

In the dining hall she indulged herself with a large piece of cheese cake with Rigel's richest deepest chocolate sauce. She was slowly savoring each bit when Mr. Huynh walked up to her.

"May I join you, Lieutenant?"

"Sit down, Nguyen." Gonzoles smiled. She looked at his tray. "What delicacy from home did you choose for your first meal?"

"Split pea soup." Huynh smiled. "Of course it is not nearly as good as my mother's home made. But it will do."

"I have cousins who live high in the Andes." Gonzoles smiled warmly at the memory. "My aunt made the most wonderful cream of potato soup. Nothing was better when you came in from the snow."

"That's kind of what it feels like now." Huynh smiled. "Coming out of a hostile environment, into a friendly one."

"Coming home." Gonzoles nodded and sighed. She sipped her coffee and asked. "So, Nguyen, what did you think of our hosts?"

"Hosts." Nguyen chuckled at her choice of words. He then turned more serious. "I guess I saw the least of them of any of us. But I felt the sting of their force fields and the cold of their dark cells. I wouldn't count them among my friends."

"I know what you mean." Gonzoles nodded. "But in the end I felt, well, sorry for them."

"Sorry?" Huynh shook his head. "Why?"

"I think they were afraid of us." Gonzoles said. Huynh shook his head some more and drank his drink. "I mean a fear of the unknown. We weren't only unknown, we were unthinkable to them."

"Maybe that's the difference between command officers and security officers." Huynh said. "I don't really care why they did what they did. I only care that they did it."

"Guilty or not guilty." Gonzoles said and finished her cheese cake. "No mitigating circumstances."

"That's right, Lieutenant." Huynh nodded.

"How do you live with that?" Gonzoles asked.

"You're on the bridge." Huynh said. "You know what's going on. Down in the security office we don't get many explanations. We stand guard over anyone the Captain's thrown in the brig. We watch for danger on away missions. And we follow orders. And that's about it."

"Are you complaining, Mr Huynh?" Gonzoles asked half joking.

"Nah." Huynh smiled at her. "It suits me. I don't want to have to decide those mitigating circumstances of yours."

"Hmmm." She shrugged. "I've got a report to make. I'll see you later."

"Later Lieutenant."

Back in her quarters Gonzoles sat in front of her computer terminal for close to an hour before she could start putting her experiences into words. Slowly she reported on everything that happened while held by the Jush.ra. When she was finished, she was exhausted. Even though it was early, Gonzoles went to bed.

Captain Sulu showered, put on a fresh uniform, and reported to the bridge. Second shift was on duty. Sulu smiled. He couldn't possibly explain how good it felt to walk onto his bridge

with his crew competently doing their job. Chekov and Patrick were waiting for him.

"Status, Mr. Chekov?"

"We are still in orbit around Hayash Four." Chekov reported while Captain Sulu made himself comfortable in the command chair. "All systems on line and available. A few minutes ago, we received a transmission from the planet requesting a word with the Captain."

"From Suran A'Gar?" Sulu asked.

"No." Chekov said. "From First Mother, Invic A'Gar."

"Are they all named A'Gar?" Sulu asked. "Or is she Suran's actual mother?"

"I don't know." Chekov grinned and shrugged. "I told them to wait."

"Good." Sulu said.

"Maybe she wants to apologize." Pat suggested.

"That would be a start." Sulu nodded.

"I was joking." Pat said. "You aren't going to talk to her. Are you?"

"There are a lot of unanswered questions." Sulu said.

"Questions?" Pat asked.

"Yes." Chekov nodded. "Like how do the men on the planet live? Were the troops we encountered aware of the women's testing?"

"Or were they being tested themselves?" Sulu asked. "Were they simply transported into our path without any warning? Or were they in some way working for the women?"

"Are there any other groups being held and tested?" Chekov asked. "And what did they hope to gain?"

"And I'm sure if we thought about it, we could come up with more." Sulu said. "Ensign DuBois, establish a communications link with Invic A'Gar."

"Aye Sir." The young man nodded. "Coming on screen now, Captain."

"Invic A'Gar." Sulu turned toward the main screen. "You wanted a word with me?"

"Captain Sulu." Invic nodded solemnly to him. Her black fur was streaked with light grey on her cheeks and the top of her head. She moved and spoke slowly. "I wish to offer my sincerest apology on the treatment of yourself and your crew. My daughters over stepped their authorization."

"Yet you authorized continuation of Suran's experiments in you science council." Sulu said.

"I was misled on key points of the experiment and the subjects involved." Invic said. "Since you have left our planet, I have been in touch with the first mothers of other families in this continent. They are dismayed that the sensor cap no longer protects us from the probes of alien ships."

"Are you unable to repair the sensor cap?" Sulu asked.

"We can repair the cap." Invic said. "However we can not repair the breach in security. I can not put the seilap back under the teilee. We were content to remain in isolation. That is no longer possible."

Sulu studied the older Jush.ra woman for a moment. "And what is it you want from me, Invic A'Gar?"

