

Sulu picked up his duffle and disembarked the Starfleet transport on the main landing deck of Starbase Eighteen. It was very close to the Romulan Neutral Zone and the military personnel stationed there generally maintained alert status. So anyone arriving on a Starfleet transport had to check in with the deck duty officer.

"Good morning, Chief." Sulu said as he walked up to the desk at the end of the landing bay. "Commander Sulu. Starship Enterprise."

"Morning Commander." The chief petty officer nodded. He was a short dark skinned man with a bit of grey in his black hair. He turned his computer screen towards Sulu and indicated the scanner on the desk. "Admiral Kirk left orders for you, Sir."

Sulu placed his hand palm down on the scanner. Kirk appeared on the screen. "Sulu, our schedule has changed due to a priority one distress call from Outpost Six. Dr. McCoy should be on Starbase Eighteen by the time you get there. Rendezvous with the Enterprise on course for Outpost Six. I've left you the Galileo. Kirk out."

"Has Dr. McCoy checked in, Chief?" Sulu asked.

"Yes Sir." Chief nodded. "He came in yesterday during my shift."

"Any idea where I might find him?"

The Chief turn the computer screen back towards himself and touch a few controls on his console. "He's in the civilian shopping area, Commander. Deck twenty three. Probably getting some lunch."

"Have the Enterprise shuttle craft Galileo readied for launch." Sulu ordered. "Dr. McCoy and I will be leaving with in the hour."

"Aye Sir." the chief responded. "If you leave your bag, I'll have it stowed on the ship Commander."

"Thank you, Chief." Sulu put his duffle bag down next to the desk and went in search of Dr. McCoy. He wasn't hard to find. The civilian area of the base had many small shops, a park, and a playground. McCoy sat at a table along the edge of the park. He was enjoying a hearty meal and apparently watching the children play. "Hi Doc."

"Sulu." McCoy looked up. "There you are. Sit down. How's my little girl?"

"Just fine." Sulu joined him at the table. "Although she believes that your sending her the white rabbit means you finally consider her an adult."

"Hmmm. Maybe it does." McCoy nodded as he ate.

"What is that?" Sulu asked indicating the soupy stew.

"It's suppose to be viinerine." McCoy said. "But the cook evidently doesn't appreciate traditional Romulan spices. She added a few potatoes, a good bit of pepper, and served it with a wonderfully crusty bread. It's a definite improvement. I got it at the stall over there. You should try some."

"Lunch does sound good, but I think I'll see what else is available." Sulu left McCoy to look over the available food choices. Romulan cuisine never had appealed to him. He decided on an overstuffed turkey sandwich and returned to the table. "The landing bay crew is getting the Galileo ready to launch. I told them we'd leave with in the hour."

"All right. I'll inform Mr. Fiedler and Mr. Afrah." McCoy nodded "I'll have to stop by the barracks. But other than that, I'm ready."

"Good." Sulu started on his lunch. "I didn't realize you had med techs with you."

"It was a big job." McCoy explained. "So how was the command seminar?"

"Good." Sulu said between bites. "I caught up with some people I hadn't seen in years. Jacob Habib and Taziana Piazza."

"Oh, I remember Lt. Piazza." McCoy smiled "When she left Enterprise, she left a string of broken hearts behind. Is she still as beautiful?"

"Definitely." Sulu nodded with a smile. "And Commander Piazza is still not interested in any attachments of a personal nature."

"What a waste." McCoy shook his head.

"The seminar itself was thought provoking." Sulu said. "It was worth the time."

"And your time with Jimmi?" McCoy asked. He watched the children run through the playground playing some form of tag. He didn't want to pressure Sulu.

"I enjoyed the time with Jimmi immensely. It was nice not to feel so rushed with her." Sulu said. He also watched the children run. After a few moments, he added. "I took Jimmi to my sister's house for a family dinner."

"Oh?" McCoy asked. "How'd that go?"

"I managed to impress my fifteen year old nephew." Sulu laughed. "I think he fell in love with her the minute he saw her."

