

Admiral Kirk was feeling frustrated. They had been in orbit around Neutral Zone Outpost Six for close to three days and still they had no answers. There had been no incidents since the Enterprise arrived. And the computer records of previous incidents were conflicting.

There was no reason to leave the ship. Outpost Six was strictly a military base. No civilians lived there. Not even the families of the base personnel. There were no shops, no restaurants, no bars. There was nothing available on the base that was not also available on the Enterprise.

Kirk turned in the command chair when Mr. Spock came on the bridge. The Admiral did not wait for Spock to join him. "Have you found anything further?"

"I do not have proof, Admiral." Spock started slowly as he walked down to the command center. "However I believe we are dealing with two different unauthorized vessels in the area in the last week."

"Two different Romulan ships, Spock?"

"I suspect that at least one of the sensor contacts was with a Romulan ship." Spock said "The computer records of the contact thirty hours before our arrival is consistent with the Romulan Bird of Prey in size and tactical maneuvers. The other five contacts are not."

"The other five contacts appear to be the same ship?" Kirk asked.

"Yes." Spock nodded. "Smaller than a Bird of Prey but definitely using a cloaking device. The ship appeared for brief periods of time on the very edge of the outpost's sensor net. It was coming from the Federation side and cloaked as it neared the outpost. I believe they miscalculated the range of the outpost sensor net and never knew they were detected."

"So what do you think we are dealing with here Spock?" Kirk asked.

"Smugglers? Spys?"

"Both are distinct possibilities." Spock nodded.

"Admiral." Commander Uhura interrupted. Kirk turned to face her. "I am receiving a coded distress signal from the Galileo."

"Let's hear it." Kirk ordered.

Sulu's calm deep voice came over the speakers. "Mayday. This is the U.S.S. Galileo. We've been attacked and forced to land on the third planet of the star system designated as G-582. Life support, sensors, and shields partially operational. Engines off line. We are attempting repairs. We have no casualties, however the star system has been mined by a cloaked pirate ship. The mines are aggressive and should be destroyed on sight. I repeat. Mayday..." Commander Uhura cut off the transmission there.

"A cloaked pirate ship." Kirk looked at Spock with raised eyebrow.

"Perhaps the very ship we are looking for." Spock nodded.

"Uhura get me Commander DuBovoy." Kirk ordered.

"Aye Sir." Uhura responded as she complied. After a moment she added.

"Commander DuBovoy is standing by, Sir."

"On screen." Kirk said. When the dark haired human man appeared on the Enterprise's main view screen, Kirk continued. "Ed, we may have a lead on the identity

of your sensor ghosts."

"From the analysis of the sensor logs?" Commander Ed DuBovoy asked.

"Spock's analysis suggests there is more than one ship involved." Kirk explained. "And I've just now received a distress call from our shuttle craft that we were expecting. Commander Sulu has run into a pirate ship equipped with a cloaking device. This could possibly be one of your ships."

"A pirate ship, Admiral?" DuBovoy was skeptical. "Excuse me Sir, but it is the Romulans I am concerned with. What purpose would pirates have in playing cat and mouse with a Federation Outpost?"

"It is possible they simply underestimated the range of your sensors, Commander." Kirk said. "Regardless, I must answer that distress call. Hopefully we will at least begin to solve your mysteries."

"So the Enterprise is leaving?" The Commander questioned the Admiral carefully.

"Only briefly, Commander." Kirk reassured him. "To reach the downed ship will only take... Spock?"

"Thirty eight minutes at warp five, Admiral." Spock answered.

"Commander." One of the outpost personnel was reporting. "Sensor contact on the edge of the Neutral Zone."

Spock scanned with Enterprise sensors. "Sensor contact confirmed. Still within the Neutral Zone. Configuration confirmed. A Romulan Bird of Prey."

"Lt. Hauser." Kirk said to the young woman at the helm. "Bring us around until we are nose to nose with that Bird of Prey. But remain on our side of the zone."

"Aye Sir." Lt. Hauser acknowledged the order and maneuvered the star ship around the small planetoid that was home to Outpost Six.

