

It was oh six hundred when Commander Sulu walked onto the bridge. Admiral Kirk, Dr. McCoy, and Mr. Spock were all present. Otherwise the normal third shift crew manned the bridge duty stations. The reddish third planet in System G-582 loomed large on the view screen. Sulu instantly recognized that Enterprise was in a standard orbit.

"Sulu." Kirk looked up. "Aren't you a little early?"

"Yes Sir." Sulu nodded stopping at the command chair. "I have to admit to being curious."

"I understand." Kirk couldn't help but smile. He knew exactly why Sulu was there. "Want to be on the landing party?"

"Yes Sir." Sulu smiled.

"Admiral." Spock said. Both Kirk and Sulu turned towards the science station. "I have one human life sign. Evidence of a camp site."

"Hail the camp site, Lt. Dierkop." Kirk said.

Dierkop tried hailing on all standard frequencies. He repeated the call then turned to Kirk. "I'm not getting any response, Admiral."

"Any ships in the area?" Kirk asked.

"Sensors are clear." Spock said.

"Nothing in the area." McCoy looked up at Spock. "Except for any cloaked pirate or Romulans ships."

Spock ignored McCoy's statement of the obvious. "Conditions at the camp site are calm. Environmental suits will not be necessary. Oxygen packs should be sufficient."

"Well Sulu, let's go see who is waiting for us." Kirk got up and headed for the turbo lift. Sulu was right behind him. McCoy was not waiting for an invitation.

"Admiral." Spock stopped Kirk from leaving the bridge. Kirk turned back to his first officer. "I would suggest taking security officers."

"For one pirate, Spock?" Kirk asked. "I think Sulu and I can handle it."

"I'm coming too." McCoy insisted. "The planet has a hostile environment. This one pirate may need medical attention."

"These pirates have shown a pattern of using cloaking technology in unusual ways." Spock said. "I am not one hundred per cent sure there is only one person on the planet."

"All right. Assign two security guards. And you better come along too." Kirk said to Spock. He turned to the helm officer. "Lt. Bonsall, you have the bridge."

The landing party materialized far enough from the camp site that they could look it over before approaching. One man sat with his back to them on a nondescript cargo box. He was hunched over, facing the glow of a heating device that served as a campfire. The man did not seem to notice the Federation officers behind him.

Kirk gave a nod to the two security guards. With phasers in hand, they fanned out to give the best coverage of the situation. Spock scanned the man with his tricorder. Sulu targeted his tricorder on the area beyond the camp.

"Holographic projection, Admiral." Spock said.

"Nicely done." Kirk said as he walked up and put his hand through the man's back.

"It's a little warm for a campfire, but it does add a homey touch." McCoy agreed. The

doctor turned away from the projection watching his medical scanner. He pointed towards another apparent cargo box about one meter tall. "Your life form reading is over there, Spock."

Sulu was standing closest to the box. He scanned it. It was not a projection and it was generating readings consistent with an adult human. Sulu touched the top of the box. The lid slid open to reveal a control panel.

"Mr. Spock." Sulu turned to call the first officer, but he was already standing next to him. "It appears to be projecting life signs."

"Yes." Spock nodded as he scanned the mechanism. "But I am not sure that is all it is doing."

"What else?" Kirk asked.

"Unknown." Spock studied his readings. The cargo box stopped generating life signs. "I believe this mechanism has sensor and communication capabilities."

"Is it the source of the hologram?" Sulu asked.

"No." Spock said.

"So?" McCoy asked. "What's the point?"

"To bring us here. But why?" Kirk said as he surveyed the area. Besides the two security guards, all there was to see was the reddish purple dust of the barren planet. Kirk turned back to his first officer. "Spock, what is the source of the hologram?"

Spock adjusted his tricorder. He again scanned the image of the man staring at the campfire. "The source is in orbit."

"Kirk to Enterprise."

"Lt. Bonsall here."