"What's not to love?" McCoy asked. "What about the rest of the family?"

"Once they got over the shock, it was ok." Sulu shrugged. "I've never been serious about a girl before. And I thought the family should know her. It just seemed like the right thing to do."

"Sounds like you are working up to something, Hikaru." McCoy observed. He wondered how long it would be until Hikaru and Jimmi started talking about a more formal commitment. "Something serious?"

"I don't know, Doc." Sulu admitted. He couldn't get Jimmi's marriage proposal out of his mind but he was not ready to discuss it with her father. Sulu finished the rest of his sandwich in silence. He stood to go. "I'll meet you back at the Galileo."

"I'll be there shortly." McCoy nodded.

As usual, Sulu thoroughly checked the small ship before take off. While he was finishing his preflight check, med techs Fiedler and Afrah reported. The two best friends made an odd pair. Farkah Afrah stood well over two meters tall. His skin was a deep brown and he wore a full beard. Don Fiedler was a good foot shorter than his friend with a very pale complexion and wispy blond hair. But around the Enterprise one was rarely seen without the other. McCoy followed a few minutes behind them and they were on their way.

McCoy settled in the copilot's seat. The two med techs made themselves comfortable in the passengers seats in the back. Once Sulu had established the correct course and satisfied himself that all read outs were normal, he asked. "Did the distress call come when you were in orbit around Galla Three?"

McCoy nodded and explained, "I couldn't leave. The administration of herclyne-adlocoine can be very delicate. And it had never been used on the Gallans before, so they required close monitoring."

"Did it reach epidemic level?" Sulu asked.

"Damn close." McCoy said. "They had not experienced this kind of viral infection before and it was spreading quickly."

"Do you have any details on the distress call from outpost six?"

McCoy shook his head and stated the obvious. "Probably the Romulans."

"Chances are." Sulu agreed. He kept a watchful eye on his instruments. A shuttle craft was not the safest place to be if a cloaked Romulan ship had crossed the Neutral Zone. "At our best speed we can make outpost six in a little less than eighteen hours. But I would rather meet the Enterprise sooner than later."

The first couple of hours passed uneventfully. Conversation died down. Fiedler fell asleep. Afrah settled in with a novel. McCoy reviewed his records of the Gallan crisis. Sulu kept an alert eye on the readouts. He kept his short range sensors on alert status and the long range on automatic sweep.

They were almost half way to Outpost Six when the short range sensors signaled contact.

McCoy looked up at the sound of the alert. "What is it?"

"Not sure." Sulu said adjusting the sensor controls. "It's small. Only three meters long. A probe, maybe. Internal power source. Ut-oh."

"What?" McCoy asked.

"It has changed course and is heading directly towards us." Sulu informed the doctor. "I'm raising shields and taking evasive action."

"And?"

"And it's following us." Sulu said. He studied the readings. He couldn't tell if it was following the ship's motion or if it was a heat seeker. Or something else all together. Sulu swung the small ship around to a heading that required the probe to turn one hundred and eighty degrees to follow. It followed. "Damn."

"Anything we can do?" Mr. Afrah asked. He had shaken Mr. Fiedler awake and they both came forward.

"See if you can analyze that thing. Any life forms? Any shields? Any weapons?" Sulu said over his shoulder. He had his hands full just trying to avoid whatever it was. "Dr. McCoy, scan that system. Any class M planets? We may need to land if I can't lose this thing."

"Aye." McCoy responded. It was crowded. The ship was designed as a transport. The only access to the computer was at the pilot and copilot station. The two med techs leaned over McCoy's shoulder trying to make sense of the sensor readings. The doctor leaned close to the scanner readout to give them some room to work.

"No life forms." Fiedler said.

"No shields. The hull is constructed of toranium." Afrah added. "But I can't get any reading on the power source."

"Then something has to be shielded." Sulu said as he turned the ship again. "Doc?"

"Got one." McCoy switched the scan he was looking at to the main viewer. "Class M. The second planet. The one we are heading away from right now."

"Good." Sulu swung the ship around again and headed back for the planet McCoy had indicated. "Because this thing is getting closer. Any weapons?"

