

"Mr. Sulu." Chekov said from the science station. "I have a large explosion on long range sensors."

"Explosion?" Sulu turned to look at Chekov. "Analysis."

"From the mass it may be a ship. Large scout ship." Chekov ventured as he studied his readouts. "Radiation patterns and elemental break down are consistent with a ship. But the levels of radiations are very low."

"What would cause that?" Sulu asked walking over to the science station..

"I'm not sure." Chekov said slowly. "It is possible that the ship, if it was a ship, did not carry any weapons. That would lower radiation levels considerably."

"If it was a ship," Sulu asked. "Was the explosion a malfunction or an attack?"

"It will take some time to analyze." Chekov said.

"Can we put it on screen?" Sulu asked. Chekov nodded and brought the long range scan up on the main viewer. The picture was fuzzy.

"Magnifying by a factor of four." Chekov said as he brought the view into focus.

While Chekov studied the read outs, Sulu studied the stars. He walked over to the helm station and looked over Lt. Hauser's shoulder. "It is on a direct heading from the ship yards to the rendezvous point at Fendrah. Chekov, is it the Bird of Prey?"

"It could be." Chekov said. "The computer is running a comparison of the readings with records of other similar debris fields. I will have more in a few minutes."

"Ensign Tochi." Sulu spoke to the young man at the navigation station. Serving his fourth shift on the bridge, Tochi was just starting to feel comfortable in the job. "Locate and identify any class M planets in the area around the debris field."

"Aye Sir." Tochi answered quickly. Determined to do well, he consulted his controls. The navigator accessed the library computer as well as navigation computer to be sure not to overlook any possibilities. Sulu sat back in the command chair. "Mr. Sulu, there are five class M planets in the area surrounding the debris field. But it appears that before the explosion the ship may have been in a high orbit around the third planet in system K466."

"How high an orbit?" Sulu asked.

"Just barely within transporter range, Sir." Tochi said.

"Yes." Chekov agreed coming down to the command center from the science station. "And the ship exploded itself. It was not attacked. There was a fire on board, possibly before the explosion."

"Lt. Hauser adjust course to the third planet in system K466." Sulu ordered. "Increase speed to warp four."

"Aye Sir." Lt. Hauser answered. After making the adjustment she added. "ETA approximately twenty three minutes."

"Anything else, Chekov?"

"I believe it is the Bird of Prey." Chekov said. "The composition of the hull is correct but I still can not explain the radiation levels. I find it hard to believe the ship was unarmed."

"Perhaps the Admiral or Mr. Spock could explain that." Sulu said.

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The Enterprise slowed to impulse power as it came up on the debris field. The explosion

had destroyed most of the ship. All that was left whole was what the Federation crew would still call the black box. It was a copy of all log entries encased in toranium. Sulu ordered the box beamed on board before turning his attention to the planet.

"Standard orbit, Lt. Hauser." Sulu ordered.

"Standard orbit, aye Sir." She answered.

"Uhura, see if you can reach them." Sulu said. She nodded and started hailing on Starfleet communicator channels. Chekov was busy with the scanners. Sulu walked over to the science station. "Anything?"

"Not yet." Chekov said without looking up. "But I am not reading any other humanoid life. So that will make the search easier."

"Mr. Sulu!" Ensign Tochi reported. "Bird of Prey decloaking."

"What the hell are they doing here?" McCoy asked as he came down from the communications station to the command station. Of course no one bothered to answer.

"Shields. Red alert." Sulu ordered as he returned to the command chair. McCoy stationed himself on Sulu's right. "Charge all weapons systems. Location, Mr. Tochi."

"Bearing 65 mark 4. Range fifty thousand kilometers." Tochi said. "Just the other side of the debris field, Sir."

"Her shields are up and her weapons are powered, Sir." Lt. Hauser added.

"Commander Uhura, anything from the Admiral?" Sulu asked. Uhura shook her head. "Hail the Klingon ship."

