

A couple of hours had passed on the Enterprise shuttle craft Galileo when Lt. Afrah noticed the communication board. He turned to Sulu and said. "We're being hailed."

Sulu checked his sensors. "It's not the Enterprise." He said then opened the channel.

"Hey Starfleet" The pirate captain called.. "Are you still confident that help is on the way?"

"We are not far from a Starbase and the Neutral Zone Outposts." Sulu said. "It will not take long for a ship to come for us."

"I don't know about that." The pirate replied. "There is very little traffic between the two stations. Outpost security verges on paranoia. They will probably assume your distress call is a Romulan trick."

"Even if I agreed with that, there are other options." Sulu would rather not discuss his options with the pirate, so he changed the subject. "If I may ask, what is so interesting about a Starfleet shuttle?"

"I've never been aboard any Starfleet ship." The pirate said. "There may not be anything of worth or interest on your small ship, but my conscience will not allow me to just leave you stranded. If you lower your shields we will beam you out of that mess that is trying to swallow you ship."

"No thank you." Sulu answered coolly. "Consider yourself relieved of any moral obligation concerning this ship. You'd be wise to take my advise and leave the area before a Starship arrives."

"Starship?" A woman's voice interjected. "Bartell! Are you crazy? Let's get out of here."

"Shut up!" The pirate captain growled. "I am still in charge here. I will say when we stay and when we go."

"You should listen to her, Bartell." Sulu said.

"And you Commander should take me up on my offer before it is too late." Bartell said angrily.

"Too late for whom?" Sulu asked calmly. The pirate did not answer.

"He closed the channel." Lt. Afrah said. "I think you hit a nerve."

"Perhaps." Sulu said thoughtfully. "But I'm not sure if that's good or bad. If I make Bartell too angry he may attack to save face in front of his crew."

"But if the crew sees his moves as unwise, they may decide they want a new captain." The med tech answered.

"Speaking from personal experience, Mr. Afrah?" Sulu asked lightly.

"Not on a pirate ship." Mr. Afrah said. "But I served on more than one commercial transport before joining Starfleet. One of the captains was a gambler and a drunk. The threat of mutiny was always in the air on that ship."

"I didn't realize you had such a colorful past." Sulu said with a smile. "How did you end up a med tech in Starfleet?"

"Long story." Lt. Afrah shrugged. "I always had a fascination for life sciences, but as a young man I used my back not my brain to make a living. About fifteen years ago I found I did not want to continue down the path I was on. A friend suggested I enlist. And here I am."

"Just enlisted?" Sulu asked. "You came into the service more than ten years older than

the average recruit. Worked your way up through the ranks to lieutenant. And now you are the top ranking med tech on any starship in the fleet. I would say you made the right choice fifteen years ago."

"I'd have to agree." Afrah said. "Starfleet has been good to me."

Commander Sulu nodded. He was studying the systems analysis again. "What do you know about the shuttle's propulsion systems?"

"Not a lot." Mr. Afrah said. "But I can read a technical schematic with the best of them."

"Ok." Sulu pointed at the section he was studying. "Both booster propulsion units are in tact. And three of the five main engine modules are damaged but still functional."

"But that is not enough to take off and make it to Outpost Six." Mr. Afrah said. "Right?"

"Well, if our friends weren't still up there, I might be willing to try it." Sulu nodded.

"But you are right. It is risky."

"So units two and three are off line." Afrah said as he studied the readouts. "What did it look like when you first inspected it?"

"Unit three is just gone." Sulu said. "Unit two does not look too bad, but I am not getting any response when I try to access it."

"Tried using a different interface?" Afrah asked.

"Yes. No response." Sulu added. "Generally you can piggyback one units control system on another, but it's not working."

"The...um..." Lt. Afrah tried a few controls. "The interface itself seems to be responding. But the unit is not."

"Right." Sulu nodded. "The problem is some where further down the line. I've been trying to trace it."

"Could there be a problem with the diagnostic system?" Mr. Afrah asked.

"Hmmm. I don't know." Sulu said. "Run a diagnostic of communications. We know that is working."

"Aye." Lt. Afrah turned to the other computer terminal and ran the diagnostic. It was only a minute or two before Afrah reported, "I'm getting error messages on the universal translator and the frequency lock."

"That's not right." Sulu shook his head. "I can't swear by the translator, but I know the frequency lock is working."

"If we can't trust the diagnostic, how can we trace the problem?"