"Uhura." Kirk said as they came very close to the edge of the Neutral Zone. "Hail the Romulan ship."

"Aye Sir." Commander Uhura replied. "Channel open, Admiral."

"This is Admiral James T. Kirk of the U.S.S. Enterprise." Kirk said. "Romulan vessel, you have already broken the treaty by entering the Neutral Zone. Return to your own space or risk retaliation."

"Federation Starship." The Romulan commander appeared on the screen. "We are experiencing technical malfunctions involving our engine control and navigation computers. My engineer estimates the repairs can be accomplished in less than three horoms."

"Roughly five hours." Spock interjected.

"Convenient malfunctions." Kirk said to the Romulan. "Were you also experiencing malfunctions when you crossed the Neutral Zone five days ago?"

"We have been on patrol in the Minar Sector. We have only just arrived at the Neutral Zone as these malfunctions were occurring." The Romulan commander said.

"Right." Kirk took a minute to think before continuing. "Then what am I to make of the sensor contact we have that is consistent with bird of prey in size and tactical maneuvers?"

"This is a remote area of space." The Commander said easily. "There are many non military vessels in the area that do not wish to be seen."

"I have considered that possibility." Kirk nodded. "And have ruled out several contacts for that very reason. But there is still that nagging report that can not be explained away."

"I know nothing of it." The Commander insisted.

Kirk looked over at Uhura. She nodded, cutting off the audio portion of the transmission. Kirk turned towards the science station. "Are they really in need of repairs?"

"Readings are conflicting." Spock said. "If their navigational computer is off line, it seems a convenient coincidence that they come to the very edge of the Neutral Zone yet not into Federation Space. However I am reading wide fluctuations in their warp drive energy output. And their warp field phase adjustment is out of alignment. That could cause some navigational problems."

"Could they be sending out these signals when there really is no problem?" Kirk asked.

"Possible." Spock said. "But to allow the warp drive to fluctuate so widely while they are maintaining position is dangerous. Unchecked it could lead to a warp core breach."

"All right then." Kirk nodded to Uhura. She re-established the audio connection with the Romulan ship. "Romulan commander. Our readings show problems with your warp drive. We stand ready to assist you in your repairs."

"Not necessary." The commander said. "My engineers can successfully complete the repairs."

"We'll stand by any way. Enterprise out." Kirk said pointedly. "Mr. Chekov, keep a sharp eye on the Romulan ship. Report the slightest thing out of the ordinary."

"Aye sir." Chekov said.

"Spock." Kirk walked up to the science station. "How often do the outposts report sensor contact with Romulan ships on their own side of the Neutral Zone?"

"Almost daily." Spock said. "They maintain regular patrols as do we. The system of outposts along the Zone allow us to track those patrols."

"And the Romulan outposts correspond to ours almost exactly." Kirk added.

"Yes." Spock nodded.

"Then why is this bird of prey not calling for help from their outposts?" Kirk asked.

"Unknown." Spock said thoughtfully. "Surely the Romulan outpost has detected our presence. Why have they not responded to the situation?"

"Perhaps they want to keep our attention here." Kirk suggested. "An accidental sensor contact for a few seconds once a week or so for the past month. What better way to get our attention without any provocative actions."

"But why?" Spock asked.

"That is the question." Kirk nodded.

"And the Galileo?" Spock asked.

"Sulu said they had life support and no casualties." Kirk said. "What do we know about the planet they've landed on?"

Spock turned to his library computer and brought up information on the third planet of system G-582. "Not much. It is class N. Basically lifeless. A hostile environment."

"I'd prefer to know what the Romulans are up to before contacting Sulu." Kirk said. "They seem to want our attention. We'll give it to them. We can wait them out."

"And while we wait?" Spock asked.

"Look at the sensor logs of all the outposts." Kirk replied. "See if you can trace where this particular ship has been. I want to know if he could be the one who was here five days ago."

Spock nodded. "And if he was not?"

"We'll go from there." Kirk turned towards the communication station. "Uhura, continue to monitor the emergency channels. Let me know if anything else comes in from Sulu."

"Aye Sir." Uhura replied.