"Aye." Uhura said. "I have them, Sulu."

"On screen." Sulu ordered. "This is Sulu commanding the Federation Starship Enterprise. Identify yourself."

"I am Duunbek." The Klingon commander responded. "Commanding the Ga'pak. By what right do you challenge us?"

"You are far from home, Commander." Sulu said although neither ship was in its home territory.

"As are you." Duunbek replied. "But I am here at the request of the Mirta government. Can you say the same? I should be challenging your presence in this sector."

"The treaty between the Federation and the Della Mir Community allows me to patrol this sector in the performance of my duty." Sulu said. "And right now I am investigating the explosion that led to the debris field that lies between us. Would you have any knowledge of that explosion?"

"Are you accusing me?" Duunbek demanded. But instead of answering the question, he made his own accusation. "As I entered this sector, you beamed something out of the debris field."

"I did." Sulu nodded. Although he was concentrating on the Klingon, Sulu was aware of Chekov and Uhura conferring behind him. "The log encasement of the destroyed ship."

"That log is the property of the Klingon Empire." Duunbek growled. "You will return it to me now."

"The casing was burned badly." Sulu bluffed. "There are no readable markings on it. We don't know who it belongs to. Once my technical officers have finished with it, I will be happy to share the information with you."

The Klingon swore in his native language. In Standard he growled. "Unacceptable!"

Chekov slowly came up on Sulu's left. Sulu glanced at him. With his back to the main screen, Chekov whispered. "We have located the three of them."

"I have no time for this, Duunbek." Sulu said. "Without proof that the ship was Klingon, all I can do is let my people finish their analysis. If it is Klingon, it will be turned over through diplomatic channels."

"The logs came from a Klingon bird of prey. I was tracking it since it was stolen from the ship yards at Kali Guari." Duunbek said "I need no markings to prove that. You will turn the logs over to me."

"I heard about the stolen ship. I wasn't aware it was a bird of prey." Sulu said. "How were you tracking it? It's a safe assumption that a stolen ship would be cloaked."

"That is not important." Duunbek growled. "The logs are." Duunbek's attention was drawn by someone on his ship. He looked back to the screen and added. "If you do not wish to start an incident with the Della Mir as well as the Klingon Empire, you will turn them over now!"

"So, you speak for the Della Mir now?" Sulu asked.

"I do." A large dark green Mirta man said stepping into the range of the view screen. "I am Captain Trenn-drah of the Mirta high command."

"Captain." Sulu nodded to Trenn-drah. He took a deep breath, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "I don't want any problems with the Della Mir. At the same time I will not be dictated to by a Klingon commander in a B'rel class Bird of Prey. I suggest you consider the repercussions of your actions carefully."

"You should listen to your own suggestions, Captain." Tenn-drah said angrily. "If you do not turn over the logs, you will be fired on. I will give you a short time to consider it!"

"That wasn't pretty." Sulu sighed after the connection had been terminated.

"Was it suppose to be?" McCoy asked.

"What is he thinking?" Sulu asked McCoy. "Surely Duunbek has informed Tenn-drah that the Ga'pak is no match for the Enterprise. Why is he trying to escalate this?"

"Must have something to do with the ship's log." McCoy suggested. Sulu nodded, still thinking. "Now what?"

"Chekov." Sulu said. "Has Scotty cracked that black box yet."

"No."

"Get down there and give him a hand." Sulu ordered. "Don't worry about translating. Just get a copy of the logs. We'll sort it out later."

"Aye." Chekov said and left the bridge to carry out his orders.

"What about Jim?" McCoy asked.

"We have to get rid of the Klingons first, Doctor." Sulu said. "Uhura, hail Gonzoles."

"Gonzoles?" Uhura asked. Sulu turned his chair to look at her. He knew neither the Klingons or the Mirta would know her name, if they were listening. "Gonzoles, aye."

"Gonzoles here."

"Ensign, there is a Klingon bird of prey about fifty thousand kilometers dead ahead of us." Sulu said. "I remind you of regulation 46A."