"I think that thing is a weapon." Fiedler said. "A torpedo or something. It's carrying a lot of explosive power."

"More specific, Mr Fiedler."

"Two hundred sixty five tons per meter, sir." Fiedler said. "The shields won't withstand a direct hit."

The small explosive device was within ten meters of the shuttle as it reached the top of the atmosphere. At the last second Sulu pulled up, taking the ship back into space. The device could not respond fast enough and went into the atmosphere where the friction of entry caused it to explode.

"Nice." Mr. Afrah smiled appreciatively.

"Stellar." Mr. Fiedler agreed.

"Now what?" McCoy asked.

"We get back on course." Sulu said. "And hope we don't meet up with the ship that thing came from."

"It didn't seem like Romulan technology." McCoy observed.

"It wasn't typical of the Empire." Sulu agreed. "But they may just be moving in another direction. We haven't seen a ship. It's possible this kind of torpedo can be launched without decloaking."

"That could be a problem." McCoy said.

"You have a gift for understatement, Doctor." Sulu nodded. The two med tech's returned to their seats while both Sulu and McCoy maintained a watchful eye on the sensors.

The shuttle craft had just moved to the edge of the planetary system when McCoy reported. "There's another one. Ahead sixty thousand kilometers."

"I see it." Sulu said. "But it hasn't detected us yet."

"There's another one. Heading 89 mark 3. Distance three hundred thousand kilometers." McCoy said.

"And another heading 233 mark 2. Two hundred thousand kilometers." Sulu said. He slowed the ship to half speed to give himself time to think. "It's a mine field."

"A mine field?" McCoy asked. "Who would lay a mine field? There is no control. Any ship coming into the area is attacked."

"Unless there is a code to transmit for safe passage." Sulu said.

"Is that possible?"

"The Cardasians have been known to mine certain shipping lanes and still negotiate them successfully themselves." Sulu said. "And toranium is a Cardasian metal."

"But we are about as far from Cardasian space as you can get." McCoy said. "Do you think the Romulans are testing a similar technology?"

"Hard to say." Sulu watched his screen thoughtfully. "Not enough information. But we seemed to come to the first one's attention at approximately fifty thousand kilometers. Perhaps in a ship this size we can navigate through if we are careful."

"What about the Enterprise?" McCoy asked.

"The mines are too close together." Sulu said. "She would never get through without being detected. Of course with the Enterprise's weapons, she could detonate them before they were a problem."

"If they detected them soon enough." McCoy added. "And the Galileo's weapons?"

"The graviton force beam is little more than a reverse tractor beam." Sulu shook his head.

"It's meant as a defense against stray asteroids. It would not hold off a self propelled device."

"Might cause one to detonate at a safe distance." McCoy suggested.

"It just might." Sulu looked over at the Doctor in surprise. They crawled along at half impulse power, making small course corrections to keep all the mines more than fifty thousand kilometers away.

"Perhaps we should contact the Enterprise." McCoy suggested. "This speed is going to put us behind schedule."

"Yes. I've considered that." Sulu said, never taking his eyes off his readouts. "But first I want to clear this field. Even a communication beam may draw the mine's attention."

"And if one sees us, trying to avoid it will bring us to the attention of these others." McCoy said.

"Exactly."

"I wonder if this has anything to do with the distress call." McCoy said.

"I don't know." Sulu guided the ship carefully between the mines. "We are still a considerable distance from Outpost Six. At least at impulse power."

They safely navigated between ten of the mines. Afrah and Fiedler were on the edge of their seats, but there was nothing they could do to help. McCoy and Sulu noted each mine with its bearing and distance as they made sensor contact. Finally they seemed to be out of the mine field, but they were still in the solar system where they had lost the first mine.

"I think we are clear." McCoy sighed with relief.

"Maybe." Sulu said. He proceeded carefully, slowly increasing speed. "But there's no point in letting our guard down now."

"Sulu." McCoy said suddenly. "Heading directly for us. Z minus twenty eight degrees. Only six thousand kilometers."

