

After a quick meal, Sulu slept the rest of the third shift and most of first shift. He pulled himself out of bed and headed to the gym for a pre-breakfast work out. His week on Earth not had left him much time for his normal exercise routine and he felt the need to get back to it.

By the time he made it to the dining hall, it was crowded with Enterprise's second shift. Even though he did not normally work second shift, Chekov was there eating breakfast. Sulu got his tray and joined him. "Didn't you just pull a double shift?"

"Yes." Chekov nodded between bites of his breakfast.

"I thought you might take today off and schedule Marsha in your place." Sulu said with practiced nonchalance. He knew damn well the puzzle of the space mines had Chekov hooked.

"You'd rather work with Marsha than me?" Chekov teased. He was not about to let Sulu get the better of him. "I just may have to tell the Princess about that."

"Threats? I've been back less than one day and I get threats?" Sulu laughed. Chekov just shrugged. Sulu turned to a more serious subject. "Has Mr. Spock come up with anything more on how the mines worked?"

"Even Mr. Spock has to sleep some time." Chekov said. "But he did leave me the initial analysis of the down loaded programming. It would seem that the graviton pulse the device sent out was meant to call the other devices. Almost like a distress call."

"Unusual method." Sulu drank some of his tea.

"Yes." Chekov agreed. "The only reason I can think to use that kind of pulse is that it would penetrate most force fields."

"Which would be useful." Sulu nodded. "Anything more on the second type of device?"

"No." Chekov sipped his coffee. "But it seems to me that the programming must be different from the first. More aggressive. And that will make it harder to ascertain how it works and why."

"We better go." Sulu checked the time. As they got on the turbo lift, Sulu asked. "Then you still don't know how the mine could be cloaked?"

"No." Chekov said. "It doesn't make any sense. The power requirements for a cloak are overwhelming for a device this size."

On the bridge they relieved the first shift. Spock was in command. The mine they had captured the night before was no longer held in the tractor beam and Enterprise had backed off from the mine field to assure they would not activate anything else.

"Mr. Chekov." Spock turned his chair at the science station towards the center of the bridge. "Run an analysis of the sensor logs from the moment we captured the first device in the tractor beam to the moment the second device appeared."

"Aye sir." Chekov went to the second science station. He had no idea what he was looking for, but he studied the short time period on the sensors repeatedly. It was the next logical step.

The fourth time Chekov studied the sensor something seemed wrong. He played it again. He enhanced the background readings and played it again. "Mr. Spock. I have

found an inconsistency."

"What is it, Mr. Chekov?" Spock asked coming over to Chekov's station.

Chekov switched the sensor log to one of the small screens so that the two science officers could look at it together. "When we first encountered the mine field the sensor indicated twenty three mines." Chekov pointed to the screen. "But here, just after the first device has initiated the graviton pulse, I read twenty eight. Seconds later there are twenty three again. That is how it remains until the device we destroyed mysteriously appeared."

"Interesting." Spock commented playing the log again. "How do you account for the difference in the readings?"

Chekov took his time in answering. It was not wise to throw around half baked theories when Spock was around. "I suppose it is possible that some of the mines have a partial cloak, more like an invisibility screen, so that they remain hidden only from one angle. It would require less power to generate and would allow the more aggressive devices to reach their target before being detected."

"A possibility, Mr. Chekov." Spock nodded. He reached down and opened the com line "Admiral Kirk to the bridge."

"On my way." Kirk responded. By the time the Admiral and Dr. McCoy reached the bridge, the two science officers had replayed the log several times and discussed several different possibilities. "Ok, Spock. What have you got?"

"Mr. Chekov has proposed a theory of an invisibility screen." Spock said.

"Chekov?"

"When the device in our tractor beam sent out the graviton pulse, sensors momentarily picked up five mines scattered through the field that had not shown up on sensors before." Chekov said.

"The pulse caused them to decloak?" Kirk asked.

"No Sir." Chekov explained. "The mines are not truly cloaked. It would seem that they are equipped with a shield that bends light around them but only makes them invisible to sensors from one angle."

"So just what did this pulse do?" D. McCoy asked.

"When you slow the log down, it seems that the mines all turned towards the pulse at the same time." Chekov continued. "It sent out a distress call. All the aggressive mines reacted. The one closest to us intervened. The others returned to their original positions."

"That made them disappear on our sensors again."

"Yes Sir." Chekov nodded. "Only a theory at this point, Admiral. To further test it we would have to capture one of the more aggressive mines."

"Why don't we just tell them all to deactivate?" Dr. McCoy asked.

"We do not know that the aggressive mines have the same programming, Doctor." Chekov said. "Or if we would be able to find all of them without the distress call from the first type of mine."

"All right." Kirk nodded. "Anything else?"