"It will be a little more difficult, but it's possible." Sulu said "We'll have to check each circuit as we go down the grid."

"That could take some time." Lt. Afrah noted.

"Well, it's not like we are going any where fast." Sulu adjusted his screen to study the engine control boards. "Check the fuel status to each unit."

"Quantity?" Afrah asked.

"Also pressure and flow." Sulu added.

"Aye." Mr. Afrah went right to work. It went slowly. They checked each and every connection, relay, and component of all the affected systems. While they were working Dr. McCoy and Mr. Fiedler woke up and joined them. Some of the work involved taking up floor panels to physically trace the controls back to the engines. Working space was limited but the

four of them managed to find the problem with engine number 2.

"Try it now." Mr. Fiedler yelled from the aft section.

"Good." Sulu said. "I'm getting some readings now."

Mr. Afrah appeared at the door to the aft section and asked. "Can we close it up then?"

"Not yet." Sulu said studying his readings. "Adjust the fuel flow to unit two by negative eight percent."

"Right." Afrah nodded and turned back to Fiedler. "You got the energy converter, Dan?"

"I heard." Fiedler responded. "Negative eight."

"That's good." Sulu called. "Go ahead and close it up."

"Is it enough?" McCoy asked from the co-pilot's seat.

"To get off the planet, yes." Sulu said. "But the mine field and the pirates still present a problem."

"How long has it been since we heard from this Bartell character?" McCoy asked.

"Maybe he took your advice and cleared out."

"It's been over two hours." Sulu said. "But I wouldn't count on anything as far as he is concerned."

"So what do we do? Wait?"

"We can't afford to wait too long, Doc." Sulu said quietly. "The storm is showing no signs of breaking up and the dust is building up on the port side of the ship. If we wait too long it could be a problem at take off."

"And we still haven't heard from Enterprise?"

"That is worrisome." Sulu nodded. "The outpost is less than an hour away with warp drive. If they are still there, they would have received our message quite a while ago."

"There are several possible reasons why they haven't answered." McCoy said.

"True." Sulu agreed. The two med techs joined them from the aft section of the shuttle. "And none of them are good."

"It's all locked down back there." Lt. Afrah reported. "Emergency supplies are stowed away. We're ready to go whenever you are."

"Well. There's no time like the present." Sulu sighed. Fiedler and Afrah sat in the forward most passenger's seat. "Hold tight. This could be a short ride."

Sulu started the four functioning engines modules and brought the booster propulsion units up to full power. He slowly inched the throttle forward and the ship started to move. Sulu could feel the variation from the normal power flow caused by the loss of engine module three. The other three officers simply felt the ship jerk forward and slowly leave the planet surface. In less than a minute they had climbed out of the dust storm. When they achieved orbit, the four officers breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Sulu completed approximately two thirds of an orbit to position the ship for the trip to Outpost Six. There was no immediate sign of the pirate ship. Sensors had no contact with any of the mines. Sulu set course and pushed the small ship to its best speed. The engine modules were meant to work together. The loss of one module decreased power by slightly more than one fifth.

"Sensors on maximum." Dr. McCoy was still serving as co-pilot. "Looks clear right now."

"Good." Sulu nodded. He accessed a subspace transmission frequency, but did not

bother to code the message. "Galileo to Enterprise. Emergency repairs complete. We are operational but not one hundred per cent. Please rendezvous at earliest possible moment. We are on our way. Galileo out."

"The Starship Enterprise?" Bartell's amused voice asked across the subspace channel. "Starfleet, are you trying to scare me?"

"I am required to report changing conditions to my commanding officer." Sulu replied evenly.

"Bartell!" The woman's voice again. This time the edge in her voice wasn't anger, it was fear. "They are back!"

"Where?" Bartell asked hurriedly.

"It's gone." She reported. "But I swear the contact was there."

"Where Lucas?" Bartell demanded again.

"Edge of the net." Lucas said. "Bearing 330 mark 15."

Sulu looked at McCoy. The doctor just shook his head. He had not seen a thing. It must have been out of their range. Sulu asked. "What is it, Bartell?"

"A ghost." Bartell snapped. "It looks a lot like a Romulan ghost. Too bad you don't have a cloak, Starfleet. Now would be a good time to hide."

"How often have you had this contact before?" Sulu asked. But no one answered. "Bartell?"

Sulu closed the channel. McCoy looked over at him. "On to Outpost Six?"

