

Commander Sulu released control of the shuttle to the Enterprise. The tractor beam pulled them gently into the landing bay. After the initial relief of seeing the Enterprise again, none of the officers had expressed their joy at returning to their ship. It was strictly business as usual.

Commander Scott waited for them as they disembarked. "Permission to come aboard Sir." Sulu performed the ritual for his crew.

"Granted." Scotty said quickly. "Now show me what you've done to my ship, lad."

Sulu followed Scotty around to the back of the shuttle. "She's just held together with spit and good intentions, Scotty. Engine module three is gone. We had to rig controls through life support to access unit two. Aft shields are gone. Forward shields are stable at fifty per cent. We reconfigured to give maximum spread."

"And you flew her out like that?" Scotty asked. "I'm not sure whether to call that bravery or just plain fool hardy."

"It was necessary." Sulu answered. "I'm sure Mr. Spock will want the sensor logs down loaded as soon as possible. There will be questions about the weapon that hit us."

"All right then." Scotty said as he removed the temporary panel from the hole in the back of the shuttle. His mind already on the repairs. "The Admiral will be waiting for you in the conference room. The sensor logs will be down loaded by the time you get there."

"Thanks Scotty." Sulu said, but Scotty was already barking orders to the repair team. Sulu joined McCoy and the two med techs who were already on their way to the conference room to report to Admiral Kirk.

Once they were all seated, Sulu made a brief report that summarized their trip. Spock studied the sensor logs as Sulu spoke. "When the mines attacked the Romulan ship." Sulu continued. "The method of attack was totally different. Like torpedoes, the device increased speed as it approached target for maximum destructive effect. I don't know how the pirate controlled these devices."

"Speculation?" Kirk asked.

"I do not think the pirate ship fired while cloaked." Sulu said. "It seems more likely that he altered commands to mines that were already in place. We intercepted no commands on any frequency going to the devices, however we were otherwise occupied at the time."

"Interesting devices." Captain Spock said. "I would like to know how you were able to avoid some, but others did not alert sensors until they were too close to avoid."

"I never claimed to be an expert in reading sensors." McCoy said his eye brow raised at Spock.

"There was no apparent difference in the readouts between the devices we detected at three hundred thousand kilometers and the one we did not detect until six thousand kilometers." Sulu said.

"Sounds like we need a closer look at one of these things." Kirk said. "Spock, would Enterprise sensors be able to tell us more?"

"Our sensors do have a longer range, but they are essentially the same. However the Enterprise does have greater capacity to analyze the sensor data." Spock nodded. "And since the device does not necessarily detonate on contact, it may be possible to hold the device in a tractor beam for further study."

"Good." Kirk stood up signaling the end of the meeting. "Sulu, I want you on the bridge for this."

"Aye Sir." Sulu nodded and left the conference room with the two med techs.

"Jim." McCoy hung back while everyone else left.

"What is it, Bones?" Kirk asked when they were alone.

"Sulu has been on duty for the last eighteen hours with little more than three hours sleep." McCoy said simply.

"He wasn't complaining." Kirk said.

"Sulu? Complain?" McCoy just raised his eyebrow at Kirk. They both knew Commander Sulu would continue on duty as long as he could stand up. "He needs some sleep."

"He also knows more about that pirate's weapons and his attack style than we do." Kirk said as they walked out the conference room and onto the turbo lift together. Kirk ordered them on their way. "Bridge. I need him on the bridge. I'll have him relieved as soon as possible. Ok?"

"It will have to do." McCoy mumbled.

"What about you, Bones?" Kirk grinned. "You sound like you could use some sleep yourself."

"You can leave crew evaluations to me, Admiral." McCoy got the last word in just before the turbo lift opened onto the bridge of the Enterprise. Commander Sulu was already at his station at the helm. The rest of the senior staff was also on duty. Kirk took his seat in the center of the bridge while McCoy assumed his usual position at the Admiral's side. Spock monitored the sensors.

"Take us back to this mine field, Mr. Sulu." Kirk said. "Full impulse."

"Aye Sir." Sulu nudged the large ship to the correct course. It only took a couple of minutes to reach the mine field.