"Sulu report!" Kirk cut in.

"Sir." Sulu was careful not to use Kirk's name. "When we came into the area, we found

and brought on board the destroyed ship's black box. This done, a Klingon ship decloaked and demanded the log. They are giving me time to think about it."

"Nice of them." Kirk said dryly. "So we are on our own."

"Temporarily Sir." Sulu said. "One other interesting point. There is a Della Mir officer on board. Claims to be a member of the Mirta high command."

"Don't take any chances, Sulu. The safety of the ship is top priority." Kirk said "We are fine."

"I hear you, Sir." Sulu said. "I'll be in touch. Enterprise out."

"What do you think is in that log that's so important?" McCoy asked. "Could the Klingons and the Della Mir be forming an alliance?"

"I don't know, Doctor." Sulu said. "I really didn't give the log a second thought when I had it beamed on board. But obviously Duunbek and Trenn-drah consider it very important."

"Yes." McCoy nodded. "I take it you are planning to copy the log then beam the black box back to them."

"Of course." Sulu said. "Since our shields will have to be down to beam them the log, we will beam up the Admiral, Spock and Gonzoles at the same time. Hopefully our shields will be up and we will be on our way before they realize anything has happened."

"Hopefully." McCoy agreed. "But I doubt they will give us much more time. They must realize that is what we are attempting."

Sulu touched one of the controls on the arm of the command chair. "Scotty. Report."

"We are downloading the information byte by byte." Scotty said. "There is a security code on it that is preventing our systems from reading or playing it back even in Klingon."

"How long?" Sulu asked.

"Another couple of minutes." Scotty said.

"At the same time we transport the log, I want you to beam up the Admiral's party." Sulu said "Let me know as soon as you're ready."

"Aye."

"The Klingon ship is hailing us, Mr. Sulu." Uhura reported.

Sulu and McCoy exchanged looks. Sulu turned his attention to the main viewer and said. "On screen."

"Your time is up." Duunbek barked. "Beam the log encasement back into the debris field and withdraw or we will fire."

"Into the debris field?" Sulu asked. "You want me to lower my shields while you keeps your shields raised? Do you think I'm a fool? I will beam the log to you directly. Or not at all."

"At least we are making progress." Duunbek sneered.

Sulu did not mind if the Klingon thought he was getting the better of him, but he had to stall for time. "Transmit you transporter coordinates and lower your shields."

"I am no fool either, Sulu." Duunbek laughed.

"Children!" Tenn-drah cried with irritation. "Enough! You will lower your shields simultaneously and conduct your business!"

"I don't see what business this is of the Della Mir." Sulu answered. "I believe this is between the Federation and the Klingon Empire."

"This is still Della Mir space." Tenn-drah bristled. "I do not believe you are bargaining

with honesty and integrity. That is the basis of all contracts."

"Believe what you like." Sulu shrugged. "Commander Duunbek and I are capable of working this out ourselves."

"Not while the Mirta are paying the bill!" Tenn-drah said and terminated the connection.

"I don't think he liked what you had to say." McCoy observed.

"I wonder why?" Sulu smiled.

"Sulu." Uhura said. "Scotty reports ready to transport."

"Good." Sulu took a deep breath. He was ready to eat his words. "Signal the Admiral to stand by, then hail the Klingons."

"Mr. Sulu!" Ensign Tochi called. Before Tochi could say anything else the disrupter blast hit, rocking the ship.

Sulu looked to the science station but Chekov wasn't there. Damn, Sulu thought, he shouldn't have sent Chekov to engineering. "Damage report."

"Direct hit to forward shield three, Sir." Lt. Hauser said. "Shield strength down by twenty two percent. They are firing again Sir."

"Lock phasers, Hauser." Sulu said. "Target their weapons systems."

The disrupter blast hit them again. Ensign Tochi almost lost his seat. Sulu could hear Uhura directing damage control teams to affected area. Hauser righted herself and reported. "Phasers locked."

