the communicator was hidden. Eventually she slept.

She woke up to a furry little finger being poked into her ear. When she opened her eyes suddenly, the Jush.ra child jumped and scurried away to the other side of the bed. Rosita sat up. Suran was up and dressed. At least six young children were in the bed wrestling. Other children were scattered about the room. Talking to each other and to their mother.

"Time to get up, Rosita." Suran picked up one of the younger ones from the floor. "We have much to do today."

"May I wash up first, Terra?" Rosita sat on the side of the bed and nonchalantly felt for the communicator.

"Fritzy, show Rosita." Suran started undressing the child in her arms. Rosita followed Fritzy to another bathroom like the one she had bathed in the night before. As they went through the arch, Suran called. "Give her the blue robe, Fritz."

"Yes Mother." Fritzy called back. In the bathroom, Fritzy was openly curious and did not give Rosita a moment's privacy.

"Fritzy." Rosita sighed and tried not to mind the child's presence. "Were all those children your brothers and sisters?"

"Some were my mother's children." Fritzy answered. "Some were Terra Genel's."

"What happens to the boys?" Rosita asked. "When do they go live with the men?"

"When they start to turn into men of course." Fritzy handed Rosita the blue robe and helped fasten it in the back when Rosita had it on. Rosita barely managed to keep the communicator hidden from the girl. "Hurry up. I'm hungry."

"Coming." Rosita followed her back to the bedroom. All the children had gone. Fritzy declared that they had better save her some breakfast and ran out of the room.

"Rosita. Come." Suran led her through several hallways to a large room. Six couches sat in a large circle. There was a narrow low table in front of each couch leaving the center of the room open. On each table was a pitcher and two glasses. Two Jush.ra women sat on each of the five couches. Peretroh was among them. Genel sat alone on the last couch. Suran joined her. Suran looked to Rosita. "Sit."

The only place left to sit was the floor. Rosita settled herself next to Suran's feet. everyone seemed to be waiting. In a few minutes, Maggie was brought in by two women that Rosita did not recognize. Happy to see a familiar face, she hurried to Suran's side and was directed to sit next to Rosita.

"We are all present." A woman with grey streaked black fur said from across the room. "This council is held at your request, Suran. Proceed."

"Thank you, Mother Invic." Suran nodded to the woman. "I have asked for this opportunity to address you together because I have received many questions from you individually. First let me introduce you to the human females. Stand. This is Rosita and Maggie."

When they stood, the group of Jush.ra women started talking excitedly to their partners sitting on the couches next to them. A woman with beige fur dotted with dark spots said. "I have heard that you intend to train the humans. How is this possible?"

"I do not want to go into technique at this point. Frankly, I stumbled on some of it." Suran said. "Maggie, pour me a drink."

Maggie picked up the pitcher and poured one glass of the pale green liquid. She put the pitcher down and handed the glass to Suran. A woman with blue black fur spoke up. "That's a nice trick, Suran. But we have no need for servants. We have always served each other. There is no need to change that."

"True." Suran nodded. "But as Peretroh can testify, they have an interesting technology that we can make use of. And then there are the males."

"What about them?"

"I would like to train them also." Suran said. She closed her eyes and Captain Sulu and Commander Chekov materialized in the middle of the room creating quite a stir among the Jush.ra women.

"Quick! Put up a protection field." Peretroh stood up and demanded.

"It is not necessary." Genel said. "Suran and I have spoken to the human males many times without any fields."

"What is going on, Suran A'Gar?" Sulu asked.

Suran stood up and walked slowly towards the two men. The Jush.ra watched her fearlessness with amazement. "This is Captain Hikaru Sulu. He is the leader of these humans. He will mate with Rosita. Welcome to our science council."

"Terra Suran." Rosita walked over to her and whispered. "May I?"

Suran turned to her with surprise. "What is it, Rosita? What do you want?"

Rosita lowered her eyes and whisper hesitantly. "May I go to Captain Sulu?"

"Is this part of your courtship ritual?" Suran asked.

"Yes Terra."

"Then go to him." Suran nodded. Rosita smiled and hurried over to Sulu. To his surprise she slipped one arm around his waist and hugged him tightly. Playing along, he put his

arm around her shoulders.

"Reach into my sleeve." Rosita whispered in his ear. "It's mate is in the defense center."

He smiled when he felt the communicator. He covered it with his hand and kissed her on the temple. "Good work, Lieutenant."

While they had whispered to each other, Suran had continued. "This is Commander Pavel Chekov. He will mate with Maggie. From her bio scan we know that Maggie is now fertile and will carry children easily. And this male has told us that he has already fathered children."

"A child." Chekov corrected her. Since they were all looking at Chekov, Sulu carefully slipped the communicator into his pants pocket.

"Only one?" Peretroh asked.

"One baby per pregnancy is normal for humans." Chekov explained. "Multiple births do happen but they are a small percentage."

"No wonder the females become fertile so often." Genel said. "She must spend her entire adult life in the reproduction process."

"A human family generally has one to four children." Chekov said.

"You only have one." The black furred woman noted.

"I have only been married a short time." Chekov said.

"Come Maggie. You must begin your courtship with Commander Pavel Chekov." Suran said. Maggie came forward as she was told, but stopped at Suran. She was blushing at the open discussion of the possibility of becoming pregnant with Mr. Chekov's child. "What is this color change in your cheeks?"

Maggie's cheeks darkened to a deeper pink. Her skin felt as if it was on fire. Rosita spoke up. "It is called blushing. A reaction to having very private things discussed in this crowd."