"I am reading twenty three mines with in sensor range." Spock said. "The closest is seventy five thousand kilometers."

"On screen." Kirk ordered. "Let's get a look at this thing. Hold this position, Mr. Sulu."

The image that appeared was barely visible. "Magnifying." Spock said. The view changed several times until Spock was satisfied with the clarity and detail. The device was a cylinder roughly the size of a standard federation probe with a larger head on one end giving it the look of a large arrow. "The hull of the device is an unknown toranium alloy. The larger end houses the guidance system and a small communications array. The rest of it is propulsion and explosive."

"It doesn't seem very interested in us." Kirk commented.

"The device has a range of influence." Spock said. "Which is one of the reason for laying a mine field. Shuttle sensor logs indicate the device ignores anything beyond fifty thousand kilometers."

"Can we determine anything more from here?" Kirk asked.

"As you know, toranium is difficult for our sensors to penetrate. The unknown composition of this alloy only compounds the problem." Spock said. "I have configured the sensors for maximum penetration, but to ascertain the programming differences I need a hands on examination."

"Bring it aboard the ship?" Kirk asked.

"Not my first recommendation." Spock said. "The first step would be to successfully capture one of the devices in a tractor beam."

"But to get close enough to get a tractor beam on it would activate the device." Kirk said.

"Exactly." Spock said.

"Assuming we could overcome that problem." Kirk continued. "What is your first recommendation?"

"Beam it onto a shuttle craft where we could examine the device first hand without endangering the ship." Spock suggested.

"We?" Kirk asked.

"I would suggest Commander Scott and myself." Spock said.

"A logical choice." Kirk looked at Spock with just the hint of a smile. "Mr. Sulu, what about your pirate friends?"

"Brady implied he was leaving the area." Sulu turned towards Kirk. "But I wouldn't trust that one hundred per cent, Sir."

"Why not?" Kirk asked. "He did come to your rescue."

"Yes Sir." Sulu nodded. "But there was an ongoing power struggle on that ship, Admiral. There's no way to know who is in control now. And with the cloaking device, they could be anywhere."

"All right. We'll just have to keep a sharp eye out for them." Kirk said. "Now as to our first problem. Getting closer without activating the thing. Suggestions?"

"If we could determine which frequency the communications array uses to accept commands." Chekov spoke up. "We could order it to deactivate."

"There is only a limited band of frequencies that penetrate toranium." Uhura agreed. "Finding the right one shouldn't be too hard, but then you'd have to use the correct command language."

"Since the device is being used as a weapon, it would be logical to assume some type of code is in place." Spock added.

"I understand that toranium is a Cardasian metal." McCoy said. "And Sulu tells me Cardasians have been known to lay mine fields and still fly through them. I'd say try a Cardasian code."

"We know very little about the Cardasians, Doctor." Spock said. "There is no guarantee this device comes from them."

"Uhura, find that frequency. Try to make contact." Kirk ordered.

"Aye Sir." Uhura nodded. "I'll need sensor reading feedback of my attempts."

"Chekov, give Uhura a hand." Kirk said.

"Aye Sir." Chekov left the navigation station to confer with Uhura at communications. While they were coordinating their actions, Kirk went over to the science station.

"Spock, is there any way you can determine what code or language the device will respond to?" Kirk asked as he stepped up to the outer circle around the edge of the bridge.

"Only with trial and error, Admiral." Spock said turning his chair towards Kirk again. "And then we are in danger of saying the wrong thing."

"You mean the wrong code may act as a booby trap and set it off?" Kirk asked.

"Quite possible." Spock nodded. "The Cardasian mine field was detected by long range

sensors by the U.S.S. Republic while patrolling along their border. Captain Sheldon reported that the Cardasian ships were able to navigate through the field unharmed. She suggested they transmitted a recognition code word to the mines."

"But she never decoded that transmission?" Kirk asked.

"Not to my knowledge." Spock shook his head.

"If Heddy had broken that code, the whole sector would have heard about it." Kirk laughed. Spock's only answer was the slightest nod of his head. He turned back to his station and switched on the come line.

"Spock to Mr. Scott."