"First, your assurance of non aggression." Invic said.

"Let me assure you," Sulu's voice took on a hard edge. "If I was going to hurt you, I would have hurt you already. There would be no need to ask about my intentions."

Invic sat back in her chair, her eyes wide. She nodded slowly. "I understand. My second request is that you keep knowledge of our family a secret."

"I will report the incident in its entirety to my superiors." Sulu sat back in his chair and forced himself to relax. "I will include your request."

"And what will your Federation superiors do?" Invic asked.

"I don't know." Sulu said. "I guess you'll just have to wait and see. Mr. DuBois, I'm done."

"Aye Captain." DuBois cut off the link.

"Commander Lee." Sulu said. "Get us out of here. Put us on course for Gamma Hydra Four."

"Aye Sir." Lee said.

"Course calculated and laid in." Lt. Barrett added in his deep calm voice.

"Warp two." Sulu said.

"Warp two. Aye." Lee nodded.

Three days had passed since the away team had returned from the Jush.ra family's compound on Hayash Four. When the first shift was over, Captain Sulu retired to his ready room as usual. Lt. Gonzoles followed him. "Excuse me, Captain. Could I have a minute?"

"Of course, Gonzoles." Sulu smiled. He was already at his desk with intraship messages on his desk top view screen. "Sit down. What's on your mind?"

"I wanted to let you know now." Gonzoles sat down. "That when we reach the next appropriate star base, I will be resigning my commission. With your permission, I will continue my duties until we reach base. Lt. Barrett is capable of taking over as head of navigation."

His smile disappeared. "Why?"

"Barrett is as aware of personnel and protocol..."

"Knock it off." Sulu said. "Why resign?"

"Captain." Gonzoles couldn't look at him. "I can't reconcile my experience on the planet with continuing in Starfleet."

"Rosita, you made it possible for the rescue of the entire away team." Sulu said. "You experienced horrendous treatment and maintained the highest level of professionalism."

"No Sir." Gonzoles shook her head vehemently. "I did not."

"I don't understand."

"Captain." Gonzoles took a deep breath. "After they put me in the cell naked with Dr. Patrick, I hated them. I was willing to do anything to escape. And I was prepared for torture and ridicule and pain. But I was not ready for kindness, Sir."

"Kindness?" Sulu asked.

"Suran A'Gar," She looked up into thin air as if the right words would appear above her head. "She... I... I gave into her. Had I been unable to give you the communicator, I would be sitting at Terra Suran's feet and thanking her for letting me."

"If it wasn't for you, I'd be sitting alone in the dark and cold." Sulu said. "We were powerless in that situation. You took what came and still did your job. There was nothing else you could do."

"But you never gave into them Sir." Gonzoles said. "I did."

"How do you know I never gave in?" Sulu asked. "Everyone has their moments,

Gonzoles. You know that. You've studied psychological torture."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles looked down at her hands.

"Lieutenant." Sulu's manner returned to business. "Have you viewed Ensign Briscoe's report on the incident?"

"No Sir." Gonzoles finally looked at him. "She does not report to me. There was no reason for me to view it"

"View it." Sulu ordered. "I want your recommendations in two hours."

"Recommendation, Sir?"

"Regarding what if any actions should be taken concerning Ensign Briscoe." Sulu turned back to his view screen. "Dismissed."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles nodded and left the ready room.

Once she was gone, Sulu opened the comline to the bridge communication station. "Mr. DuBois, it's about that time."

"I already have the connection, Captain." DuBois answered. "Coming through now."

Sulu smiled at his screen. "Hello Jeanie. How are things at home?"

"Same as always." Jimmi smiled. "But the kids aren't here right now. Commander Tseng invited all the little kids on the base to Charlie's birthday party."

"Is she nuts?"

"I think so." Jimmi laughed. "I'll make sure they send you a letter with all the details when they get home."

"Good." Sulu smiled.

Jimmi scrutinized his image. Something did not seem right but she couldn't put her finger on it. "Rough day?"

"Personnel problems." He shrugged.

"Really?"

"A couple of perfectionist who worry if they even think the wrong thing on an away mission." Sulu explained.

"Who are we talking about, Harry?" Jimmi asked leaning forward with interest.

"I hardly think that is appropriate." Sulu smiled.

"I'd tell you." Jimmi said.

"Somehow I don't think spilling a bowl of soup in a customer's lap compares to an good officer considering leaving the service." Sulu said.

"I guess." Jimmi shrugged. "So did these two unnamed officers really screw up a mission?"

"No." Sulu said.

"I get the feeling that's all you are going to tell me." Jimmi smiled at him. Hikaru just shrugged. "Well then, I have something to tell you. Your sisters are planning a big party for your mother's birthday next month. They thought it would be a wonderful surprise for her if you showed up."

"Ummm." Sulu hesitated. "What did you tell them?"

"That I'd try to talk you into it." Jimmi said. "You haven't stepped foot on the planet since Pavel's wedding. And I know you have leave time saved up."

