

As the Enterprise approached Outpost Six, Kirk brought Commander DuBovoy up to speed on the destruction of the pirate's mine field. "The mine field has been cleared from the system. But it appears the pirates recovered one of the mines before we could destroy it." Kirk walked around the bridge as he spoke. "Have you had any sensor contacts since our last conversation? Any indication that the pirates may have passed this way?"

"No Sir." DuBovoy stood stiffly in the middle of the operations center with his hands behind his back. He was surrounded by a semi circle of Starfleet's most advanced sensor stations manned by experts. But none of the officers could see his left fist twisting in his right palm while Admiral Kirk talked about the pirates. "None at all. However the Romulan ship, Maak, has returned to her own outpost and remains in orbit there."

"Are there any other Romulan military ships within sensor range?" Kirk asked while he glanced at a report handed to him by Ensign Yat-Sen.

DuBovoy waited for Admiral Kirk to hand the computer padd back to the ensign before answering. "None Admiral."

"Commander." The young man at DuBovoy's elbow reported. He was reading the outpost's long range sensors that were focused on the Romulan station. "The Maak is leaving the Romulan Outpost. Traveling at full impulse."

"Heading?" DuBovoy turned his attention to the ensign. The lanky young officer tapped his controls with precision.

"Straight for the Zone, Sir." The ensign looked up at his commander. "She will cross into the Neutral Zone in six minutes, present speed."

"Confirmed." Spock noted from the science station.

"We'll keep you advised, Commander. Enterprise out." Kirk's orders flowed with crisp certainty as he returned to the command chair. "Plot a course to intercept the Romulan on our side of the Zone."

"Course plotted and laid in." Chekov said.

"Full impulse."

"Full impulse, Aye." Sulu brought the ship around the out post and headed for the edge of the Neutral Zone. The senior staff of Enterprise monitored their systems carefully. They watched as the Maak flew towards them. Slowly she veered off to starboard

"The Maak has slowed to three quarters impulse and changed course." Spock reported "She is now running parallel to the Neutral Zone."

"But staying on her own side?" Kirk asked looking over at Spock.

"Yes." Spock nodded. "The Maak is maintaining a distance of twenty five hundred kilometers from the Neutral Zone."

Kirk sat back and watched the enemy ship. "Sulu, match her course and speed."

"Aye Sir." Sulu said and looked over at Chekov. Chekov checked and set the new course. He nodded to Sulu, who adjusted the ship's heading to the new course and slowed to match the Maak's speed.

"This is a new game." McCoy noted. He stood next to the Captain's chair. "Why is he staying so close to the edge of the Neutral Zone?"

"I don't know." Kirk stared at the main viewer, trying to read the Romulan commander's mind. "Chekov, how long before we reach Outpost Five at this speed?"

"Nine hours, fifteen minutes." Chekov said after checking his console. "She does not seem to be in a hurry."

"No, she doesn't." Kirk leaned forward in his chair. There had to be a clue. Slowly, he turned his chair towards the science station. "Spock, at what point does Outpost Five take over space traffic control?"

"The sensor nets overlap slightly and the Outposts stay in constant contact with the next post down the line." Spock said. "Technically, control passes from one outpost to the next at the halfway mark."

"What difference does that make?" McCoy asked.

"I'm not sure, Bones. But they are taking us on this ride for a reason." Kirk said. He turned towards communications. "Uhura, notify all outposts to inform us if they have any unusual sensor contacts. I don't want anything to get by us."

"Aye Sir." Uhura nodded and turned back to her station.

"Are they trying to divert our attention from something else?" McCoy asked Kirk.

"That would be consistent with their behavior up until now." Spock answered.

"It was the Maak that conveniently broke down in the Neutral Zone while the Galileo was in trouble." Kirk explained. "Perhaps they are playing the same role now."

The Maak had proceeded on course at a leisurely pace. The Enterprise crew maintained alert status with practiced ease. Sulu's deep clear voice filled the bridge. "Leaving Outpost Six controlled space for Outpost Five Control."

"Outpost Five acknowledges control." Uhura said.

"Admiral." Sulu reported a few minutes later. "The Maak is changing course. Ascent plus twenty five degrees. Hard to port. Increasing speed."

"Match her, Sulu." Kirk ordered. "Move for move."

"Aye Sir." Sulu followed each new move the Maak made. She circled up and back away from the Neutral Zone. The Enterprise did the same. When the Maak had finished her circle she was going in the opposite direction of just moments before.

"The Maak has reversed course and is now headed back towards Outpost Six." Chekov reported. "Traveling at point seven impulse power."

"Now what?" No one had an answer for McCoy's question. His words seemed to hang in the air as they waited. The crew kept a watchful eye on their console readouts. They did not have to wait long.

