

The away team materialized on the class M planet. Commander Chekov immediately started scanning the area. Lt. Gonzales also had her tricorder out. The science and security officers fanned out across the flat grassland. Dr. Patrick picked a piece of the long brown grass to examine. Captain Sulu shaded his eyes from the intense sunlight.

"Pretty much what we expected from earlier reports, Captain." Gonzales reported. "No evidence of sentient life forms. Diversified plant and animal life forms. Plenty of water. No obvious reason not to build a colony here."

"A little warm for my taste." Dr. Patrick pushed his blond bangs back off his forehead. It was an unconscious habit Sulu had gotten used to in the nine years he had captained the Excelsior. "But the ground is fertile. This is suppose to be an ag-colony, isn't it?"

"At least in part." Gonzales shaded her eyes when she looked up to answer the tall doctor. "If you look at their charter, they have much bigger things in mind."

Captain Sulu walked away from Gonzales and Patrick's discussion about the proposed colony. He joined Chekov who was scanning then adjusting his tricorder several times. "So, Chekov where are your anomalous readings?"

"I am not getting anything now." Chekov frowned at his tricorder. "But from the ship this was the center of the energy surge."

Sulu looked around the open grasslands. There were a few trees in the distance and some higher ground on the horizon, but it was basically a flat open prairie. "Could your energy surge come from under ground?"

"Possible." Chekov sighed. "Although I am not reading any underground chambers of any kind. It is possible there is some kind of shielding that is interfering with my readings."

"Why would you be able to read it from the ship, but not from here?" Sulu asked.

"It was only a momentary reading." Chekov said.

"Problem with ship's sensors?"

"No." Chekov shook his head. "Thorough maintenance check just last week. Perhaps whatever shielding is being used was triggered when we came into orbit."

"Assuming there is shielding." Sulu said. "Any idea how we determine where it is or what it's made of?"

"Not exactly." Chekov frowned again. He took out his communicator. "Chekov to Excelsior. Lt. Mirek, what are you reading at this position?"

Chekov walked away from the captain as he conferred with Lt. Mirek at the bridge's science station. Sulu took a quick check of the rest of the away party. Dr. Patrick was taking readings of the soil. Lt. Gonzales had sent the four security officers to secure the perimeter of their sight from predators. She saw Captain Sulu was alone and joined him.

"Captain, I don't see any sign of something that would have generated an energy burst on the magnitude that Commander Chekov suggests." Gonzales said.

"Nothing on the surface anyway." Sulu said.

"Underground?" Gonzales asked.

"Maybe." Sulu nodded. "Maybe what ever was here left in a hurry when we arrived."

The tricorder in Gonzales' hand suddenly sounded an alarm. She studied the readings. "Incoming missile of some kind. Flying at two kilometers above the surface. Range five kilometers. Twenty three degrees west of polar north."

"Time?"

"Forty seconds." Gonzoles said.

"Sulu to Enterprise."

"We have it on sensors, Captain." Lt. Commander Lee said. "On course for your position. Targeting phasers."

"Don't let me hold you up, Commander."

"Firing." Lee said.

When the Excelsior's phasers met their target, the missile was a little over one and a half kilometers from the away team's position. The explosion fragmented the missile into several large pieces. The debris continued on the original flight path sending a stream of hot gas, ash, and metal fragments raining down over the away team.

"Hit the deck." Sulu yelled. The team ducked into the grass, covering their heads until the hot rain had settled. "Is everyone all right? Report."

The away team all stood up, calling out that they were fine. While the Starfleet officers brushed ash off their uniforms, Dr. Patrick did a quick check. Two of the security officers had minor burns. The doctor administered first aid.

"No sentient life forms?" Sulu raised his eyebrow at Gonzoles.

"I seem to have been mistaken." Gonzoles tossed her long black braid back over her shoulder. "I'll try to get a fix on the missile's point of origin."

"Good idea." Sulu nodded. After she turned away, Sulu spoke into his communicator. "Good shooting, Lee.... Lt. Commander Lee?.... Sulu to Excelsior. Respond."

Chekov strode up to Sulu. "I've been cut off from the ship." he reported. "I was talking to Mirek when the missile was sighted. Now I am not getting any response."

"Neither am I." Sulu said. "Doctor, Gonzoles. Check your communicators. Can anyone raise the ship?"

"I'm getting nothing." Patrick reported.

"Nothing." Gonzoles tapped her communicator.

