

Captain Sulu and Commander Chekov came back on duty at the beginning of third shift. Chekov had both Lt. Ellen Mirek and Lt. Aaron Wong manning sensors. Both lieutenants had proven themselves to Chekov repeatedly. Commander Rand assumed the communications station. Just after Sulu sat in the command chair, Lt. Commander Smith and Lt. Commander Gonzoles relieved the second shift at their stations. Dr. Patrick joined them on the bridge.

"Status." Sulu said.

"On course for the Arcyba system." Smith reported. "Traveling at warp nine point oh five."

"ETA Twenty eight minutes." Gonzoles added.

"Anything on sensors, Mr Chekov?" Sulu asked.

"Not yet." Chekov said. "This system has two asteroid belts, one between the first and second planet and one between the last two planets in the system. If Dodger is damaged, Captain Uhura may be using one of these for cover."

"Or she may have landed." Sulu said. While landing was not an option for a star ship, it was for Captain Uhura's smaller recon vessel. "Try to raise the Artful Dodger, Commander Rand."

"Aye Sir." Rand said. After a few moments, she reported. "She's still not answering, Captain."

"All right." Sulu sighed. "All sensors on maximum. What else do we know about this system, Chekov?"

"Not a lot, really." Chekov said. "An ordinary yellow star with five planets. The inner most asteroid belt appears to be the remains of a destroyed planet. It consists of rock and dust as you would expect. The outer belt is made up of ice particles, some rock, and gaseous clouds made up chiefly of methane."

"Not your typical asteroid belt." Pat said.

"The inner most and outer most planets show no signs of life." Chekov continued as if the doctor hadn't spoken. "Of the three central planets two are class M and the other is class G. Arcyba Three has a humanoid population that has achieved very limited space travel. However last survey in the area showed them at prewarp levels of technology. They had not even made it to the closest planet yet."

"Which means we have not made first contact with them." Dr. Patrick said. "At least not a planned first contact."

"So whatever Uhura has run into, it comes from outside this system." Sulu said.

"That would make the most sense." Chekov agreed.

Sulu got up and walked over to the communication station. "Scan all frequencies, Rand. Uhura may try to send a beacon signal on an obscure frequency to keep from betraying her location."

"Yes Sir," Rand nodded. "But I am not reading anything along those lines."

"Keep looking, Janice." Sulu said. "Report any possibility."

"Aye Sir."

"A beacon signal?" Patrick asked from the lower bridge.

"A signal that the enemy would hopefully take as background noise." Sulu said as he returned to the command chair. "But that we would recognize as the Dodger. A pattern. An

echo. Something."

"Ok."

Twenty minutes past as they sped towards the small system that none of them had given any thought to before. Sulu sat stoically in the command chair to keep himself from pacing the bridge. He could not keep from chastising himself for not looking for Uhura when she missed the poker game. But his mind had been on personal matters.

"Mr. Chekov." Lt. Wong looked up from the long range sensors at the third bridge science station. "I am reading three distinct warp signatures on the inner edge of the outer asteroid belt."

"Three?" Sulu asked as Chekov turned to look at Wong's readouts.

"Yes Sir." Wong nodded. "Each about the same size as the Dodger."

"Can we see it yet, Pavel?" Sulu asked.

"Another few minutes before we can get it on short range sensors." Chekov said. "Still too far away."

The minutes past slowly. Captain Sulu forced himself to sit still and wait. Dr. Patrick was pacing slowly on the upper bridge between the science and communications stations. The science officers kept monitoring the sensors

"I have the three ships on short range." Mirek said.

"On screen." Sulu ordered. The ships were all of a configuration unknown to anyone on Excelsior. Each ship was small. The main body formed a V with apparent nacelles hanging beneath the tips of the V. "Looks like they are patrolling the edge of the asteroid belt."

"Coming up on the Arcyba System." Mr. Smith reported.

"Bring us out of warp on the other side of the belt, Mr. Smith." Sulu said. "Hold position directly across the belt from the three ships. Let's see how good their sensors are."