"Fire." Sulu ordered. Hauser fired. They watched the phaser blasts rock the much smaller ship. "Fire." Hauser fired again. The Ga'pak appeared to be pushed back in space.

"Sulu!" Uhura called. "The Admiral wants to know what's going on."

Chekov returned to the bridge and the science station. Immediately scanning the Klingon ship. "The Ga'Pak's port shield is buckling. One more direct hit should take out her disrupters."

"Fire!" Sulu ordered. After Hauser fired, Sulu took two seconds to look towards Uhura. "Tell him to stand by."

"Aye aye." Uhura said softly to herself.

"Her disrupters are off line." Chekov reported. "She still has torpedoes."

"Hail them." Sulu ordered. Uhura nodded to him. Commander Sulu stood and said. "Duunbek! Enough of this. In exactly one minute I will lower my shields and beam your log to you. You can lower your shields and accept it. And I will be on my way. If you choice to fire on us then, I will destroy your ship without hesitation. Acknowledge."

Sulu held his breath. He did not look around the bridge which had fallen silent. He knew they were all looking at him. Finally the answer came. Dembek said stoically. "I am transmitting coordinates now." And terminated the connection.

"Uhura, signal the Admiral to prepare to beam up." Sulu said. "Hauser, as soon as the Admiral's party is on board, I want to be out of here. Warp speed as soon as possible."

"Course, Mr. Sulu?" Ensign Tochi asked.

"The shortest course back to Federation space." Sulu ordered. Sitting down, Sulu opened his line to Scotty. "Scotty, are you ready?"

"Whenever you are Sulu." Scotty answered.

"Lower shields." Sulu ordered.

"Aye. Shields are down." Lt. Hauser reported.

"The Ga'pak has lowered her shields." Chekov added. Lt. Hauser tensed, her finger poised over the phaser controls. She was ready to fire at the first sign of betrayal.

"Energize." Sulu ordered. They waited for Scotty's report.

"I have them, Sulu." Scotty finally called. "They are on their way to the bridge."

"Shields up." Sulu ordered. "Get us out of here."

"Aye Sir." Hauser said. "Shields up. Course heading 115 mark 5. Warp four."

The bridge crew breathed a collective sigh of relief. Sulu asked for damage and casualty reports. Everyone was just getting back into their routine, when Admiral Kirk, Commander Spock, and Ensign Gonzales stepped out of the turbo lift. Sulu stood up and turned to face Kirk.

"Report." Kirk said abruptly.

"There was a brief battle with the bird of prey. We took out their disrupters then made a deal to transport the black box back to them. We beamed you up at the same time, raised shields and headed back to Federation Space." Sulu reported. "The Klingon ship did not follow as far as we can tell. Damage to the ship is minor, repairs are under way. No casualties, Sir."

"You copied the contents of the black box?" Kirk asked.

"Yes Sir." Sulu replied. "Although we haven't been able to access the information yet. It seems to have a top level security code."

"Fine." Kirk said then stepped closer to Sulu and lowered his voice. "I don't appreciate being told to stand by when I ask for a report, Sulu."

Before Sulu could answer, McCoy leaned close to Kirk and said softly. "We were a little busy up here, Jim."

Kirk stared at McCoy for a second. The Doctor knew him well. "Of course." Kirk took a deep breath and smiled. "It's just frustrating not knowing what's going on."

"Yes Sir." Sulu said.

"Well. Since everything is under control here, I'm going to get back in uniform." Kirk said. "I'll relieve you shortly, Sulu."

Spock and Chekov were discussing the black box and its security code. When Kirk left the bridge, McCoy and Gonzales joined him. Dr. McCoy waited until Gonzales got off to head for her quarters.

"What the hell was that all about?" McCoy demanded.

"I don't know what you mean, Bones." Kirk strode off the turbo lift towards his quarters.

