

Rosita Gonzoles was dressed and ready to go on duty. Her shift did not start for another two hours. Even though she was confined to quarters, Gonzoles kept in touch with the bridge. When the red alert sounded, Gonzoles ran from her cabin to the turbo lift and the bridge without a second thought.

When she walked onto the bridge, Lt. Ellis was in command. She walked down to the center seat, "Report."

"Three ships on long range sensors, Commander." Lt. Ellis said. "They are headed this way traveling at warp six. Our weapons systems are ready. We are still bringing Dodger crew onboard."

"ETA?" Gonzoles asked.

"Sixteen minutes." Lt. Wong reported from the science station. "They are somewhat larger than the ships we encountered at the asteroid belt. Their shields are up and weapon systems are powered."

"Same weapons as the others?"

"I am reading similar energy output as the phase disruptors." Wong said. "But that's not all she's carrying. They've got torpedoes of some kind. I'm not sure."

"Keep after it, Wong." Gonzoles nodded to the science station. She turned to Ellis and asked. "Have you reported to the Captain?"

"Not yet, Sir."

"What were you waiting for, Ellis?" Gonzoles asked. But she did not wait for an answer. She turned to the communications station. "Lt. Epstein, the Captain please."

"Aye."

"Sulu here."

"Captain." Gonzoles said. "There are three ships on course for our position. Larger and more heavily armed than our previous encounter. ETA approximately sixteen minutes."

"Ship's status?"

"Weapon systems ready. We have approximately three quarters of Dodger's crew on board." Gonzoles said.

"Ok." Sulu said. "Sit tight. I'll be there in five minutes."

"Aye Sir." Gonzoles sat down in the command chair. Lt. Commander Smith came onto the bridge. Gonzoles smiled at him, lowered her voice, and said. "I beat you."

"I was in the shower." Smith said as he passed her on his way to the helm station. Lt. Ellis manned the navigation station.

"Epstein, let me know when the Captain has beamed up." Gonzoles said.

"Aye."

"Anything else, Lt. Wong?" Gonzoles asked.

"The energy readout on these torpedoes is very unusual, Commander." Wong said. Gonzoles got up and walked over to the science station. "The previous weapons were phase disruptors using pulse delivery."

"Right." Gonzoles nodded. "How are these torpedoes different?"

"It's not a photon torpedo." Wong pointed out the energy wave on the scanner readout. "I can't get a definite read on what they are using as a warhead, but it is very unstable. I wouldn't like to be on the ship that is carrying it."

"So if we try to hit their torpedoes close to their ships we can detonate them early?" Gonzoles asked.

"Definitely." Lt. Wong said. "I don't know how they keep from detonating them before they launch them."

"Good work, Aaron." Gonzoles said.

"The transporter room reports that Captain Sulu and Mr. Chekov are on their way to the bridge." Epstein said. Gonzoles returned to the command chair. "All personnel are on board either Excelsior or Dodger."

"Raise shields." Gonzoles ordered.

"Shields are up and at full strength." Smith reported.

"The Dodger is powering her engines." Wong reported.

When she heard the turbo lift doors open, Gonzoles stood and turned to face Captain Sulu. He came down the two steps to the lower bridge. "Report Commander."

"These ships carry torpedoes, Captain." Gonzoles said. "Lt. Wong reports that the warheads are highly unstable. If we could target the torpedoes as they launch, we can use their own weapons against them."

"That would require pinpoint accuracy." Sulu sat in his chair. Gonzoles relieved Ellis at navigation. "Are you up to the job, Mr. Smith?"

"I'll give it my best shot, Captain." Smith answered.

"Mr. Epstein, hail the Dodger." Sulu ordered.

"Aye Sir."

Captain Uhura appeared on the main view screen. Sulu asked. "Any problems, Captain?"

"You mean other than no shields, limited life support, only the most basic sensors, and one cracked dilithium crystal? No problems." Uhura smiled. "She's holding together and ready for lift off."

"Let me try talking to these Jenage." Sulu said even though they had already talked over tactics. "Stay close to the planet."

"I will wait for your signal." Uhura said. "Good luck, Hikaru. Dodger out."

"The three ships have entered the system and slowed to impulse power." Chekov reported. "The Dodger has lifted off the planet and is maintaining an upper atmosphere orbit."

"Let's see them, Mr. Chekov." Sulu said.