"Bonsall, raise shields." Kirk ordered. "Go to yellow alert."

"Aye Sir." Bonsall acknowledged. "Yellow alert. Raise shields."

"Sensor readings." Kirk said.

"Sensors are still clear, Admiral." Lt. Xiang reported from the science station. "There has been no change since you transported to the planet."

"Lieutenant." Spock said. "Adjust sensors to scan for a narrow beam transmission to these coordinates from an object in orbit in close proximity to the Enterprise."

"Adjusting." Xiang said.

Lt. Commander Chekov had been getting dressed for work when he heard Lt. Bonsall sound the yellow alert. Checking the computer, Chekov found that Kirk, Spock, and Sulu had all left the ship. He immediately headed for the bridge. As soon as Lt. Bonsall had filled him in, he joined Xiang at the science station.

"Directly below." Xiang said as Chekov studied the readings. "Alpha waves?"

"Worth a shot." Chekov nodded then reported. "The transmission is coming from directly below the Enterprise, Mr. Spock. Lt. Xiang and I are attempting to get an image by bouncing an alpha wave off the atmosphere."

"Ready, Mr. Chekov." Xiang reported.

"Proceed." Chekov said and watched the monitor carefully. He grinned when he said. "Got it."

"What Mr. Chekov?"

"Looks like one of those mines, Admiral." Chekov said. "Same size and shape. It is

maintaining a position of equal distance between the Enterprise and the atmosphere."

"It seems these mines can do just about anything." McCoy said.

"Can you tell if it is one of the aggressive mines, Chekov?" Kirk asked.

"No Sir." Chekov said. "The mine is still cloaked. I can only get an idea of the size and shape of the device by analyzing the path of the alpha waves as they bounce off the top of the atmosphere. If it wasn't directly below us, I wouldn't be able to read it at all."

"Keep me apprised of any changes, Chekov." Kirk said. "And keep those shields up."

"Aye Sir." Chekov said.

"Kirk out."

"This doesn't make any sense." Sulu said to Kirk. "Why did Brady want us to come here? There's nothing here."

"You've answered your own question, Sulu." Brady's voice came from the cargo box that had generated the human life signs.

"Because there is nothing here?" Kirk asked while nodding to Spock. The first officer started scanning for the source of the transmission. When he realized the transmission was not coming from the planet surface, Spock contacted Chekov.

"It took us quite a while to find systems on both sides of the Neutral Zone to fit the parameters of the test." Brady said. Sulu studied the control board looking for a clue to the location of the pirate. "But they were willing to pay."

"They?" Kirk asked. "The Romulans?"

Brady laughed. "Wrong quadrant."

"Then who?" Sulu asked.

"The test was the same on both sides of the Zone." Brady ignored Sulu's question. "But the reactions were different. I wonder what they would have paid for the full results."

"Who?" Kirk asked again.

"Ask Bartell." Brady said. The holographic projection faded and disappeared. "I'm done with it."

"Just where is Mr. Bartell?" Kirk asked.

"You'll find him." Brady said. "Good luck."

"Brady." Sulu called.

"The transmission has been terminated." Spock said. "Mr. Brady was maintaining a close orbit just beyond the horizon to the west."

"Wouldn't that invite atmospheric interference with communications?" Sulu asked.

"Indeed." Spock nodded. "Which is why he was using the mine beneath Enterprise as a communication satellite. That also made it more difficult for Mr. Chekov to locate the cloaked ship."

Kirk's communicator signaled. "Chekov to Admiral Kirk."

"Kirk here."

"The mine is no longer cloaked, Admiral." Chekov reported. "And I am reading no explosives. Only communication equipment."

"Mr. Chekov." Lt. Xiang broke in. "I now have a life sign on the planet surface fifty kilometers from the landing party's location."

"Stand by, Chekov." Kirk closed the communicator and faced his landing party. "It

seems the Mr. Brady took his multiple cloaking devices and went home."