"Aye. Slowing to impulse." Smith nodded. The main view screen showed the asteroid belt as a green haze studded with rocks and ice chunks. Excelsior traveled laterally along the belt. When he had reached the point across from the three alien ships, Smith said. "All stop. Thrusters at station keeping."

"What have you got, Pavel?"

"The ships are of unknown config, but I am reading two type two nacelles per ship. Probably capable of warp seven. Their shields are up. It reads as a layered approach."

"Layered?" Sulu asked.

"Yes." Chekov said. "One shield on top of another. I can't be sure how many layers. At least three."

"That's different." Sulu said. "Effective?"

"I don't know." Chekov shrugged. "But each ship has a large dish antennae on the nose. Perhaps they are collecting methane from the asteroid belt."

"I wonder who needs methane that badly?" Dr. Patrick asked. "It is easy enough to produce in a laboratory."

"What about their weapons?" Sulu asked.

"Looks like some kind of disrupter." Chekov frowned at his readouts. "Maybe with a pulse driven delivery system."

"Maybe?"

"That's as good as I can do without extensive analysis of these readings." Chekov said. "Or more data."

"Ok." Sulu nodded. "Have they seen us?"

"They are probing the asteroid belt." Chekov said. "They have not altered course or given any indication that they are aware of us."

"Are they looking for the Dodger?" Gonzoles asked. "Could their antennae be part of a sensor array?"

"It is hard to say." Chekov said.

"We can out run them and out gun them." Smith said. "Why don't we just ask them what they are doing?"

"The direct approach." Sulu said. "It has always been one of my favorites. Can you take us safely through the asteroid belt, Mr. Smith?"

Lt. Commander Smith consulted his proximity scanners. "The belt seems fairly stable. I think I can find a way through. I recommend shields at full power."

"Raise shields." Sulu said. "Bring all weapons systems to the ready. Mr. Chekov, will sensors function inside the belt?"

"Probably as well as inside a nebula." Chekov asked. "We will get readings, but I would not trust them too much. If the Dodger is in the belt we could be on top of her before we know it. I would advise proceeding very slowly."

"Agreed." Sulu nodded. "Take us through, Mr. Smith. Course at your discretion. Thrusters only."

"Aye Sir." Smith nodded. "Elevation Z plus thirty five degrees. Ahead dead slow."

Smith guided the Excelsior into the least dense section of the asteroid belt in front of them. The swirling green gas cloud engulfed the ship and obscured the view of the main screen. They moved through the belt slowly. Many small particles burned up against Excelsior's shields. While the science officers monitored their sensors, the rest of the bridge crew watched the view screen for any sign of the Dodger.

Using only thrusters to move the massive star ship through the asteroid belt took almost five full minutes to cross a distance that would have normally taken seconds. Finally Mr. Smith reported. "Clearing asteroid belt, Captain."

"The three alien ships at bearing 000 mark negative 45." Chekov said. "They are powering weapons."

"Open hailing frequencies, Commander Rand." Sulu said.

"Frequencies open, Captain."

"This is Captain Hikaru Sulu of the Federation Starship Excelsior." Sulu said. "Please identify yourselves."

"The lead ship is firing." Chekov reported. The shot hit the Excelsior's shield and dissipated "Direct hit to the lower aft shield. No damage. It is a pulse disruptor. Pulse phase zero nine zero."

"The other two are firing." Mirek reported. The force of the weapons fire hitting the shields rocked the Excelsior slightly. "Multiple shots. All to the lower shields. Minor damage to shield beta six."

"Mr. Smith." Sulu said. "Target the port nacelle of the lead ship. Fire phasers."

"Aye Sir." Smith said. "Firing."

"Top level of their shields have collapsed." Chekov said. "There are several more levels. All three ships returning fire."

"The same spot, Mr. Smith." Sulu said "Fire."

"The two flank ships are changing position." Mirek reported. "Trying to surround us."

"Firing." Smith said.

"Again!" Sulu ordered. "Aft phasers target the other two ships."