"We should be prepared." Spock said. "There is evidence the aggressive mines

are in contact with each other. To capture one may trigger all of them."

"Wonderful." McCoy's sarcasm got no answer.

"Mr. Sulu bring phasers to full power." Kirk left the science station and took his seat in the center of the bridge. Chekov returned to the navigation console. "Stand ready to fire on short notice."

"Aye Sir." Sulu responded. "Phasers are ready."

"Take us into the field slowly, Mr. Sulu." Kirk said. "We'll put the tractor beam on one of the mines, deactivate it after it sends out the graviton pulse, and be ready to grab the aggressive mine when it shows up."

"Aft thrusters at full power." Sulu slowly started the large ship towards the mine field.

"The closest mine is at sixty five thousand kilometers." Chekov reported.

"Bearing zero zero eight mark thirty three."

"Stand by tractor beam." Kirk ordered.

"Fifty five thousand."

"The device has changed direction and is now on an intersect course with the Enterprise." Spock reported. "Speed increasing. The device will be within tractor beam range within twenty seconds."

"Twenty two thousand." Chekov reported the distance. "And closing fast."

"As soon as it's in range, Mr. Sulu." Kirk said.

"Aye Sir." Sulu nodded, keeping his eyes on the readouts. The seconds ticked by.

"Activating tractor beam. Holding the device at forty eight hundred kilometers."

"Propulsion system is shutting down." Spock said. "Graviton pulse has been activated. Cycling at twenty pulses per second."

"Transmit deactivation command." Kirk ordered.

"Aye Sir." Uhura sent the coded message.

"All systems on the device are shutting down." Spock studied the sensor readouts.

"A second device. Sixty five hundred kilometers. Bearing one fifty three mark sixty six."

"Tractor beam, Sulu."

"Aye." Sulu released the inactive device and switched the beam to the bearing Spock had given. "Tractor beam holding device at fifty two hundred kilometers."

But no sooner than the words were out of his mouth, the second mine exploded within the beam. The shock wave traveled up the tractor beam and rocked the large star ship momentarily. Everyone grabbed something solid to steady themselves. McCoy had to grab the captain's chair to keep his feet.

"Now what?" The Doctor asked.

"Admiral." Spock said before Kirk could answer McCoy. "All the mines have changed course and speed. They will converge on our position in forty five seconds."

"Ut-oh." McCoy said just above a whisper.

"Spock." Kirk turned the command chair towards the science station. "Can we send a general order to deactivate to all of them?"

"Not a general order." Spock said. "However, if the deactivate command was sent simultaneously in all directions, it should have the effect of a general order. Each

mine would have to receive the command individually and directly."

"Uhura, send that command." Kirk ordered.

"Aye Sir." Uhura hurriedly sent her messages out.

"Mr. Chekov." Spock said. "Monitor the aft sensors."

"Aye Sir." Chekov returned to the second science station. He quickly checked the aft sensor readouts and reported. "The mines are shutting down. One by one."

"Incoming mine. Bearing one hundred eighty two mark fifteen." Spock reported as he watched the forward sensors. "Distance forty five hundred kilometers."

"Another one." Chekov said. "Bearing three hundred forty five mark thirty six. Distance sixty two hundred kilometers."

"Sulu, target those mines and fire." Kirk ordered.

"Firing phasers." Sulu reported. First the mine in front of the Enterprise exploded as the phasers found their target, then the one behind the ship did the same.

After a minute while everyone held their breath and watched their control boards, McCoy asked. "Shouldn't there be at least one more of those aggressive mines left?"

"Anything else on sensors, Spock?" Kirk asked.

"I am only reading inactive mines right now." Spock said. "But Dr. McCoy is correct. There is one aggressive mine unaccounted for."

"Did the mines send out a graviton pulse when we ordered them to shut down, Spock?" Kirk asked walking over to the science station.

Spock shook his head. "No Sir. It's possible the last two mines were on course for Enterprise and simply did not respond to the deactivate order. Or something in the deactivate order actually put them on the attack. I have no way of knowing."

"What about the missing mine?" McCoy asked.

"Again, I have no way of knowing what has happened to it." Spock said. "Or why it reacted differently than these last two we destroyed."

"Well." Kirk said. "We can't just leave all these inactive mines hanging around this solar system. I wouldn't want any of Mr. Sulu's pirate friends to go back into business after we've gone. Any suggestions?"

"Would it be possible to send a self destruct command?" Sulu asked.

"Possible." Spock said. "But not advisable. To explode that number of mines in a small area would leave a devastating radiation belt in this system."

"That leaves out destroying them all with phasers." Kirk said.

"Since we know the command language." Chekov suggested "Perhaps we could have them all set course directly into the star. The radiation would have no effect there."

"Spock?"