"All right." Sulu said. "Then I suggest we find some cover. Who ever fired that missile is bound to know it did not hit its target. Do you have a point of origin, Lt. Gonzoles?"

"The foot hills of those mountains." Gonzoles nodded towards the west. "But it's a long walk. Almost ten kilometers."

"Are you suggesting we go towards the installation that fired on us?" Dr. Patrick asked Gonzoles.

"There will be shelter, food, and water." Gonzoles said. "We are cut off from Excelsior. Survival is the first order of business."

"And they will probably expect us to go the other way." Chekov added. "It is always good to surprise an opponent."

"Besides, we need to know who we are dealing with and how we can establish friendly relations." Sulu said.

"They don't seem very friendly to me." Patrick grumbled. "Unless you are assuming that missile was their way of saying hello."

"We'll have to keep an open mind on that, Doctor." Sulu said. He turned towards the security detail. "Briscoe, D'Amico. You take the point. Huynh, Silverman. You'll bring up the rear. Keep your phasers ready, set on stun. And scan for life signs ahead and behind. I don't want any surprises."

"Aye Sir." The four officers replied in unison. Ensign Maggie Briscoe and Crew member Tony D'Amico started towards the western foothills. Lt. Gonzoles and Commander Chekov followed with their tricorders out and scanning as they went.

"Come on, Pat." Sulu said. "At the Academy they consider this a morning stroll. Of course you would be carrying a twenty five kilogram pack."

"I'm glad I never went to the Academy." Patrick fell into step with the Captain. His long legs easily carried him over the flat prairie. They were followed by Crew members Nguyen Huynh and David Silverman.

"Mr. Chekov." Ensign Briscoe called him. When Chekov sprinted ahead to joined the lead officers, she reported. "There is a water source five degrees north of our present course. Should we stay on course for the missile's point of origin?"

"No." Chekov said. "We will need water before we get there. Head for the water source, Ensign."

"Aye Sir."

"Mr. Chekov." Gonzoles said after they had walked along for roughly twenty minutes. "This isn't making much sense. The readings I am getting now are totally different than what I was reading before the missile attack."

"Yes." Chekov nodded looking at his own tricorder. "I believe we have passed under some kind of sensor shield. I am now reading a population center ahead."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles agreed. "A city of approximately five hundred with structures, vehicles, and armaments."

"Continue scanning. We'll need as much detail as possible." Chekov said. "I will report to the Captain."

"Aye Sir." Gonzoles adjusted her tricorder.

Chekov slowed his pace until Sulu and Patrick caught up with him. "Captain. Our sensor readings have changed dramatically again. We now read a population center ahead at the missile's point of origin."

"A population center?" Sulu asked. "Obviously something we weren't reading before."

"Obviously." Chekov said. "From the ship and on the ground we read no signs of sentient life. No communities of any kind. No refined metal. No irrigation systems. Nothing."

"Explanation?"

"I believe we have passed under a sensor shield." Chekov said. "The readings outside the shield are either generated artificially or are a reflection of the unshielded area."

"Which means Excelsior will not be able to locate us as long as the shield is operational." Sulu said. Chekov nodded. "Any idea why we were cut off from Excelsior after the missile attack? We certainly weren't under the sensor shield then."

"I don't know." Chekov said. "There was nothing unusual in the gas, ash or metal from the missile."

"Maybe someone extended your shield over us, Chekov." Patrick suggested. "To cut us off from the ship that destroyed their missile."

"That is a possibility, Doctor." Chekov nodded. "But we need more information."

"This population center." Sulu said. "Small? Large?"

"Small." Chekov said. "A village, or possibly a military outpost. There are armaments present."

"Estimated level of technology?" Sulu asked.

"Gonzoles is still scanning." Chekov said. "Give us some time to analyze the findings."

"We'll take a break in thirty minutes." Sulu said. "We'll review the tricorder findings at that time."

"Any sign of water nearby?" Patrick asked.

"Yes." Chekov nodded. "Only slightly off our original course for the foothills. We are headed to the water source now. If we pick up the pace a bit, we could take our break there in approximately thirty minutes."

"Then let's do it." Sulu nodded. Chekov used his communicator to tell the lead security officers to pick up the pace.

"Damn." Pat swore as he sped up to from a brisk walk to an easy jog.

The water source turned out to be a small spring surrounded by shrubs and a couple of low to the ground trees. Whatever animals were present scattered as the Starfleet officers approached.

"Mr. Chekov." Ensign Briscoe turned back to the rest of the away team as they caught up with the security officers.