"Admiral." Spock turned towards Kirk. "I am picking up traces of theta-gamma radiation, type three."

"Where's it coming from?" Kirk got up from the command chair and joined Spock on the upper circle of the bridge.

"I can not locate a specific source." Spock said. "But the most dense readings are at bearing 220 mark negative fifteen."

"A cloaked ship?" Kirk asked.

"A damaged cloaked ship." Spock turned towards Kirk with eyebrow raised. "The readings are consistent with damage to the subspace field generators."

"Now we know why the Maak is trying to divert our attention." Kirk and Spock's eyes met. "That ship is limping home. She can't maintain warp drive without those generators."

"Exactly." Spock nodded.

"So those mines hit her harder than we thought." McCoy observed to no one in particular. "It seems those pirates know quite a bit about Romulan ships."

"If you recall, Doctor." Sulu looked over his shoulder at McCoy. "They knew quite a bit about the shuttle also."

Kirk turned back towards the center of the bridge. "What do you mean, Sulu?"

"Only that the pirates guessed the magnitude of our damages very accurately." Sulu explained. "The only information they had was the placement of their device on our aft shields."

"Sulu." Kirk returned to the lower level of the bridge. "Put us between Spock's readings and the Neutral Zone."

"Aye Sir." Sulu changed course. "Descent thirty degrees. Adjusting heading to 030, mark five."

"Is the Maak changing course?" Kirk asked.

Spock checked his console. "The Maak has cloaked Admiral."

"Advise when we are in position, Sulu." Kirk ordered. His voice softened as he added. "Everyone, keep your eyes open."

"Coming into position now, Sir." Sulu said.

"All stop."

"All stop. Aye." Sulu repeated as he brought the thrusters up to hold the ship in position.

"The radiant energy readings are dead ahead, Sir. Zero mark zero."

"There she is." Chekov's statement momentarily startled the bridge crew. A bird of prey had just decloaked in full view of the Enterprise. "Holding position at zero mark zero."

"Red Alert." Kirk ordered sharply. A red light filled the bridge as the alert klaxon sounded. The crew was already at alert status. The shields were up and weapon systems at full power.

"The Bird of prey's shields are down. Her main power is fluctuating." Spock reported now that he had something he could scan. "Her disruptors are off line."

"There she goes." McCoy said as the Romulan ship seemed to shimmer and waned before fading from view.

"Spock?" Kirk glanced over at the science station.

"The radiation readings are moving slowly off to starboard." Spock said.

"However the radiant energy is increasing by five thousand rads per minute."

"Is the Enterprise in danger?"

"Not immediately." Spock said.

"Cancel red alert." Kirk got up and walked around the bridge. Sometimes thinking on his feet was more than just a metaphor for Jim Kirk. "Sulu keep us between them and the Neutral Zone."

"Aye Sir." Sulu nodded. "Port thrusters at one quarter. Aft thrusters at one half."
"There it is again." Chekov said.

Kirk turned to see a shimmering image on the main view screen floating in and out of his visual range. The crew waited for the image to solidify and stabilize into a ship but it just disappeared again. "They appear to be having trouble maintaining their cloak. Uhura, hail them."

"Channel open, Admiral." Uhura reported. "Audio only."

"Romulan vessel. This is Admiral James T. Kirk of the starship Enterprise." Kirk said in his most official voice. "Are you in need of assistance?"

They waited but the bird of prey did not answer. McCoy looked at Kirk. "You didn't really think he was going to admit to being in Federation space?"

"I don't think he's going to make it home." Kirk raised his eye brow. "At least not without a little help."

"The Maak?" McCoy asked skeptically. "They can't effectively carry out a rescue without decloaking themselves. How are they going to help them?"

"Maybe by distracting us again. Maybe something else. I don't know." Kirk shook his head. He looked around the bridge. "Comments? Suggestions?"

"They must know how we are tracking them." Sulu observed.

"Undoubtedly." Spock nodded.

"Your point, Sulu?" Kirk asked.

"If it was me, I'd back track along that radiation trail to a point where I could run for the Neutral Zone." Sulu suggested. "If they have any power at all, they could make it back to their own space before we could change course."

"It seems probable that they are using all their power to maintain the cloak." Chekov said. "They may have to decloak to make that run."

"But if we are at the end of the radiation trail. If we are looking the other way..." Sulu said to Chekov. "It wouldn't make much of a difference."

"And once they are back on their own side," McCoy added. "It won't matter what our records show or what we say happened."

"Spock, would we be able to tell if they were back tracking?" Kirk asked.

"Not necessarily, Admiral." Spock admitted. "The radiant energy readings are variable. If the ship would back track along the trail, it may take a few minutes before the reason for the change in pattern became apparent."