"I see no reason not to follow Mr. Chekov's suggestion." Spock answered the Admiral. "The effect of the mines exploding on the surface of the star would be negligible."

"It would require that we send a separate command to each mine." Chekov added. "So that each mine received the correct course correction."

"How long would this take, Chekov?" Kirk asked.

"A few minutes for each mine." Chekov said. "At most ninety minutes to change

the course of all the mines if I had Commander Uhura's assistance."

"Good." Kirk nodded. "Proceed."

"Aye Sir." Chekov switched his scan to Uhura's station so they could work together. It took only a few minutes for them to get organized. Then one by one the mines changed course for the system's star. It was an ordinary star, not unlike Sol. Since all of the mines traveled at sublight speed it would take several hours for the mines to reach the outer corona of the star.

"Ok, Spock." Kirk went over to the science station. "How do we locate this last mine?"

"I have been thinking about it, Admiral." Spock turned his chair towards Kirk. "If the Enterprise sent out a graviton pulse mimicking the mines' distress call, the unaccounted for mine should turn at least momentarily making it visible to our sensors."

"What about these others that are now on course for the star?" Kirk asked. "Would the pulse effect them?"

"I would suggest waiting until the deactivated mines have reached the star." Spock said. "Not only would it preclude any possibility of them being effected, it would also clear the sensor field. That would make detection easier."

"Chekov. How long until all those mines have reached the star?"

"Approximately five hours, Sir." Chekov looked up from his work.

"Approximately?" Kirk raised his eyebrow. Science officers were rarely so vague.

"As the mines become caught in the star's gravity, speeds will increase. Travel time will no longer be a constant." Chekov explained. "In five hours all mines will be close enough to the star that it will not be possible for them to pull away. It is possible to calculate the exact time..."

"No." Kirk smiled. "That's good enough."

Admiral Kirk took advantage of the time lag to talk to Commander DuBovoy on Outpost Six. They discussed Sulu's encounter with the Romulan bird of prey. The outpost sensors had no record of a ship crossing the Neutral Zone since Enterprise had left to answer Sulu's last distress call.

Once all the deactivated mines were on course for the system's star, the bridge crew took a lunch break. Sulu and Uhura headed for the dining hall. Chekov promised to meet them and went off to his quarters first.

"So are you going to tell me about the seminar?" Uhura asked as they sat down with their meal.

"It was exhaustive and exhilarating." Sulu grinned. "You would have loved it. Remember Dynarski?"

"Sure, tall skinny kid who was at the Academy with us." Uhura said. "His first name was...Peter. Right?"

"Right. But you'd barely recognize him." Sulu said "He's not so skinny any more and most of his hair is gone."

"I can't imagine." Uhura shook her head. "But what about the seminar itself? Was it just discussion or what?"

"We started each day with simulations of different types of command decisions. Similar to the Kobayashi Maru test, but much more complicated." Sulu said "Then we spent the rest of the day discussing the alternative strategies we used."

"Was it helpful?" Uhura asked. "Do you feel better prepared for command?"

"It was helpful to discuss the different styles each commander used." Sulu said. "I was at a bit of a disadvantage for having worked on one ship and for one captain for so long. Most everyone else there had been assigned to three or more ships in the time I've been on Enterprise."

"Do you regret having turned down that first officer position on Saratoga last year?" Uhura asked.

"No." Sulu said without hesitation. "I had my reasons then and they are still valid. As for the seminar, I held my own in defending my decisions and I learned a few things."

"Well then, I guess it was worth it." Uhura sipped her iced tea. "So, how's Jimmi?"

"She's good." Sulu smiled self consciously. "I introduced her to my mother while I was home."

"Really?" Uhura asked with interest. "How did it go?"

"All right." Sulu nodded. "But Mom suggested I was being selfish where Jimmi is concerned. She says I am thinking of myself and not Jimmi by leaving things... well, casual."

"You two are not casual." Uhura laughed. "No matter what you tell yourselves. I have not seen you even look at another woman in the last four years."

"I look." Sulu said although he wasn't sure why he was defending himself. Chekov finally joined them. "There you are. I thought maybe you had decided to have lunch with Rachel."

"No." Chekov shrugged. "She is no longer interested."

"What did you do?" Sulu laughed. "Or was it what you didn't do?"

"I don't know." Chekov shrugged again. "But it is not important."

"Sounds like the loss of interest was mutual." Uhura noted. Chekov did not respond. He concentrated on his lunch.

"So Pavel, do you think the graviton pulse will help us find the missing mine?" Sulu changed the subject.

"There is only one way to find out." Chekov was grateful to talk about business. "But since it did not respond as the others did before, I am wondering if it is still there."

"The pirate ship?" Sulu asked.

"They may have recovered one of the mines." Chekov nodded. "It would not have required them to decloak. And since they know how the invisibility screen works they could have angled the ship so our sensors never picked it up."