"I'm reading it, Ensign." Chekov looked up from his tricorder to Sulu. "There is a barrier between us and the water."

"Barrier?" Sulu asked.

"Yes." Chekov said "An energy field surrounding the spring. I can still read the water which is fresh and devoid of any harmful chemicals."

"Let me guess." Sulu sighed. "The force field was not there before."

"It was not there a minute ago." Chekov said. "Perhaps we triggered a switch of some kind."

"I'm not detecting any kind of switch." Gonzoles wiped the sweat off her forehead with her sleeve.

"Walk the perimeter. Brisco with Chekov. Huynh with Gonzoles." Sulu ordered. "Perhaps there is a way around it."

"Aye Sir." Chekov and Briscoe walked to the right, scanning the field and surrounding area. Gonzoles and Huynh went left.

"So close and yet so far." Pat sighed with obvious exaggeration. He scanned the surrounding area with his medical tricorder. He lowered his voice and spoke seriously to Captain Sulu. "After that jog, we are in real need of that water."

"I know." Sulu nodded. "Silverman. Your tricorder."

"Yes Sir." Silverman handed the tricorder over to Captain Sulu.

Sulu looked at the young man. His face was flushed and covered with sweat. The heat and exertion was clearly getting to him. "Sit down. Relax, Dave. You too, Tony."

"You need the break too, Captain." Dr. Patrick said. He ripped open his uniform jacket to let some air in. The two security guards followed suit.

"Uh-huh." Sulu replied vaguely as he stared intently at the tricorder. He opened the top flap of his jacket. "The force field is being projected from the population center that fired the missile at us. It would seem they don't intend to let us drink."

"They obviously know where we are." Patrick said. "So much for the element of

surprise."

"If they know where we are," David Silverman said from his seat in the grass. "Why haven't they fired on us again, Captain?"

"Perhaps they think we will die from the elements. Making it unnecessary to kill us out right." Sulu said. "If so, they will soon find out that they are wrong."

The rest of the away team returned from the tour around the force field. Chekov announced. "It goes all the way around. No door that we could find."

"However, it does stop a few centimeters above the ground." Gonzoles added. "Perhaps we could tunnel under."

"Did you happen to bring your shovel with you, Lt. Gonzoles?" Dr. Patrick asked.

"No Sir." Gonzoles said. "But I'm sure we could find something of use around here."

"Good idea, Gonzoles." Sulu nodded. "Get to it."

"There are some flat stones here, Lieutenant." D'Amico took a flat stone about the size of his hand to the base of the barrier and scraped away some of the dirt. "And the top soil seems relatively loose."

They took turns digging until Briscoe, who was the smallest of them all, could slide through on her back. From the inside she helped widen and lengthen the ditch until they all could get through and drink. After each had drunk their fill, they took a long break.

They sat in a circle. The planet's sun was directly overhead. Sulu tried to contact the Excelsior with no luck. Chekov and Gonzoles spent some time going over the tricorder readings of the population center ahead.

"All right, Pavel." Sulu finally said. "What do you think?"

"In terms of shielding and sensor abilities, their technology at least rivels our own. Perhaps surpasses us in some ways." Chekov said. "The missile fired on us is at least a century behind in terms of our technology. It doesn't make any sense. But then little on this planet has so far."

"And the population center ahead?" Sulu asked.

"The best description from our readings is a fort, Sir." Gonzoles said. "A heavily armed installment with a high wall all around it. There are also force fields around it. The weapons appear to be similar to the missile that was fired on us. Missiles, guns, mines."

"I'd take any readings with a grain of salt." Sulu said. "For now, we'll assume your analysis is correct. But anything could change. We've covered almost one half the distance to the fort. Is there any other water between here and there?"

"None that we can read." Chekov said.

"I have two water bags in the medical kit." Dr. Patrick said. "But I suggest a slower pace to conserve water and energy."

"Agreed." Sulu nodded. "Anything else?"

"We are still going to this fort?" Patrick asked. Sulu merely nodded. "And we are going to make friendly contact?"

"That would be ideal." Sulu said. "But if it is not possible, we will need to disengage that shield in order to beam out of here. And everything points to this fort as the place to do that. Any other questions?"

"Hmmm." Pat frowned. "Not at this time."

"Good." Sulu said. "Fill your water bags, Pat. Then we'll move out."

Dr. Patrick took the two small silver packs from the medical kit. He lowered himself into the ditch and pushed himself through on his back. Once inside the barrier, he shook out the water bags and immersed one in the spring. When filled it carried three liters of water. He closed it and handed it out to Mr. D'Amico. After he handed the second bag to Mr. Huynh, Dr. Patrick pushed himself through the ditch again. The away team continued on their way.