"What choice do we have?" Sulu asked. "Perhaps the Romulan will keep the pirates busy."

"But who will keep the Romulans busy?" McCoy asked. Sulu didn't bother to answer. He just held his course and pushed the already damaged ship to its limits. With their new power limits it would now require almost ten hours to reach their destination. After a few minutes, McCoy asked suddenly "What was that?"

"What?" Sulu looked to the sensor readout that McCoy was staring at.

"It's gone." McCoy shook his head. "But momentarily, there was a ship. I'm sure of it."

"Did you get a bearing or distance?" Sulu asked.

"Bearing 56 mark 8." McCoy reported. "Distance was approximately 65,000 kilometers. But it was only there for a second."

"But was it a Romulan or our pirate friend?" Sulu asked.

"I just don't know." McCoy shook his head in frustration. "It wasn't there long enough. Sorry."

"All right." Sulu said. "If it is a Romulan ship, then it is breaking the treaty just by being here. We'll have to use that to our advantage."

"Any ideas?" McCoy asked.

"Galileo to Enterprise." Sulu said opening a subspace channel. "We have had a brief sensor contact with a possible Romulan ship. I repeat the identification was not confirmed. We are on course for rendezvous and will keep you informed of any further contact. Galileo out."

"Giving them a reason to stay cloaked?" McCoy asked.

"Without a positive identification, the treaty has not been broken." Sulu said "But if we disappear now, Starfleet will blame the Romulans."

"The Romulans could still destroy us and blame it on Bartell and his crew." McCoy offered..

"Possible." Sulu admitted "But how would the Romulans explain knowing of Bartell's existence? Their sensor nets do not extend this far into Federation space."

"You're sure about that?" McCoy raised one eyebrow.

"Reasonably sure." Sulu said without looking at the doctor. "Just keep your eyes on the sensor readouts."

McCoy just nodded and watched the read outs.

"Admiral." Uhura reported finally. "I have a new message from the Galileo."

"Let's hear it." Kirk said.

Uhura nodded and switched the message to audio. "Galileo to Enterprise. Emergency repairs complete. We are operational but not one hundred per cent. Please rendezvous at earliest possible moment. We are on our way. Galileo out."

"No mention of another ship." Kirk looked over at Spock. "How are the repairs coming along on the Maak?"

"The Romulans appear to be making progress on the warp field phase adjustment." Spock reported. "It still reads slightly out of alignment, however within an acceptable operating range. The ship is now capable of leaving the Neutral Zone."

"About time." Kirk said. "Uhura, open a channel to the Romulan ship."

"Aye Sir." Uhura followed her orders. The Romulan Commander appeared on their main view screen. "Channel open."

"Romulan Commander." Kirk said "Your ship appears to be in good working order. It is time to withdraw from the Neutral Zone or risk war with the Federation."

"Of course, Admiral Kirk." The commander replied evenly. "My crew is presently completing the repairs. We will be ready to depart in twenty of your minutes."

"Not good enough." Kirk said. "Your repairs can be finished up in your own space. You will withdraw now."

"Admiral." The Romulan replied. "What difference can twenty minutes make?"~

"No difference at all. The treaty is clear. You will withdraw now." Kirk said. "Lt. Poremski, lock phasers on the Maak. Arm photon torpedoes."

"Aye Sir." Lt. Poremski responded. "Phasers are locked on target. Torpedoes are armed and ready."

"In accordance with the Treaty of Algernon we are withdrawing from the Neutral Zone." The Romulan Commander said with an official air and terminated to connection without further comment. The Enterprise bridge crew watched as the bird of prey slowly turned and started towards her own space.

"Admiral." Uhura said. "Another message from Galileo."

"On speaker." Kirk ordered.

"Galileo to Enterprise." Sulu's voice filled the bridge. "We have had a brief sensor contact with a possible Romulan ship. I repeat the identification was not confirmed. We are on course for rendezvous and will keep you informed of any further contact. Galileo out."

"Chekov, set course for the Galileo." Kirk ordered.

"Course set and laid in, Sir." Chekov said. He had that course ready for hours.

"Warp nine."

The crew on the shuttle held their collective breath while McCoy watched the sensor readouts. Less than ten minutes had passed since they last saw the bird of prey when McCoy said, "There it is again. Dead ahead...bearing zero mark zero."

"Definitely a Bird of prey." Sulu said. He adjusted course to give the Romulans a wide berth. Then the ship cloaked again. "What is he doing?"