It seemed that he had only just closed his eyes when McCoy woke him.

"It's midnight." The doctor said quietly. Sulu nodded and sat up. Not far from him Mr. Afrah was sound asleep. "It's been very quiet."

Sulu stood and stretched. There wasn't much room in this small ship. But the atmosphere wasn't conducive to a leisurely stroll. Sulu checked the aft section. When he returned to the main cabin, Mr. Fiedler had taken Sulu's place in the sleeping bag and Dr. McCoy was sitting in the copilot's seat. Sulu went forward and checked that the distress call was still transmitting.

"Aren't you going to sleep, Doc?" Sulu asked quietly.

"I'll give Mr. Afrah a little more time." McCoy said. "It got dark a couple of hours ago and the wind has picked up."

"But no sign of our pirates?" Sulu asked.

"None." McCoy said. "Perhaps they are not interested."

"They may have decided the risk of trying to salvage a Starfleet ship with survivors is too high." Sulu said. "But I doubt they aren't interested. If they thought they could get away with it, they'd be here in a minute."

"And there's nothing we can do but wait." McCoy observed. Sulu just nodded. "So, was Jimmi surprised when you showed up unannounced?"

"I walked in on one of her classes." Sulu grinned. "It left her momentarily speechless."

"Now there's something I'd like to see." McCoy laughed. Before McCoy could say anything else, Sulu's attention was caught by the communications board. They were being hailed. Sulu switched it to audio.

"Starfleet shuttle." It was the pirate. "You seem to be in a difficult situation. I don't think anyone will be coming to your rescue."

"We are now officially overdue." Sulu responded. "I am confident that a Starfleet ship is on the way."

"I'm glad you are confident." The pirate said. "I think I'll just wait and see."

"You do that."

"If you decide you need a lift off that nasty little planet, just call." The pirate offered. "I'm sure we could work out a deal."

"I'm glad you are sure." Sulu said. "Just what kind of a deal did you have in mind?"

"Nothing complicated." the pirate captain said smoothly. "We'll take you to the nearest Starbase. You let us salvage what is left of your ship."

"There's not much left." Sulu said.

"You still have shields and communications." He said. "Brady suspects that all you've lost is your engines."

"How does your Mr. Brady come by such intimate knowledge of Starfleet vessels?" Sulu avoided acknowledging just how close Brady's assessment of their damage was.

"He claims to have friends." The pirate said lightly. "Do we have a deal Commander?"

"No." Sulu said simply. "I'll take my chances."

"As you wish." The pirate said and terminated the connection.

"Lovely." McCoy said.

"Well, at least we know they are not planning to attempt to take possession of the Galileo immediately." Sulu shrugged. "I think they will try to wait us out."

"You think or you hope?" McCoy asked.

"So Doc, were you planning on getting some sleep?" Sulu changed the subject and punched up the analysis he had the computer working on while he slept.

"Yeah. Sure." McCoy said and went to wake Mr. Afrah.

Sulu took a couple of minutes to check the scanners. Long range sensors were still operational. Sulu was looking for any ships in the system. But there was nothing there. The pirate ship must be cloaked and the Enterprise was not within range. Lt. Farkah Afrah joined him at the pilot's station. He was the highest ranking med tech on the Enterprise.

"No news?" Afrah asked rubbing one eye as he sat in the copilot's seat. Sulu just shook his head. Mr Afrah touched the control that retracted the port covers to get a look outside. There was a dim light. "Night doesn't last too long around here."

"I guess not." Sulu responded automatically. He was concentrating on the computer analysis. It wasn't very encouraging, but Sulu was starting to formulate possible alternatives in his mind.

"Wind's really blowing." Mr. Afrah studied the outside environment through the vaguely purple light. "Looks like a regular sand storm."

Sulu finally looked up. "Sand storm?"

"That wind is carrying a lot of that purple dust." Afrah nodded. "Reminds me of the Nuar Desert on Rigel III. The wind would blow like this for days."

"Never been there." Sulu said looking out the forward ports.

"I lived there for a couple of years. It was my wife's home." Afrah continued.

"But when the storms got bad, you could get lost three meters from your front door."