After the spring the landscape started to slowly change. The flat prairie started to gently slope upward. The occasional outcropping of large stones and the short stout trees became more prevalent. The tall grass became shorter.

They hadn't been walking long when Briscoe and D'Amico stopped by a couple of large rocks. As the rest of the party caught up with them, Briscoe signaled them to stay hidden and quiet.

"What is it, Briscoe?" Sulu whispered.

"Appears to be troops of some kind, Captain." She whispered back. "Just beyond those trees. I am reading twenty individuals. Humanoid. Armed. Moving this way in formation."

"Type of armament?" Sulu asked.

"Energy pulse." Briscoe frowned at her tricorder, reporting hesitantly. "Similar to a disruptor, but not as powerful. The readings are contradictory, Sir."

"Twenty." Sulu nodded, thinking over his options. "Chekov, take Dr. Patrick, Briscoe, and D'Amico. Circle around these troops and continue towards the fort. Take out that shield and contact Excelsior."

"And what will you be doing?" Chekov asked.

"The rest of us will try to make friendly contact with these troops." Sulu said.

"Captain." Chekov objected, "We know nothing about this species. You do not know how they will react. I suggest we all continue towards the fort and contact Excelsior before confronting the local inhabitants."

"We beamed onto their planet without invitation." Sulu said. "The least we can do is explain."

"This is not a good idea." Chekov looked the Captain directly in the eye.

"You have your orders." Sulu returned his gaze.

"Yes Sir." Chekov consulted his tricorder. He glanced over at Patrick and nodded his head to the left. "This way."

After Chekov and his half of the away team had left, Captain Sulu turned to the rest of the team. "We are not going to take any chances. Our weapons are superior, but they outnumber us. Huynh, take up position to the left. Silverman, to the right. Be sure to find good cover. Gonzoles, you'll stay here. Maintain constant contact. Phasers set to heavy stun. I am going to try to talk to them. Gonzoles, any use of force will be your decision."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles nodded.

"Any questions?"

"No Sir." Gonzoles answered for all three. Huynh and Silverman stayed low as they moved around the rocks to take up the positions the captain had ordered. Gonzoles consulted her tricorder. "Mr. Chekov's crew has moved past the troops. They are moving quickly towards the fort, Sir."

"Good." Sulu nodded. "And the troops?"

"Coming this way." She said. Gonzoles straightened up to look over the rock. The troop

was advancing slowly. They were shorter and stouter than the Starfleet officers and covered with a short fine fur. Their clothes were short loose tunics and all pale brown appearing to be some kind of uniform. Each carried a side arm and a transparent shield. They were marching directly at the rock Sulu and Gonzoles hid behind.

Captain Sulu stood up and walked slowly around the rock towards the advancing troops. He held his arms away from his side with his empty palms towards them. He smiled. "Hello."

The troop stopped. The front line dropped to one knee. They held their shields out in front of them and drew their side arms. The line behind them did the same while remaining standing. Sulu stood still and waited. An individual separated himself from the rear of the troops and slowly approached Sulu.

"Who are you?" The individual's fur was a tawny color. It covered his entire body except for his hands, his face, and throat.

"I am Captain Hikaru Sulu of the Federation Starship Excelsior." Sulu explained. "I have been stranded on your planet and need help to get home."

"Stranded? You mean exiled."

"Exiled? No." Sulu shook his head. "I am on a mission of exploration. I come to find out who you are."

"We are Jush.ra." The leader said. "I am Rellel. Defender. You are not welcome."

"I'd like to go home." Sulu said. "But there is a force field that prevents me from returning to my ship."

"You are not alone." Rellel said. He turned to his troop. "Defend."

"Wait." Sulu said as they aimed their weapons at him. "Perhaps there is someone else I could talk to. A government leader? A religious leader?"

"No." Rellel said. "Defend."

"Now." Gonzoles said into her communicator. With phasers set on wide dispersement and heavy stun, she fired. Mr. Huynh fired. The Jush.ra started collapsing. Sulu dropped behind the closest rock and fired also. All twenty went down without discharging their weapons.

Sulu stood up, surveying the unconscious Jush.ra. Gonzoles and Huynh came out to the Captain's side. Sulu looked at Gonzoles. "That was too easy."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles said. While Sulu examined Rellel's weapon and shield, Gonzoles looked around. "Silverman. Report."