"Or so he would have us think." Spock said.

McCoy adjusted the face mask of the oxygen pack. "Then we can get off this god forsaken planet."

"You asked to come along, Bones." Kirk reminded him.

"The other life sign must be Bartell." Sulu said.

"Or another box like this one." McCoy said.

"Only one way to find out." Kirk said and opened his communicator again. "Chekov. Beam the landing party directly to the sight of the life sign."

"Aye Sir." Chekov said. "Stand by."

Sulu called the two security guards to join them. In a few moments the Enterprise landing party found themselves standing on the edge of a body of water. A small emergency shelter stood about four meters from the water's edge. Conditions were not as calm at this sight. The wind blew carrying the coarse purplish sand with it.

"The life sign is inside, Admiral." Spock had to raise his voice to be heard over the wind.

"Kaftner. Esteban." Kirk yelled at the two security officers. They nodded and stood ready with phasers in hand. The door slid open and the two security officers rushed into the emergency shelter. The rest of the Enterprise officers followed with Kirk in the lead.

A lanky man with light brown skin and long loose black hair sat on the one bunk in the room. He leaned back against the wall with a half empty liquor bottle in his hand. He looked up at the crowd that suddenly filled his small temporary home and growled. "Close the door. You'll let all the oxygen out."

McCoy was the last through the door. It slid shut behind him. The Enterprise officers looked around the tiny room. The only furniture was the bunk and a chair that sat in front of a computer communications terminal. There was a door that led to a small compartment that housed the bathroom and equipment that maintained the atmosphere and produced food and water.

"Edward Bartell." Kirk said after he took off his face mask. The rests of the Starfleet officers followed suit.

"Yeah." Bartell said and took a drink from his bottle. "About time you showed up."

"You were expecting us?" Spock asked.

"Brady dropped me here six days ago. Or maybe eight. He said he'd send someone by." Bartell said. He suddenly sat up straight and looked Kirk in the eye. "Have you caught him? That bastard stole my ship."

"That was your ship?" Kirk asked.

"Damn right."

"You are under arrest, Mr. Bartell." Kirk said.

"Big surprise." Bartell took another drink. "What's the charge?"

"Piracy, to begin with." Kirk said. "Possession of an illegal cloaking device. Attacking a Federation vessel. Should I go on?"

"Why bother?"

"Kirk to Enterprise. Seven to beam up."

Once on the Enterprise, Spock joined the transporter operator and started scanning the

original camp site. "Admiral. I would like to bring the mechanism that generated the life signs on board to study."

"Fine Spock." Kirk nodded then turned to the two security officers. "Lt. Esteban, take Mr. Bartell to the brig. And let me know when he sobers up."

"Aye Sir." Esteban took the bottle from Bartell and handed it to Crewman Kaftner. Each security guard then grabbed one of Bartell's arms and escorted him to the brig.

Once in the turbo lift, Kaftner held up the bottle and asked. "I guess we have to file this under personal property?"

"What kind is it?" Esteban asked.

"It's called Hiuldre." Bartell said "A whiskey from Simiko III. And I know exactly how much is there."

"You're absolutely sure?" Kaftner smiled as he sniffed the top of the open bottle.

"Absolutely!"

"Don't worry, Bartell." Lt. Esteban said. "You'll get it back."

When Kirk, Sulu, and McCoy returned to the bridge, Chekov stood up and reported. "We have a tractor beam on the mine. We are ready to bring it on board."

"Very good, Mr. Chekov." Kirk nodded. "Bring it on board."

Even though it wasn't quite time for the change of shift, Sulu and Chekov relieved Lt. Bonsall and Ensign Lafferty.

"Shuttle bay reports the mine is on board and secure." Lt. Dierkop reported from communications.

"Good." Kirk said. "Set course for Starbase 39-Sierra."

"Aye Sir." Chekov responded. "Course calculated and ready."

"Warp nine, Mr. Sulu."

"Aye Sir."