Chekov changed the main screen from the view of the planet's edge to the three incoming ships. They were of similar shape as the commercial ships but larger and bulkier. There was no dish antennae on these ships. "Similar shield configuration, but stronger. It will take more than one phaser blast to take a layer out on these."

"Mr. Smith, take us out of orbit. Give me some maneuvering room." Sulu ordered. "Mr. Epstein open hailing frequencies."

"Hailing frequencies open, Captain."

"This is Captain Hikaru Sulu of the Federation Starship Excelsior." Sulu said. "Please identify yourselves and state your purpose in the system."

The view screen changed from the outer view of the three ships to the apparent bridge of the lead ship. It wasn't all that different from Excelsior. There was a central console with three

officers at duty stations and several duty stations along the far bulkhead. One officer stood in front of the central console looking at the view screen.

"I am Greurahn. First Kosk of the Dercas Jenage." The First Kosk was larger, darker and hairier than the other Jenage Sulu had spoken to but apparently of the same species. "My purpose is to uphold the Boundaries of Acar. The Federation Starship Excelsior has crossed the boundaries and broken the treaty."

"The lead Jenage ship is holding position at bearing 000 mark 5, distance 500,000 kilometers." Chekov reported. "The other two are coming along side the lead ship"

"I was not aware of your treaty." Sulu said. "I am on a rescue mission. A Federation ship sent a distress call from this system. We have located the ship and are in the process of effecting rescue."

"You will leave this system now." The First Kosk said.

"I am preparing to leave, but it may take some time." Sulu said. "The other Federation ship is space worthy but damaged. I will need to escort her home."

"I see no other ship." The First Kosk said. "The Federation Starship Excelsior has violated our treaty and is clearly a threat to the Dercas Jenage security. You will leave or be destroyed."

"The lead ship is holding position," Chekov said. "But the two other ships are moving to surround us."

"Just by being here?" Sulu asked. "How is that a threat to your security?"

"It is a violation of the treaty." The First Kosk answered. "And you threatened the Fregeul, a ship under my protection."

"I see." Sulu said. "Yes, I did compel the three ships we encountered earlier to let me continue with my mission. I could have easily destroyed them, but I did not. And I will not attack without provocation."

One of the Jenage officers from the central console walked up to the First Kosk and spoke softly to him. Sulu glanced at Chekov, who was conferring with Lt. Wong. "Keep an eye on it."

Chekov said as he left the science station. He came down to the command chair and stood with his back to the main view screen. "There is a very small and delicate ship that has been launched from the third planet. Two life signs on board. On course for their first moon."

"Any weapons?" Sulu asked.

"No." Chekov said. "It is a capsule on top of a rocket. Probably their first attempt to reach their moon."

"Captain." Lt. Wong called. Sulu and Chekov turned towards him. "The Jenage are sending one of their flank ships towards the rocket."

"First Kosk!" Sulu stood. "What are your intentions towards the small ship of the third planet?"

"This is not your system, Captain." The Kosk said. "The third planet is violating the treaty by coming into our space."

"Do they know this?" Sulu asked. "They have no weapons. They are not expecting to meet with aggression of any kind in their own system."

"My orders are to uphold the treaty."

"This is their system." Sulu said. "They have a right to be here."

"They have a right to be on the planet." The Kosk said. "They will be given an opportunity to return to the planet safely."

"If their ships are anything like Earth's first manned ships," Chekov said. "Then the pilots have little if any control. They may not be able to turn around."

"Mr. Smith," Sulu said "Put us between the Jenage and the rocket."

"Aye Sir." Smith said. "We'll have to go around the Jenage. Full impulse. We'll be in position in fifteen seconds."

"Gonzoles, man phaser." Sulu said. "Smith be ready to extend shields around the rocket if necessary."

"Aye." Gonzoles and Smith answered. Gonzoles touched a series of control pads to transfer control of the phaser systems to her duty station. Smith brought up shield configurations on his panel and brought the Excelsior as close as possible to the capsule without damaging it.

"Can we hail the rocket?" Sulu asked.

"They have an audio connection with the planet." Epstein said. "I can cut in on that Captain."

"Do it, Mr. Epstein."

"You heard me right, flight control." A male voice came over the communication speakers. "Space ships. Four of them. One is big enough to have thousands of people on board. And it's damn close. Too close. The other three aren't as big. They are coming this way. I don't like the looks of this."