Sulu looked up at her, then around for Silverman. Gonzoles had her tricorder out, scanning the immediate area. Sulu called. "Silverman." When he did not receive an answer he turned to Gonzoles. "Anything?"

"No sign of him, Captain." Gonzoles said. She adjusted the tricorder's range. "No sign of Mr. Chekov's crew either."

"Damn." Sulu let his breath out slowly. "Go and physically check. The readings have not been reliable."

"Yes Sir." Gonzoles and Huynh rushed over to the area where Silverman was suppose to be. They found the water bag he had been carrying laying in the grass. "Damn."

"This is weird, Lieutenant." Huynh said. "How did they get Dave out of here without setting off the tricorder? No energy surge. No evidence of transportation. No vehicles of any kind."

"Which they are you talking about Nguyen?" Gonzoles asked. "We don't even know if

the Jush.ra are the ones who took him. Come on, let's get back to the Captain before he disappears."

They found Captain Sulu just where they left him. He was still examining the transparent shield the Jush.ra soldier had carried. He looked up as they approached. "Well?"

"All we found was the water bag, Captain." Gonzoles reported. "No sign of Mr. Silverman. No evidence of how he was taken."

"The level of technology on this planet has been carefully hidden." Sulu turned the shield over in his hands. It was light weight and strong, but it would not have held against the phasers or the Jush.ra's own weapons. "I don't know what purpose these Jush.ra serve, but it is not defense."

"If the Jush.ra were just a distraction, why did they, whoever they are, take Silverman?" Gonzoles asked. "Why not take us all?"

"I don't know." Sulu shook his head. "There is no way to follow Silverman?"

"No clues at all." Gonzoles said. "Not a blade of grass out of place."

"Then we follow Chekov." Sulu tossed the shield on the ground. Huynh and Gonzoles followed Sulu in the direction Chekov and the others had gone. They stayed close together.

Commander Chekov moved quietly through the trees. Dr. Patrick was directly behind him. Briscoe and D'Amico brought up the rear keeping their tricorders aimed at the captain's position. They moved as quickly as possible. The trees were slowly becoming a forest. The temperature dropped slightly as the direct sunlight was cut off.

"Mr. Chekov." Briscoe said. "I am no longer reading the Captain and the others. The readings just suddenly changed. Like someone hit a switch."

Chekov stopped. "Do you read the troops?"

"No Sir." Briscoe shook her head. "I am reading no humanoid life forms behind us at all."

"Then something is interfering with the tricorder." Chekov hoped he sounded convincing.

"Maybe we should go back and check on them." Dr. Patrick suggested.

"There is no reason to believe that something has happened to the others." Chekov said. "We will continue with our mission."

They continued towards the fort. Chekov periodically adjusted his tricorder to look for humanoid life behind them. He never found any.

"I guess that's it." Dr. Patrick said when the trees cleared to reveal a tall stone wall. "Some how it is not what I expected."

"What did you expect?" Chekov stood in the shade of the last row of trees before the clearing. "A gothic castle?"

"Maybe." Pat smiled. "Or something similar to the massive ground forts of Argus Three. You know, long and low to the ground with weapon portals every half meter. I never really understood the strategic value of the configuration."

"One day when we have a few hours, I'll explain it to you." Chekov said. "Right now we have other things to think about. I don't see any doors, windows, or convenient ledges."

"I am reading a force field directly around the wall, Mr. Chekov." DiAmico said. "Of

course, who knows what we aren't reading."

"We will have to make due with the information we have." Chekov said. "Locate the power source for the force field."

"Aye Sir." D'Amico said. He and Briscoe fanned out with tricorders but stayed in the tree line. The fort was dark and still. They could no longer detect any life signs behind the walls.

"Looking for the plug, Pavel?" Patrick asked.

"I don't see any equipment at the base of the wall." Chekov said as he consulted his own tricorder. "No obvious emitters or reflectors. It has to come from some where."

"If the power source is inside the wall, how do we get past the force field to turn off the force field?" Pat asked.

Chekov ignored the question and spoke into his communicator. "Briscoe, report." She did not answer. "D'Amico, report."

"Briscoe, D'Amico. Anyone." Dr. Patrick tried his communicator. He scanned with his medical tricorder. "Nothing. No sign of them. Now what?"

"No energy residual from a transporter. But these readings can't be trusted." Chekov shook his head as he studied his readings. "We will look for them. But we will stay together."

"Damn right." Pat followed Chekov closely through the trees.