"That would mean the pirate ship would have had to been in the area after you saw the aggressive mines turn." Sulu said. "Or we wouldn't even know one was missing."

"Which would mean they may still be in the area." Uhura said. "How big a ship

was it? What kind of speed was it capable of?"

"She was at least three times the size of the Galileo." Sulu said. "With plenty of power for a cloaking device. I imagine she'd do warp five easily. Maybe more."

"It could easily be out of sensor range now." Chekov said. "The pirate ship could be back in Romulan space by now."

"If that's where they were headed." Sulu said. "They were not too happy to see the Romulans on this side of the Neutral Zone."

"We saw evidence of the pirate ship crossing into Romulan space regularly." Uhura said. "The only reason I can think of for them going there would be to hide from Federation authorities or..."

"Or to set up a similar mine field there as they have here." Sulu finished her thought.

"Perhaps they started there." Chekov said. "And came here when the Romulans came looking for them."

"That would be consistent with some of the comments the pirates made when the bird of prey showed up." Sulu nodded. "But if they are gone, I don't know how we will catch up with them now."

"Or if we'll even look." Uhura said. "Outpost Six is worried about the Romulans not the pirates. Commander DuBovoy was not too happy when we left the Outpost."

"We better get back to the bridge." Chekov said checking the time.

After the entire senior staff had returned to their posts, they prepared to try to find the missing mine. Chekov monitored the mines that were still on course for the star. They were all almost to the point of no return. Admiral Kirk had several conversations with Outpost Six to keep them up to date with the investigation. Commander DuBovoy was not comfortable pushing a superior officer of Kirk's reputation, but he felt the Admiral did not see the Outpost's priorities in the proper perspective.

"Admiral, I believe these pirates have diverted the Enterprise from her mission here." Commander DuBovoy said carefully.

"Ed, it is quite possible that these pirates have a lot to do with the recent sightings of the birds of prey." Kirk said.

"I'm sorry Admiral, but I don't follow you."

"Captain Spock has theorized that the Romulans have been in pursuit of these pirates." Kirk explained. "It is probable that the pirates set up a similar mine field in Romulan space."

"An interesting theory, Sir." DuBovoy said "But there is no proof. And unless we violate the treaty ourselves..."

"Commander." Spock joined Kirk at the command station. "In my study of traffic around the Romulan Outposts I have noted several unexplained explosions. Correlating those explosions with sensor contacts of the pirate ship shows that the ship left Romulan Space shortly after each explosion."

"So." Commander DuBovoy said slowly. "You are suggesting these pirates stopped Romulan ships, seized whatever they could, destroyed the ships, and ran for Federation space."

"Yes." Kirk nodded. "That is what we are suggesting."

"Then why haven't the Romulans asked us for help?" DuBovoy asked. "Or at least accused us of state sponsored terrorism?"

"And admit they couldn't handle one small pirate ship in their own space?" Kirk asked

"That would be uncharacteristic." Commander DuBovoy agreed. He finally seemed to resign himself to Kirk's methods. "Can I expect you'll keep me informed, Admiral?"

"Of course Commander." Kirk smiled. "Enterprise out."

"An overbearing admiral can be such a pain in the..." McCoy teased Kirk quietly. He was of course referring to Kirk's own problems with superior officers.

"Thank you Bones." The Admiral cut Dr. McCoy off in mid sentence. He turned his chair towards the science stations. "Chekov, are we ready?"

"Aye Sir." Chekov nodded. "All the mines have past the point where they can escape the star's gravity."

"Then let's get to it." Kirk said. "Phasers at the ready, Sulu."

"Phasers at full power." Sulu answered.

Spock returned to the science station. "Initiating graviton pulse. Cycling at twenty pulses per second."

"Nothing on aft sensors." Chekov reported after a minute without taking his eyes off the readings.

"Forward sensors also show no sign of any aggressive mines." Spock agreed. Even though they should have seen the results almost immediately, they continued to scan for a short time. But the sensors found nothing.

"So what happened to it?" McCoy finally asked.

"Deactivating graviton pulse." Spock said. He turned in his chair towards Kirk and McCoy. "It would appear the last mine is no longer in the area."

"Could its programming just be different?" Kirk asked.

"It reacted to the graviton pulse before." Spock said. "Or we would have never known it was there. Commander Uhura has been monitoring the only channels that would penetrate the alloy hull. There have been no transmissions on those channels except by us."

"The pirate ship was cloaked." Kirk said. "Could it have recovered the other mine with out our knowledge?"

"It is a distinct possibility." Spock nodded.

"Now what?" McCoy asked.

"Back to Outpost Six." Kirk said. "Warp four, Mr. Sulu."

"Course laid in." Chekov said.

"Warp four." Sulu added. "Aye."