After a few seconds the answer came. "Scott here. Go ahead Mr. Spock."

"Have you downloaded the communications log from the Galileo Mr. Scott?" Spock asked.

"Not yet, Mr. Spock." Scotty answered. "I've had my hands full replacing these engine modules. There's quite a bit of damage here. I assume you need them right away?"

"As soon as you can, Mr. Scott." Spock said.

"Give me a few minutes." Scotty said. "Scott out."

"What are you thinking, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"That the answer is in those logs?" McCoy asked from the lower level of the bridge. He leaned on the railing between the two levels. "We were just too busy to see it?"

"Essentially, Doctor." Spock said. "Once Commander Uhura has isolated the proper frequency, we can scan for that frequency on the communications log. It would at least give me a place to start to determine the command codes."

"Admiral." Uhura said. "We are being hailed by Outpost Six."

"On screen." Kirk ordered.

Commander Ed DuBovoy appeared on the main view screen. "Admiral Kirk, we have had another brief sensor contact with a Romulan ship. It appeared to be going back across the Neutral Zone."

"If he was heading home, there's not much we can do about it right now." Kirk came back down to the command chair as he spoke.

"Admiral, just because he showed himself leaving our space does not mean he has left the area." Commander DuBovoy said with as much urgency as he dare use with the Admiral.

"I know Ed." Kirk smiled sympathetically. "But we are only minutes away at top speed. And what we are looking at here may have some bearing on your mysterious ghosts. So keep me informed and stand by. Kirk out."

Kirk turned to Uhura to make sure she terminated the connection before the commander had time to object. She nodded and the main view returned to the view of the closest mine.

"Do you really think these pirates have something to do with what is going on in the Neutral Zone?" McCoy asked Kirk.

"According to the Galileo's sensor log," Spock said. "The pirate ship was the same size and configuration as a ship that has been crossing the Neutral Zone regularly."

"And I doubt it is a coincidence that the Romulans ended up here." Kirk added. "After all there's not much here of military interest. They must have been looking for something."

"The Romulan was interested in Bartell's ship." Sulu added. "He was especially

concerned that the pirate could fire while cloaked."

"But you don't think that's the case." Kirk said.

"If he could fire while cloaked, why lay a mine field?" Sulu asked.

"But why would Bartell cross the Neutral Zone?" Dr. McCoy asked. "His crew did not seem to want to tangle with the Romulans."

"Maybe they had tangled with them before." Kirk suggested.

"If Bartell has been crossing the Neutral Zone regularly." Sulu suggested. "He may have been laying the same kind of traps in Romulan space as he has here."

"A dangerous business." McCoy said.

"Not necessarily, Doctor." Spock said. "Laying a mine field would allow the pirate to stay cloaked while attacking where the Romulans would have to decloak to destroy the mines."

"And since this pirate can control the mines and some seem able to elude sensors." Kirk finished. "The pirate would not have to decloak until the Romulan ship was disabled."

"Mr. Spock." Uhura said. "The device has responded to my transmission. Transferring data to your station."

"Are you sure it heard us?" Kirk asked as Spock studied the information Uhura had sent.

"It heard us." Chekov said from the second science station. "The device has changed course and is heading this way."

"Speed?" Kirk asked Chekov.

"It is not in a hurry." Chekov reported. "It is traveling at less than one quarter impulse."

"Spock, can we put a tractor beam on it while it's active?" Kirk asked.

"Possibly." Spock answered slowly as he studied his readouts. "But I can not assure the outcome."

"Well if this one explodes, there are twenty two others in the area." Kirk said.

"It sends out a significant shock wave when it explodes." Sulu said. "Which could activate the other mines."

"Forty five thousand kilometers and closing." Chekov reported.

"We are either going to have to destroy it or try to hold it." Kirk said. "Spock?"

"I have found records of transmissions to the mine from the cloaked ship in the Galileo's communication logs." Spock said. "But it is coded. It may take a few minutes to decode."

"I don't have a few minutes, Spock." Kirk returned to the center seat. "Ready tractor beams, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye Sir." Sulu said "The device will be in tractor beam range in fifteen seconds."