Suran took Maggie's hand and placed it in Chekov's. Suran looked around at the Jush.ra council. "I am told hand holding is the beginning of the courtship ritual."

Chekov leaned forward and whispered. "Don't worry Ensign. There will be no baby. My wife would kill me."

Maggie smiled and looked away, still blushing. Peretroh asked. "What is this whispering between mating pairs? Does it have a purpose?"

"I have observed it in the courtship ritual." Suran said. "But I don't know the purpose yet. Rosita?"

"Umm." Rosita looked to Sulu.

"The purpose is merely to draw the couple together." Sulu said. "It establishes an emotional bond and makes intimate physical contact seem more normal."

"I am amazed, Suran." Mother Invic stood up. The rest of the council fell silent. "We have males here in the council chamber without protection fields. They answer our questions without threats or boasts. I believe you should be allowed to continue your experiment. I understand your daughters have become very attached to the younger female."

"Yes Mother." Suran nodded. "They have. I planned to let them keep her."

"I see." Mother Invic said. "My only question is how will the human babies be raised? Did not the humans say the males also raise children?"

"If the males can be trained as the females have been," Suran said. "I thought the males could live with the family. Or perhaps adjacent to the family."

"No!" the rest of the council cried together.

"How can you suggest such a thing?" Peretroh demanded.

"Let me see if I can train them first." Suran said. "In my tests I have proven that the males even have compassion for the other males. While quartered together they have not attacked each other or behaved as we expect males to behave in any way."

Sulu lowered his head to whisper in Rosita's ear. "Have you seen any controls for the transporters?"

She lifted her lips to his ear. "I have established that there is a hand held device, but I have not seen one yet."

"Keep looking." Sulu whispered. "Chekov will try to access the transporter from the quarters. Be alert."

"Aye."

The council adjourned while Sulu and Gonzoles had been whispering. All the Jush.ra women started filing out. Many passed close to the humans. A couple even reached out to touch one of them. Chekov turned to a woman who reached out to touch his smooth hand. When he smiled at her, she startled and hurried away.

Suran and Genel waited until they were alone with the humans. Maggie left Chekov's side and walked slowly over to Suran. Looking down, she pleaded. "Please Terra. I do not wish to mate with any males."

"Maggie." Suran placed a hand on each of Maggie's cheeks and lifted her face. "I understand. I never wish to mate with males either. But it is necessary to have children. And you are fertile now. You will do as you are told."

"Yes Terra." Maggie said barely above a whisper.

"Now. Maggie and Rosita, you have not yet eaten this morning. But before you go, take your mate's jacket with you." Suran said. The four humans stared at her without moving as if they did not understand her language. She turned to Sulu and Chekov. "Remove your uniform jackets."

Sulu undid his jacket, took it off slowly, and handed it to Rosita. "Take good care of it for me." She nodded. Chekov followed suit, handing his jacket to Maggie. They stood waiting in their black t-shirts and black pants without any indication of rank or affiliation.

"Go. Eat." Suran said and closed her eyes. Rosita and Maggie dematerialized. Suran turned to the two men. "We must be clear. You are to stay here with us. You are no longer in any military. Your titles mean nothing here. I understand your names are Hikaru and Pavel. Am I saying them correctly?"

"You are, Suran." Sulu said.

"From this time forward you will address me as Terra Suran. And any adult Jush.ra as Terra." Suran said. "It is a term of respect. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Terra." Sulu said.

"And you Pavel." Suran turned to Chekov. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Terra Suran."

"I do not have appropriate male clothing right now." Suran explained. "It will be made and then you will give up the rest of your uniform. If you cooperate and prove to me that you can be trusted, I will devise better quarters for you. Your level of freedom of movement depends entirely on you."

"Any tricks will be severely dealt with." Genel added.

"Yes Terra Genel." Sulu nodded to her.

"Mother, how did it go?" Maj asked from behind her mother's council seat. Haj and Raj were directly behind her.

"You girls should not be here." Genel said.

"Those are the males." Haj said to her sisters excitedly. "Which one is to be Maggie's mate, Mother?"

"It went well. You can come closer." Suran smiled at her daughters. The girls inched closer, but remained behind their mother. "You are safe. This one is to be Maggie's mate. His name is Pavel. The other is Hikaru. He is for Rosita."

The three girls put their heads together. They made a muffled snorting noise that sounded a lot like giggling to Chekov and Sulu. Genel put herself between the girls and the two humans. "Careful." She warned. "They can be tricky."

"Nonsense. You have no evidence, Genel." Suran said. "Pavel, Hikaru. These are my oldest daughters. Maj, Haj, and Raj."

"Good morning, Terra Maj. Terra Haj. Terra Raj." Chekov smiled at each girl as he said her name.

The girls laughed at him. Raj said. "We are not yet adults."

"But soon." Chekov winked at them. "Yes?"

"Yes." Raj nodded, smiling. "Very soon."

"Rosita and Maggie have returned to our rooms for a meal." Suran told her girls. "Please go stay with them until I call for them."

"Yes Mother." The girls said. As they went on their way they spoke excitedly in quick phrases, finishing each others thoughts.

Suran studied Chekov for a minute unsure what to think of the exchange. Finally she said. "My daughters are not used to talking to males."

"I did not mean to offend, Terra." Pavel said.

"Hmmm." Suran sighed. "Perhaps it is something I will have to get used to. Now you will return to your quarters. The rest of the males will discard their jackets. We will resume our experiment later today. Do you understand?"

"Yes Terra." Both Sulu and Chekov answered. She closed her eyes and sent them back.