"More to the point." McCoy drawled. "Why?"

"Ever seen a cat with a mouse?" Mr Fiedler asked from behind Sulu. No one bothered to acknowledge him. "They do it just because they can."

"There it is again." Lt. Afrah said before McCoy could open his mouth. "Bearing 115 mark minus 35."

"It's gone." McCoy reported seconds later.

"So he can fly circles around us." Mr. Fiedler said. "That's not exactly fresh information." Sulu opened a hailing frequency. "Hey Bartell. Are you still out there?"

"Getting nervous Starfleet?" Bartell's voice was barely a whisper.

"Nervous?" Sulu tried his best to sound calm and nonchalant. "I'm just looking for information. What do you know about our transient ghost?"

"I wouldn't worry about him." Bartell said. "He hasn't got the audacity to show himself around here for too long."

"You've seen the Romulan ship before?" Sulu asked.

"Off and on." Bartell said. "They never show themselves for long. Damn cowards."

"And you never reported this?" Sulu asked.

"Reported?" Bartell laughed. "I've never reported anything in my life."

"Leave it alone, Bartell." the woman on his ship whispered. "Let's get out of here. I know a great little bar on Rigel. We've made enough here to vacation for a long time."

"Relax Lucus." Bartell said. "We're safe. I want to watch the show."

"Bartell..." Another deep voice menaced. Abruptly, the pirate ship terminated the subspace connection with the Starfleet shuttle. But the shuttle crew did not have time to think about developments on the pirate ship.

"Bird of prey decloaking." McCoy said. "Bearing 23 mark 0."

"Romulan ship." Sulu hailed the ship. "This is Commander Sulu piloting the Starfleet shuttle Galileo. You have broken the treaty by entering Federation space. Explain."

"I need not explain myself to you." the translation came through the universal translator in slow measured words. "Does Starfleet think so little of the Star Empire that they foolishly send out unarmed ships along our border?"

"Does the Romulan Military Forces have so little respect for their government's treaties that they cross the Neutral Zone at will?" Sulu responded. "If so, this could alter Federation policies."

"The chances of Starfleet ever knowing are minimal." The Romulan said. "Your Starship is not likely to rendezvous with you soon. They are otherwise engaged."

"She is powering weapons systems." Mr. Afrah reported. "Our shields still holding at fifty percent of power. They'll never hold."

"What's that?" McCoy asked himself as movement caught his eye on the sensor readouts. "One of those mines. No, two. On a direct course for the Romulan ship."

"Her shields are up?" Sulu asked.

"Yes." McCoy nodded. "Another mine is coming in. How can Bartell launch these things while cloaked?"

"Message coming in." Mr. Afrah said before Sulu could answer McCoy's question. He was leaning over McCoy's shoulder.

"Galileo, this is Enterprise." Kirk's voice came across subspace. "We are on our way. Hold on. Enterprise out."

"The mines are acting more like torpedoes now." Lt. Afrah said as he watched the sensors. "They are picking up speed as they near their target."

"Why hasn't the Romulan fired at them?" Fiedler asked. But none of them had any answer. The first mine impacted on the Romulan's shields. The second mine was only seconds behind the first. It impacted in precisely the same spot.

"Report." Sulu asked.

"Their port shield is gone." Afrah reported.

"Last mine impacting in three seconds." McCoy added. But before it could strike the Romulan ship fired disrupters and destroyed the mine. The explosion sent a shock wave that rocked the Starfleet shuttle.

"Another mine coming into range." McCoy said.

"On course for the Romulan ship, I hope." Sulu said. McCoy nodded. The Romulan fired again. Another shock wave rocked the shuttle.

"What is the meaning of this?" The Romulan commander accused across subspace.

"I would think that was clear." Sulu said.

"These weapons are not coming from your shuttle." The Romulan said. "Who is this Bartell who can fire while cloaked?"

"I'd like to know more about him myself. But I guess those answers will have to wait until the Enterprise arrives. She is on her way." Sulu said. The Romulan ship jumped to warp speed and disappeared from their screens. "Bartell. Thanks."

"Bartell has been temporarily relieved of command." A deep voice came back across subspace.

"Then to whom do I owe my thanks?" Sulu asked.

"It's not important." the man answered.

"Don't be silly, Brady." Lucas said. "A friend in Starfleet can't be a bad thing."

"I'll choose my own friends, Maryann." Brady said. "I believe we will be on our way before that Starship shows up. Good luck, Galileo."