"She is decloaking again." Chekov brought their attention back to the main screen. "Dead ahead."

"Radiation levels inside the bird of prey are rising." Spock said.

"Uhura, open a channel." Kirk returned to the command chair. Standing in front of it, he faced the main view screen. "They have to be getting desperate."

"Channel open Admiral."

"Romulan vessel. You have violated the Treaty of Algernon by entering Federation Space." Kirk said. "Prepare to be boarded."

When the Romulans did not answer, Kirk turned towards the communications station. Uhura checked her console and assured him, "They are receiving, Admiral."

"Bird of prey decloaking at bearing 185 mark 15." Chekov reported.

"I guess they both heard us." Kirk nodded to Uhura. He sat down and glanced over at Spock. The Vulcan was staring intently at his sensor data. "Spock?"

"It is the Maak." Spock reported in his normal efficient manner. He looked over at Kirk and stressed. "Disruptors at full power. She's firing."

"Evasive action." Kirk called out automatically. "Fire phasers."

"Firing phasers." Sulu answered just as the disruptor fire hit the Enterprise. The impact rocked the ship only slightly.

"Direct hit to the Maak's forward shields." Chekov reported. "Minimal damage."

"Damage report."

"Direct hit to the port shield number four." Spock reported on damage to the Enterprise. "Holding at eighty seven per cent. All systems on line and available."

"She's heading for the Neutral Zone. Full impulse power." Chekov turned to look at Kirk. "And Sir. The Maak has not cloaked."

"She wants us to follow." Kirk nodded to Chekov. He leaned forward resting his elbows on his knees. "The other bird of prey?"

"Making a run for it." Sulu said. "But she's sluggish. Only moving at half impulse. Her heading is straight for the Zone. She's attempting to go around our port side, Sir."

"Sulu, ignore the Maak. Keep that damaged ship on this side of the Zone." Kirk straightened in his chair. "Chekov, keep your eye on the Maak. She'll be back when we don't follow."

"Aye Sir." Chekov and Sulu acknowledged their orders at the same time. Sulu brought the Enterprise back to block the Romulan's path home. Chekov switched from the navigation station to the second science station. Ensign Yat-Sen eagerly took over navigation.

"Incoming torpedo. Impact in five seconds. Three. Two." Spock grabbed the support rail attached to his station to steady himself as the ship rocked again. "Port shield four down to fifty three per cent."

"She is resuming her course for Romulan Space." Chekov added. The damaged ship remained on the main view screen. Chekov kept the aft view on his screen at the science station. "And she still hasn't cloaked."

"Load photon torpedoes and fire when ready." Kirk ordered. "But don't alter our course or position."

"Aye Sir. Torpedo room reports ready. Torpedoes are locked on target." Sulu said. "Firing one and two."

"Now she is cloaking." Chekov did not add that the Maak was probably also changing direction and speed to avoid the torpedoes. Everyone on the bridge assumed that with the possible exception of Ensign Yat-Sen who was serving his first deep space assignment. Chekov used his sensors to track the torpedoes as they sought their target. The first missed altogether. A green flash momentarily illuminating the ship as the second torpedo struck the starboard nacelle at the edge of her wing. The cloak quickly recovered, masking even the sparks that flew out from the damaged nacelle. "A hit on the

starboard nacelle. Substantial damage, but the cloak remains in tact."

"The damaged ship has stopped forward movement." Sulu reported.

"Her impulse engines are off line." Spock nodded. "Interior radiation levels are reaching dangerous levels."

"Life signs?" Kirk asked.

"I am reading nine Romulan life signs." Spock said then stopped and rechecked his data. His long fingers moved surely over the control board. "Admiral. I am reading an unusual build up of radiant energy in the ship's internal power grid."

"What's the source?" Kirk asked.

"Unclear." Spock studied the readings. "But the energy wave is similar to the distortions seen in a subspace compression."

"I thought her warp drive was off line." Kirk said. "How can..."

"Insufficient data, Admiral." Spock cut Kirk off. He swiveled his chair turned toward the Admiral and urged. "But I suggest we put as much distance between us and them as possible. Now."

"Sulu, are they within transporter range?"

"Yes Sir."

"Transporter room." Kirk opened the intraship comline. "Lock onto all life signs on that ship and beam them to an isolation unit. Take all precautions for radiation poisoning."

"Aye Sir." Chief Landon replied. Less than a minute later, she added. "I have nine Romulans on board, Admiral. In isolation."

"Set course for Outpost Six." Kirk ordered. "Warp four."

"Aye Sir." Sulu said. The Enterprise jumped into warp as the damaged Romulan ship exploded behind her.