"I didn't know you were married." Sulu looked at the tall med tech.

"Long time ago." Afrah shook his head, "It didn't last long. But that sand, it got into everything."

"Everything? I better check the engines." Sulu stood up and adjusted his oxygen pack to go outside. "Do you think this storm could be a problem?"

"Depends how long it lasts." Afrah followed Sulu's example. The lieutenant grabbed two safety visors and handed one to Sulu. "It could possibly bury the shuttle."

"Great." Sulu said as he opened the door and they stepped into the swirling purple dust. Both men kept one hand on the side of the ship as they made their way towards the back to the engines. The storm made conversation difficult. When they reached the hole in the hull, Sulu inspected the magnetic seal. It was in tact. Sulu had to raise his voice to be heard over the storm, "Looks ok. But we are not going to be able to do anything here until the storm passes."

"If it passes." Lt Afrah shouted. They turned back to toward the main hatch.

"Well, at least we still have life support." Sulu said after they were back in the main cabin. He brushed the purple dust out of his hair and off his uniform. "But we are down to battery power only."

"How long can we survive on battery power?" Lt. Afrah asked.

"A week easily." Sulu said. "Of course food rations will run out by then. How much water do we have?"

"If we're careful, enough for four or five days." Mr. Afrah returned the safety visors to their compartment. "The Enterprise will be here before then. Right?"

"Assuming she didn't run into something they couldn't handle." Sulu said. Mr. Afrah turned and looked at Sulu. Sulu added. "We can't count on anything."

"Of course." Afrah agreed. "But it's hard to imagine something Admiral Kirk can't handle."

"I know what you mean." Sulu smiled. Blind faith in Kirk was typical among the crew. Sulu wasn't sure if it was stronger in those who were never knew how close they came to destruction or those on the bridge who knew all too well. Sulu returned to the computer and scanners. "I'm still not reading any kind of life forms."

"Not even anything microscopic?" Afrah asked.

"Nothing." Sulu shrugged. "This area of the planet seems totally lifeless."

"Given a choice, would you live here?" Lt. Afrah asked with a grin.

"I'd just like the choice to leave about now." Sulu nodded. The hours past slowly. Sulu and Afrah didn't know each other well. They passed the time with small talk and ship's gossip.

"Anything new from Sulu?" Kirk asked Uhura when he returned to the bridge from his break. It was getting quite late; almost oh-two hundred hours by Federation

standard time. They should have changed shifts two hours ago, but both Uhura and Chekov had volunteered to stay on the bridge.

"Nothing Admiral." Uhura shook her head. "But they are still transmitting the distress call."

"Good." Kirk nodded, although he wasn't sure just how good that was. Kirk walked over to Spock's station. "Well?"

It hadn't taken Spock long to track the movements of the bird of prey that now faced the Enterprise. They had made no attempt to hide their course over that previous week. He studied the sensor logs of all nine outposts. By the time Kirk had returned to the bridge, Spock had an intimate knowledge of traffic around Romulan outposts.

"The ship we are now facing, the Maak." Spock turned his chair to face the Admiral. "Can not have been in Federation space at the time of Outpost Six's sensor contacts. Its course over the time period is well documented."

"All right." Kirk said. He glanced over his shoulder at the bird-of-prey still on their main view screen. "What else?"

"The Romulan outposts have regular traffic of freighters and transports." Spock explained. "But birds of prey are less regular in their routes. In the time period I have studied five birds of prey have visited the outposts. Three of them have remained decloaked and visited all the Romulan outposts. The other two have come in from unknown course, decloaked at the outpost, then cloaked again when leaving. One of these two ships visited the Romulan Outpost closest to our Outpost Two and the other visited the Outpost that is within six light years of Outpost Six. Logically this was the ship that had momentary contact with our outpost five days ago."

"Two cloaked birds of prey?" Kirk raised his eye brow. "Or one bird of prey at two different outposts?"

"Impossible to say." Spock said. "There is enough time difference in the two logs that it could be the same ship, however neither log includes any ship's identification."

"But why are they decloaking momentarily near our outposts?" Kirk asked. "Why do they want us to know they are there?"