"Right." McCoy said sarcastically and followed. When they were alone in the captain's cabin, McCoy continued. "Is this how you plan to handle your new assignment? Running rough shod over the people you've left in charge?"

"Frankly Bones." Kirk said as he changed. "I don't know how I am going to handle my new assignment."

"Well if you can't handle working with the cadets, Admiral." McCoy said earnestly.

"Then don't accept the assignment. Take another command."

"It's not that easy, Bones." Kirk said. "You know that."

"There are other commands. There's Excelsior."

"Excelsior should go to Sulu. He's earned it." Kirk said. "And he'll get it even if I have to ram it down command's throat."

"Does he know that?" The doctor asked.

"No. I'm sure he's aware he is on the short list." Kirk shrugged. "But the final decision has not been made yet."

"He did a damn good job today." McCoy observed.

"I know." Kirk sat down at his desk. "Kirk to bridge."

"Sulu here."

"Commander Sulu, please join me in my quarters." Kirk said.

"On my way Sir." Sulu responded. "Bridge out."

"Unless there is anything else Bones..." Kirk looked up at his friend.

"No." McCoy said reluctant to leave. "Nothing else. See you for dinner?"

"Sure." Kirk checked his chronometer. "Let's make it early. I'm starving."

"Fine." McCoy hesitated. Kirk gave him the wide eyed innocent look to tell the Doctor to stop worrying. McCoy just threw up his hands and left. Sulu was coming down the hall. McCoy still had a worried look on his face.

"Everything ok, Doc?" Sulu asked.

"I'm sure it is." McCoy nodded and continued on his way. Sulu watched the Doctor go then turned and rang the captain's bell.

"Come in Sulu. Sit down." Kirk said. When Sulu was sitting across the desk from him, Kirk continued. "What do you think this Mirta captain was doing on the Bird of Prey?"

"Hard to say." Sulu said thoughtfully. "Although I believe his presence did effect the outcome of the battle."

"What do you mean?" Kirk asked.

"The commander of the Ga'pak did not use standard Klingon attack strategies." Sulu said. "Instead of using his cloaking device to take a run at us and attack from a surprise position, he merely held position and fired."

"Surely the Klingon would have known the Enterprise was capable of destroying his shields with just a few phaser blasts in the same area." Kirk was amazed.

"We fired three times." Sulu said. "Lt. Hauser was on target. Captain Tenn-drah said one other interesting thing."

"Tenn-drah?" Kirk interrupted. "That name is familiar. Wasn't he involved in that initial problem we had with the Della Mir a couple of years ago?"

"I don't know." Sulu shook his head. "The name did not register with me."

"What did he say?"

"When I suggested the business of the black box was between the Federation and the Klingon Empire, he said 'Not while the Mirta are footing the bill.' " Sulu smiled and added. "He sounded like Jimmi when she thinks one of her suppliers is trying to cheat her."

"Maybe when Spock cracks the code on the log, we'll know what Tenn-drah was talking about." Kirk said. "The Bird of Prey we were flying was certainly no prize. The Klingons had stripped it of everything except the cloaking device."

"So you were cloaked?" Sulu asked.

"Up until three minutes before we left the ship." Kirk said.

"Duunbek, the Klingon commander, claimed he had been tracking you since you left the repair station." Sulu said.

"That doesn't seem likely." Kirk shook his head. "We had so many systems failures in

that short flight that anyone who could track us could have over taken us in a minute. There weren't even any weapons on the damn thing."

"Then Chekov was right." Sulu nodded. Kirk looked at him questioningly. "He said the radiation levels of the debris field were too low. It looked more like an unarmed ship than any Klingon debris we'd ever seen."

"Aren't you off duty about now?" Kirk asked. Sulu nodded. "Then get out of here."

"I want to talk to Gonzales anyway." Sulu said as he started towards the door.

"Oh, and Sulu." Kirk said. Sulu stopped in the doorway. "I'm sorry I jumped down your throat when I came on the bridge."

"No problem, Sir." Sulu said and left the captain's quarters.