"I'll try." Sulu sighed. "When is this party?"

"It's on your mother's birthday, Hikaru." Jimmi said. "I assume you know the date."

"Guilt." Sulu laughed. "You are going to resort to guilt?"

"Is it working?" Jimmi laughed.

"All right. All right." Sulu said. "I'll work something out. And our time is pretty much up for today."

"You are just worried I'm going to talk you into something else." Jimmi smiled.

"That's right." He laughed. "I'll talk to you next week."

"Ok Harry." She smiled. "Until then, be careful."

"Always Jeanie." He returned her smile. "I love you."

"I love you too. Bye."

Gonzoles was surprised by Ensign Briscoe's report. She had included very detail of the time spent with the Jush.ra family. She had included her own doubts, fears, and fascination with the family. After viewing the report three times, Gonzoles called Briscoe and asked her to report to Gonzoles's office.

"Come in, Ensign." Gonzoles returned to her chair at her desk. "Sit down."

"Thank you Lieutenant." Briscoe sat in the only other chair in the room. "What did you want to see me about?"

"Captain Sulu has asked me to view your report." Gonzoles said.

"And?"

"Are you crazy?" Gonzoles asked.

"Sir?"

"You admitted to the Captain that you felt sympathetic to his captors. That you understood their actions." Gonzoles said. "You have to remember that he's human too. He did not need to hear that."

"Sir, you ordered a detailed report." Briscoe said. "That's what I gave. After all weren't you concerned about my sympathies?"

"I was." Gonzoles said. "But you report what you did, what you saw, what you heard. It doesn't matter what you felt as long as you did your job. And you did."

"Permission to speak freely, Lieutenant."

"Granted."

"I just can't win with you. Can I?" Briscoe said. "If I had left one thing out you would have called me on the carpet for that. You've been watching me since I signed on. What is it about me that you don't like?"

"I never said I didn't like you." Gonzoles said. "And if I've been watching you, it is because I believe you have potential. If that's a problem, I'm sorry. I'll back off."

Briscoe studied Gonzoles. "So you are saying I should consider you being on my back all the time as a good thing."

"Let me ask you this, Briscoe." Gonzoles said. "Do you want to stay in security?"

"It was not my first choice." Briscoe admitted. "But it was a posting on Excelsior. I had hoped to get my foot in the door."

"Just about every command officer who makes it, has someone a step or two up the ladder helping them out." Gonzoles explained. "Pointing out pitfalls. Challenging you to think about all the possibilities. It's an unofficial system, but it seems to work."

"Yes, I've heard of it." Briscoe nodded. "If I may ask, who has helped you?"

"Captain Sulu has been kind enough to share his experience with me." Gonzoles said. "As Captain Kirk had shared his with Captain Sulu."

"And now you think you and I could have this kind of relationship?" Briscoe asked. "I don't know. After our recent experience..."

"Our recent experience effected us both." Gonzoles said. "As you pointed out. Anyway, think about it. No need to decide right now."

"All right. I will." Briscoe nodded. "As for the report, should I redo it?"

"I am due back in the Captain's ready room in fifteen minutes." Gonzoles said. "I'll let you know if he wants you to redo it."

"Thank you, Lt. Gonzoles." Briscoe got up and left. As soon as she was gone, Gonzoles left to meet with Captain Sulu.

Gonzoles paused outside the ready room door. She squared her shoulders, took a deep breath, and walked through the door. She stood at attention in front of his desk. "Captain, I believe I made a complete fool of myself about two hours ago."

"Sit down, Lieutenant." Sulu smiled. She did. "You viewed Ensign Briscoe's report."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles said. "And I've talked with Ensign Briscoe."

"Really?" Sulu raised his eyebrow in surprise. "Just what did you talk about?"

"I told her it did not matter what she felt. It mattered what she did." Gonzoles sighed. "And even as it came out of my mouth, I realized it was exactly what you had been saying to me."

"Did she hear you any better than you heard me?" Sulu asked.

"At first, no. But in the end, I think so." Gonzoles said. "And her report was in part my fault."

"Oh?"

"I made a point of telling her to turn in a detailed report." Gonzoles said. "She took me literally. And I believe she wanted to show me I was wrong for having questioned her loyalty on the planet."

"I see."

"I needed her to hide the communicator." Gonzoles said. "I needed to know if she was acting or if they had broken her."

"Yes. I recall your report."

"Well, she took it personally." Gonzoles shrugged. "Who wouldn't? But I believe we worked that out now. She would like to redo the report."

"Gonzoles." Sulu sat back in his chair. "Are you taking an interest in Briscoe's career?"

"I haven't decided yet." Gonzoles said. "Maybe."

"All right." Sulu nodded. "Have her redo the report."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles got up and started to leave.

"It's a good thing you decided not to resign, Lieutenant." Sulu said as she was about to walk out. She stopped at the door and looked at him. "It would be embarrassing after I just put in a request for your promotion."

"I wouldn't want to embarrass you, Sir." Gonzoles smiled and left the ready room.