"Twenty eight thousand." Chekov reported.

"Put the tractor beam on it as soon as possible, Sulu." Kirk said. "If it's going to explode, I want it as far from the ship as possible."

"Aye Sir." Sulu waited watching the readout of the distance between the mine and Enterprise. As soon as it was in range, he activated the tractor beam. "Tractor beam is holding the device at five thousand kilometers. Power out put reads stable."

"It's not resisting?" Kirk asked.

"The device's propulsion system has shut down." Chekov reported from the second science station.

"Spock?" Kirk asked.

"The device has not received any new commands." Spock turned his chair briefly towards the Admiral. "It must be in the programming."

"The code?" Kirk asked.

"Working on it, Admiral." Spock said.

"Strange way for a mine to act." Kirk said to himself.

"We didn't run from it." McCoy said.

"What do you mean, Bones?"

"In the shuttle," McCoy explained. "When we ran from it, the mine followed aggressively."

"When we stopped because the pirate ship decloaked in front of us." Sulu added. "The device slowed down and attached itself to our shields. I had assumed the pirate ship was in direct control of the mine."

"But we have no indication of the pirate ship now." Kirk slowly walked back over to Spock's station. "Chekov, can we detect any additional information from the device in the tractor beam?"

"It's energy output has changed significantly." Chekov said.

"I take you mean more than just shutting down it's engines?" Kirk asked.

"Yes Sir." Chekov studied the sensors readouts. "I am now reading a diminishing graviton pulse. It was not there before, Admiral."

"A graviton pulse should have been obvious from first sensor contact." Kirk said.

"Yes Sir." Chekov nodded. "It started just after the engines shut down at a rate of twenty pulses per minute and is now down to half that."

"Mr. Chekov." Spock said "Scan for tetryon particles."

"Aye Sir." Chekov said adjusting his instruments. "I do not read any tetryon particles, Mr. Spock. But they should only exist in subspace, Sir."

"Indeed, Mr. Chekov." Spock nodded. "However a diminishing graviton pulse is often used to disperse tetryon particles. I am unaware of other uses for this type of pulse."

"Another mine, Admiral." Chekov said suddenly. "Bearing 45 mark 6. Distance six thousand kilometers."

"Six thousand?" Kirk asked. "How did it get so close?"

"I do not know, Sir." Chekov said. "But it is coming in twice as fast as the first one. Fully armed and increasing speed. Four thousand Kilometers."

"Ready phasers, Mr. Sulu." Kirk ordered.

"Phasers ready." Sulu answered.

"Fire." Kirk ordered. Sulu fired the phasers exploding the attacking device just two thousand kilometers from the ship. The light from the explosion momentarily filled the view screen. The shock wave rocked the large ship slightly. "Explanation, Mr. Chekov."

"It appeared on the sensors suddenly, as if it had been cloaked, Sir." Chekov said.

"Cloaked?" Kirk asked. "A cloaked mine? Why?"

"I do not know, Sir." Chekov said.

"Admiral." Spock said. "I have broken the code. I believe I can direct the device in the tractor beam to deactivate its detonation components and to download its programming for

further study. If successful it may negate the necessity of a hands on examination."

"By all means, Spock." Kirk said. "Transmit the command."

Spock finished his coded command and transferred it to Uhura station. "Commander Uhura, transmit message using the mutual interface linkage to receive downloaded data."

"Aye Sir." Uhura acknowledged. Her fingers moving expertly over her control board. "I have a command acknowledgment from the device. And I am receiving data."

"Spock, will this code work for all these mines?" Kirk asked. "Or would they each have their own code?"

"Logically, one code should command all these devices." Spock said. "However only direct experience will answer that question for sure."

"Dr. McCoy, Mr. Sulu." Kirk said. "You are relieved. Get a good night's sleep."

"About time." McCoy grumbled. Sulu locked his station. They got on the turbo lift together. "I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

"I'm not sure which I need more." Sulu agreed. "Food or sleep."

"A little food first." McCoy was sure what he needed. "Then sleep. I never could sleep on an empty stomach."

"Sounds like a plan." Sulu nodded.