"Possibly they are attempting to provoke us." Spock said. "Possibly they are trying to divert our attention from something else."

"Possibly. Possibly." Kirk was frustrated. "But we saw nothing from the Romulans until we were getting ready to answer Sulu's distress call."

"The distress call was coded." Spock said. "However our conversation with Outpost Six was not."

"So as soon as we say we're going, the Romulans give us a reason to stay."

Spock nodded. "So it would seem."

"Now the question is do they want us to stay here?" Kirk wondered. "Or just not go to the Galileo?"

"A shuttle craft is no threat to the Romulans. However Mr. Sulu did mention another cloaked ship." Spock said. "If it is the other ship that has been crossing the Neutral Zone, perhaps the Romulans are protecting them."

"Or maybe they are looking for them."

"Another possibility." Spock nodded.

"We need more than possibilities, Spock." Kirk said. "We need proof."

"According to the Romulan commander." Spock said. "Repairs to the Maak should be completed in another hour."

"Then they have no excuse to be in the Neutral Zone." Kirk continued Spock's line of thought. "And we should be free to retrieve the Galileo. If you can trust the Romulans."

"Trust is not the first word I would choose." Spock said.

"No." Kirk agreed. "Spock, is there any way you can monitor the repairs on the Romulan ship?"

"I can monitor the results of the repairs." Spock said. He checked his scanners again. "The Maak's warp field phase adjustment is still out of alignment, however the warp drive energy output is no longer fluctuating."

"So they are making progress." Kirk said.

"You are concerned about the Galileo." Spock said matter of factly.

Kirk nodded slowly. "Without weapons and with heavy damage, they don't have much of a chance to make it out of there alone."

"Mr. Sulu will make the best of the situation." Spock said.

"Of course." Kirk agreed. His confidence in Sulu's abilities were not in questions. He took a deep breath and continued. "I stopped by my quarters and checked my mail. I got a letter from Jean Marie. She was very happy. She hinted at some big changes coming in her life."

"Concerning Mr. Sulu?" Spock asked with raised eyebrow.

"She didn't say." Kirk shrugged. "But she did promise she would tell her father all about it soon." Spock did not have an answer to Kirk's concerns. But then the Admiral didn't really expect one. He left Spock's station and went to check on Chekov. He and Uhura had now been on duty for a little more than ten hours. "Chekov. Take a break."

Chekov looked up from the navigation station. "Sir, I do not need..."

"Go get a cup of coffee. Something to eat." Kirk said again. "That's an order. And take Uhura with you."

"Aye Sir." Chekov locked his station. Kirk settled back in the command chair. As Chekov passed Uhura's station he said. "Come on. We are taking a break."

Uhura hesitated only a moment before removing her ear piece and following Chekov onto the turbo lift. "I could really use a cup of coffee right now."

"I was thinking more about a glass of vodka." Chekov said with a brief smile. "But coffee will have to do."

The dining hall was almost empty. It was late enough that second shift had already eaten, first shift was in bed, and too early for third shift to break for lunch. At Uhura's suggestion, they treated themselves to a slice of coffee cake with their coffee. They made small talk for a few minutes before falling silent.

"They will be ok." Uhura said finally.

"Of course." Chekov agreed quickly. "But we can not trust these Romulans."

They have already violated the treaty just by being in the Neutral Zone."

"I know." Uhura sympathized. "But we can't start a war it because a damaged ship drifted into the zone."

"If you can believe that." Chekov grumbled. "It was too convenient. The way they appeared just after we received the distress call."

"It makes you wonder, doesn't it?" Uhura said, picking at her cake. "Why do they want us to stay here?"

"Or why don't they want us to answer the distress call?" Chekov asked. He sipped his coffee in silence for a minute before saying. "They will be ok."

"Of course." Uhura said. She finished her coffee quickly. "Let's get back to the bridge."

"Yes." Chekov downed half a cup of coffee in one gulp. When they returned to their stations nothing had changed on the bridge. The bird of prey still hung motionless on the main view screen. Chekov checked his control board. Enterprise's position hadn't changed either. Time passed slowly.