"How?" Sulu hesitated. How had it gotten so close without detection? Sulu quickly changed course for the fourth planet in the system. Within three seconds the mine had changed course to follow them. "Damn."

"Four thousand kilometers." McCoy reported. Just as Sulu was about to change course again, a ship decloaked between the Galileo and the planet. It was about three times as large as the shuttlecraft.

"They are hailing us." Afrah said from behind McCoy. "Audio only."

Without comment, Sulu switched open an audio channel. "Cut your engines or be destroyed." a deep male voice ordered.

Sulu brought the ship to a halt. McCoy glanced at him. Sulu pointed to the readout of the unknown ship. A warning light blinked 'PHASER LOCK CONFIRMED'. As soon as they had stopped, the mine slowed until it gently bumped into the Galileo's shields and attached itself there.

"This is the U.S.S. Galileo. A Starfleet transport ship." Sulu said. "What is the meaning of this attack?"

"Meaning?" The man laughed. "You have entered our space. If you want to leave alive, you will pay the price."

"What would the price be?" Sulu asked the pirate.

"What do you have?"

"If you will establish visual contact, you will see that we are a Starfleet transport vessel." Sulu repeated. He wanted to get a look at who he was dealing with. The pirate's species might make a difference in the approach he tried. "I am piloting three medical officers from a special assignment to Outpost Six. We have no personal belongings on board. Nothing of value."

"Too bad." The pirate said calmly. "I'll guess I have to detonate that little device that has attached itself to your shields."

"Interesting device." Sulu tried to keep him talking. "How did it get so close to us without my sensors picking it up?"

"Good question." the pirate let them establish visual contact. He was a humanoid with light brown skin and long black hair. Sulu judged him to be about his own age, maybe a little older. There were several others visible on the pirate ship. Two more apparent humans, an Andorian, and a large hairy fellow of unknown specie. "But since you will soon be dead, why do you care?"

"When I'm dead, I'm dead." Sulu answered. He kept his voice as calm and as level as humanly possible. "Until then, I'll continue to do my job."

The pirate laughed. "Perhaps we can make an arrangement. I will take your ship in exchange for your lives."

"I'm afraid I can't let you do that." Sulu said. He looked the pirate in the eye and hoped his opponent did not see his hands moving over the control board.

"You have no choice." The pirate grinned. "I have your life in my hands."

"Technically." Sulu agreed easily as he reinforced the aft shields strength where the mine had attached itself. "But that is only if you assume I value my life over my duty."

A young human man with his black hair in a ponytail, a thick mustache curling over his upper lip, and a large diamond earring in his left earlobe, leaned close to the pirate commander and whispered in his ear. The commander turned and looked him in the eye. The young man nodded. Sulu took the opportunity to glance at his instruments.

"Brady here informs me that your rank is commander." The pirate said to Sulu. "And as such you have a duty to the survival of your crew."

"Granted." Sulu nodded. "However if young Mr. Brady knows Starfleet regulations so well, he will also tell you that self destruction is the option of every command officer."

"As I see it you have two options." The pirate commander's demeanor changed from amusement to strictly business. "Lower your shields and surrender or die."

"You may have a point." Sulu said slowly. He moved his fingers to the throttle controls. As he gunned the throttle, he added. "Of course you should try looking at it from my point of view. Cut him off, Doc." McCoy terminated the connections as the shuttle jumped forward and passed under the pirate ship too close for them to safely use any weapons. Sulu headed directly for the planet below. The pirate was caught off guard and never had a chance to fire his phasers.

The Galileo was just about to enter the planets atmosphere when the mine attached to the shields detonated. The shockwave forced the small ship forward into the atmosphere at too steep an angle. Sulu struggled to regain control.

"We're losing power. Aft engines gone." Afrah reported as he looked over Sulu's shoulder at the readouts Sulu didn't have time for. "Hull breach in the aft section. Emergency hatched is closed. Life support holding at seventy three percent."

"Aft shields inoperative." Fiedler added. The ship finally started to level off. "Forward shields at fifty two percent. Hull temperature rising."