"This is Captain Sulu of the Starship Excelsior." Sulu said "Calling the small ship from the third planet. Do you read me?"

"You can speak our language?" The pilot asked skeptically.

"The computer translates our language to yours." Sulu explained. "You picked a very bad time to launch, can you turn back?"

"The Jenage are firing pulse disruptors." Chekov was back at the science station. "Direct hit to the aft shields. The other two ships are coming this way."

"Turn back? I don't know." The pilot asked. "Flight control are you reading this?"

"We read, Wex." The third planet confirmed. "We have an image on radio scanners close to you that is over one hundred times your size. What's going on up there?"

"Return fire, Gonzoles." Sulu said. "Target weapons systems and engines."

"Aye Captain." Gonzoles said. "Firing phasers."

"My God!" The pilot exclaimed.

"Wex!" Flight control called. "We need a report!"

"What a light show!" The pilot said. "They are firing some kind of energy beam at each other. It's not hitting the ships though. There is some kind of invisible bubble around the ships."

"They are called shields." Sulu explained. "Smith, extend shields around the rocket."

"Aye Captain." Smith said. "Shields are extended, Captain. But that cuts down on our maneuverability and shield strength."

"Acknowledged." Sulu said.

"They are arming their torpedoes." Lt. Wong said.

"Arm photon torpedoes." Sulu said. "Gonzoles, you know what to do. Fire at your own discretion."

"Aye Captain."

"Wex, do you read?" Planet flight control called. "We've lost you on our radio scanners."

"I read you, flight control." The pilot said. "I'm inside the shield bubble of this Starship Excelsior. The other three ships are firing on Excelsior."

"They are firing torpedoes." Chekov reported.

"Mr. Wex, is it?" Sulu said. "We will keep the communications line open so you can stay in touch with your flight control."

"Um. Thanks. I think."

"Firing phasers." Gonzoles said. The torpedo exploded half way between Excelsior and the ship that fired it.

"Mr. Smith, target the lead ship." Sulu ordered. "Fire torpedo."

"Torpedo away." Smith said.

"Ship two is firing torpedo." Wong reported.

"Firing phasers." Gonzoles said almost immediately.

"Got him! Direct hit in the launch bay." Wong almost jumped out of his seat as a large fire ball engulfed one wing of the Jenage flank ship. "Ship two is disabled. Shields are down. Large hull breach. But she still has disruptors."

"Direct hit by torpedo on the lead ship's shields." Chekov said. "At least three layers of shields were taken out. The layers are global, Captain. Take out a layer in one spot, the layer is gone over the entire ship."

"Hit on extended shields, Captain." Wong reported. "Ship three is concentrating fire on the shields around the rocket."

"Smith target that ship and fire torpedo." Sulu said.

"Aye." Smith said. "Torpedo away."

"Captain, we could bring the capsule into the shuttle bay and tighten shields." Chekov suggested. "I would say we have already made contact with this civilization."

"Under less than ideal situations." Sulu said. "Ok, Pavel, bring her on board."

"Direct torpedo hit on ship three." Wong reported. "Shields down by three more layers."

"Hey." Wex called out. "Something is pulling on the ship. Hull pressure has increased."

"Relax, Mr. Wex." Chekov said. "We are bringing you on board Excelsior. You will be safer here."

"I don't seem to have any choice in the matter."

"Gonzoles." Wong called. "Ship three is firing a torpedo."

"Firing phasers." Gonzoles answered. A large explosion momentarily hid the Jenage ship from view.

"Direct hit on launch bay." Wong said. "Hull breach, shields down, and disruptors are out."

"Open hailing frequencies, Lt. Epstein." Sulu said. Epstein nodded. "First Kosk, I have taken the two pilots from the third planet under my protection and I will return them to their planet then be on my way with my damaged ship. I suggest you withdraw from this area."

They waited for the Kosk to answer. After a minute, Chekov observed. "At least they have stopped firing."

"They are retreating slowly." Lt. Wong reported. "Ship two is having engine trouble and

is limping behind the other two."

"Captain." Epstein said. "The flight controller from the planet wants to know the status of his pilots."

"Tell them to stand by." Sulu said. "Signal the Dodger to join us. I'm sure Captain Uhura has been monitoring communications. Tell her I'll fill her in as soon as possible."

"Gonzales." Sulu said. "You have the bridge. Chekov, want to see what this capsule looks like?"