"Aye."

"Two more shield levels have collapsed on the lead ship." Chekov said. "There at least three more."

"Top shield layer on the ship now at bearing 030 mark 15 has failed." Mirek reported. "She is moving away at full impulse."

"The third ship is also putting distance between them and us." Wong reported. "Now at bearing 320 mark 30 and retreating."

"Looking for our weapons range." Sulu said. "Show them, Mr. Smith. Fire all phasers."

"Aye Captain."

"Direct hit all three ships." Chekov reported.

"Captain." Rand said. "They are hailing us."

"Now they want to talk. Hold your fire, Smith" Sulu smiled. He sat back in his chair and relaxed. "Put them on screen, Rand."

"Aye." She nodded.

The aliens were humanoid. The one on screen had a pale yellow skin color with pale orange hair. He appeared short and bulky with a large head that had lateral ridges across the top with bits of dark hair between them.

"Federation." The alien spoke in a deep booming voice. His speech was slow, but that was probably due to the universal translator leaving out things it could not translate. "You invade our space. Why?"

"We are on a rescue mission. One of our ships sent a distress call from this system." Sulu said. "Perhaps you can help us locate her?"

"No." The alien spokesman said. "Leave our space."

"By what right do you claim this system?" Sulu asked.

Another alien, with darker skin tones and more distinct ridges, whispered in the spokesman's ear. The first alien nodded and faced Sulu again. "Time."

"Time?" Sulu asked.

"For generations the Dercas Jenage has mined and farmed this system." The alien explained. "You will not take."

"I am not interested in your mining or farming." Sulu said. "I am looking for a Federation ship about the same size as your own. She was attacked in this system. Do you know anything about that?"

"No."

"Were you in this space seventeen hours ago?" Sulu asked.

The Dercas Jenage put their heads together, whispering. The spokesman turned back to the screen. "We do not understand these hours. But where this ship is and when is our business."

"Since you can't seem to help us," Sulu said. "We will continue our search."

"No. Leave our space."

"If nothing else, he's consistent." Dr. Patrick commented.

"I do not wish to destroy a ship of the Dercas Jenage." Sulu said. "But I will if that is the only way I can continue my search. I will not leave this area without my missing ship and her crew."

"The Dercas Jenage can not allow this trespass." The alien said. "Federations must honor the boundaries of Acar. What is here is ours."

"I do not want anything that is yours." Sulu insisted. "But if you do not let me search for my missing ship, I have no choice but to destroy you. Mr. Smith, arm photon torpedoes."

"Aye Sir." Smith said. "Torpedoes armed and ready."

"What is your decision, Dercas Jenage?"

The two Dercas Jenage conferred. "The Federations may search for two rotations of the fourth planet. Then leave."

"Thank you." Sulu nodded. "Excelsior out."

"All three ships are retreating, Captain." Mirek reported. She consulted her sensors and added. "One day on the fourth planet is a little less than twenty hours, Captain."

"Then we better make good use of the time." Sulu said. "Two days is probably how long it will take for their reinforcements to show up."

"They don't seem to present much of a threat." Dr. Patrick said.

"These ships appear to be commercial vessels." Sulu said. "We can expect any military ships to be better equipped. Anything yet, Rand?"

"No Sir."

"There is no indication a ship was destroyed in this system in the last seventeen hours." Chekov said as he walked down to the command chair. "But Uhura did say the ship was damaged. So she may have opted to land."

"That is a logical place to start." Sulu nodded. "If shields or engines are damaged hiding in the asteroid belt could be dangerous. If she had time to make a choice, Uhura would have landed on the uninhabited class M planet. We'll do an extensive scan of that first."

"The fourth planet, Gonzoles." Chekov said.

"Aye Sir." Gonzoles said. "Course laid in."

"Two minutes, twenty three seconds at full impulse." Smith added.

"Engage." Sulu nodded. "As soon as we reach the fourth planet assume standard orbit and initiate search pattern alpha."

"Aye Sir." Smith said.