"Tell me something good about this planet, Doc." Sulu said as they skimmed ever lower through the atmosphere.

"It's reading as class N." McCoy informed him. "There is some oxygen in the atmosphere, but not enough. I'm not reading any surface water. I'm not reading much of anything."

Sulu slowed the ship and switched the scanner to a tactical view of the ground below. He searched for a level place to land. They were losing power quickly so he took the first available spot. It wasn't an easy landing. They came to a stop with a jolt. The two med techs were knocked off their feet. Through the forward port, Sulu saw a large cloud of purplish red dust rise around the ship. As the dust slowly started to settle on and around the shuttle, Dr. McCoy quickly checked the two med techs. Their injuries were minor.

McCoy turned to Sulu and asked. "Are you ok?"

"Yeah." Sulu said, nodding. He took a deep breath. "You?"

McCoy nodded. "What was that all about?"

"Piracy." Sulu said simply. He surveyed his damaged ship and her crew. "Which, I hope, will work in our favor."

"What do you mean?" Mr. Fiedler asked from his seat on the floor.

"Since the ship was all they wanted and since it is no longer in the best of shape," Sulu said. "They shouldn't come looking for us."

"Damage assessment, Mr Sulu?" Mr. Afrah asked.

"Yes, Mr. Afrah." Sulu nodded. He turned back to the sensor. "But first we need to know a little more about the atmosphere out there."

McCoy leaned over his shoulder. "Oxygen, nitrogen, hydrogen, helium. Tolerable amounts of radon, xenon, neon, and fluorine. Nothing poisonous to us. But we will need the oxygen packs. There's just not enough of it out there to support human life."

"Mr. Afrah and Mr. Fiedler see if you can get shields back on line. Dr. McCoy and I will inspect the engines." Sulu ordered. He left the pilots seat to open a panel in the back wall of the main compartment. Sulu took out two phasers, handing one to Dr. McCoy. "I am not reading any life forms in the immediate area, but don't go outside unarmed. And stay in constant communications with each other."

McCoy opened the shuttle's emergency medical supplies. He issued an oxygen pack to each man. They attached the small box of condensed oxygen to their uniforms and wore the clear mask around their necks until it was needed.

"No distress call?" Mr Fiedler asked.

"Let's give those pirates a chance to forget about us first." Sulu said. "We will assess the damage and go from there."

Sulu adjusted the clear mask to cover his nose and mouth and opened the main hatch. As soon as he and McCoy were off the gangway, the door closed behind them. The purplish red dust was close to two inches deep. It partially covered their boots as they stepped down. It was a flat open area with mountains in the distance.

"Looks like a desert, maybe a dry sea bed or something." McCoy noted as they made

their way to the back of the shuttle craft. They walked slowly. "Damn, what's the gravity here?"

"Close to one third more than we are use to." Sulu said. They turned the back corner of the ship to find a hole one meter in diameter in the hull. Sulu carefully leaned in to see how much damage was done to the engines.

"Well?" McCoy asked.

"I don't know." Sulu said as he straightened up and looked at McCoy. "It will require an awful lot of work. I'm not sure it's a repair we can make."

McCoy took a brief look and said. "That's a lot of damage for something that impacted on the shields."

"Yes it is." Sulu agreed. He opened an access panel below the engines and took out a spare panel large enough to cover the hole. McCoy reached in for a small computer pad. Sulu held the panel against the hole while McCoy pressed the pad onto it and adjusted the controls to create a magnetic seal. When they turned back toward the main hatch, Sulu suggested. "Perhaps we can bypass some of the nonessential systems and make our repairs."

"I didn't think shuttles had any nonessential systems." McCoy said.

"Well, some are more essential than others." Sulu shrugged. "But first we better take stock of our emergency supplies and send that distress signal. I am not at all sure we will get out of here on our own."

The two officers made their way slowly back to the main hatch of the shuttle. The stronger gravity and elevated heat made the short walk tiring. They went into the small ship and sat down to catch their breath. The two med techs were frowning at the main console.

"Any luck with the aft shields?" Sulu asked.

"Next time you plan to crash land one of these Commander, try to bring along an engineer." Mr. Afrah joked easily. "Because we can't make heads or tails out of this."

"I'll be sure to pack some extra parts and a science officer too." Sulu laughed. More seriously, he added. "The engines are in bad shape. I think it's time to send that may day."

"I hope those pirates aren't still interested." Fiedler said getting out of the pilot's seat to make room for Sulu.

"The ship no longer flies." McCoy said. "Why would they want it?"

"There is still plenty worth salvaging." Fiedler answered. "Including access codes to Starfleet databases. I wonder how much that's worth on the open market."

"Good point." Sulu said as he sat down in the pilot's seat. "We will have to keep our eyes open. I am sending a standard may day with a coded message regarding the mine field."

"Without shields we can't prevent anyone from beaming directly into the ship." Mr. Afrah said once Sulu had set the may day on automatic.

"I know." Sulu said thoughtfully. "We will have to sleep in shifts, so that someone is on guard at all times. Keep your phasers handy."

"We'll have to sleep in shifts anyway." McCoy said as he opened one of the emergency supply compartments. "Short range shuttles only come equipped with two sleeping bags. There are extra blankets of course."

"Mr Afrah, Mr Fiedler check emergency supplies. Doctor, I'll leave any rationing of food and water to you." Sulu said turning back to the console. "Meanwhile I'll try to devise a defense against our pirate friends."

The two med techs got right to work. But Dr. McCoy joined Sulu at the small ship's command center. McCoy lowered his voice. "Just how long do you expect us to be here?"

"I don't know, Doc." Sulu also spoke quietly. "There's no telling what Enterprise has run into at Outpost Six. They may not be able to disengage to come looking for us right away."

"Then how am I suppose to ration supplies?" McCoy asked. Sulu just looked at him. McCoy shook his head. "I know, I know. According to regulations."

"Just make them last as long as possible, Doc." Sulu said turning back to his work. "We've all trained for this possibility. We'll make do."

McCoy nodded and went back to the two med techs who were busy counting and cataloging all the emergency supplies. He took a few minutes to assess the food and water situation. Unfortunately short range shuttles were not equipped with replicators. McCoy returned to the pilot's station with two glasses of water and two packs of combat rations.

"Dinner." McCoy said holding out a ration pack and glass of water to Sulu. Sulu turned towards the doctor and accepted the meal with a smile. "Trying to extend the forward shields?"

"Yes." Sulu nodded. "I've reconfigured the shield that are still working to be almost skin tight around the ship. They are extended to cover about eighty seven per cent of the ship. Right now the only way anyone could beam directly onto the ship would be to come into the aft compartment."

"They almost would have to materialize in the head." McCoy said. He opened the ration pack and eyed the contents suspiciously. He hated vacuum packed food. It all tasted the same. "There's not much clear space back there."

"Exactly." Sulu nodded. Sulu did not bother to inspect his rations too closely. He just ate it. "And if the pirates choose to beam down outside the ship, the proximity alert will give us fair warning."

"Not to mention that the high gravity and hostile atmosphere will slow them down." McCoy added. "Do you think they will give us any trouble?"

"If I was in their position, I'd wait to see if anyone answered our distress call before making any decisions." Sulu said. "They certainly don't want to face down a starship."

"Then why don't you get some sleep." McCoy suggested. "I'll take the first watch."

"There is still a lot to do." Sulu turned back to his computer analysis of their engine problems. "I've got the computer analyzing all components on the ship to see what we can use to get us flying again."

"You've been going since, what? Oh six hundred?" McCoy asked. Sulu nodded. "Take your doctor's advice and get some sleep while you can."

"All right, Doc." Sulu checked the chronometer. It wasn't very late but it had been a long day. He was tired. "But just a few hours. Wake me at midnight."

There wasn't much room in a short range shuttle. After pushing a couple of chairs aside, Sulu took one of the sleeping bags and stretched it out along the wall. He laid down in the bag and turned towards the wall.