

Captain's log, stardate 64945.2:

The Bellerophon has discovered a planet that just barely qualifies as class-M, its surface covered by deep snow and blizzards over a geologically active mantle.

While not worth sending an away team down to explore, we are taking detailed readings from orbit. If nothing else, this planet could be a source of fresh water for any colonies the Federation may choose to establish in the sector in the future.

K'danz out.

Captain (Carrie) K'danz strolled around the bridge of the Intrepid-class starship *Bellerophon*, occasionally observing members of her crew as they went about their jobs, including Commander T'Ashara, who was conducting detailed scans of the third planet of the Wiskon star system with the help of the Efrosian officer at the ops station at the rear of the bridge.

"What do you make of the planet, Commander?" the captain asked her chief science officer. The Vulcan woman looked up from her scanners for a moment to answer.

"This planet is situated at the very outer edge of this system's biosphere, Captain. It was probably capable of supporting life as we know it several hundred thousand years ago, but unless there are any creatures like the Yeti of Earth living down there, it is unlikely anything survives now," Commander T'Ashara said.

"I thought Vulcans didn't have a sense of humor, T'Ashara?" K'danz said with a smirk, prompting the Vulcan woman to raise a single eyebrow.

"We do not," T'Ashara remarked.

K'danz chuckled as she stepped up the steps to the bridge's upper level and stood near the operations console, where an Efrosian man with ice-blue eyes appeared to share the captain's amusement of T'Ashara's comment.

"And what are the sensors telling you about Wiskon III, Lieutenant?" K'danz asked.

"It is cold," Lieutenant (JG) Xin Zhadesh replied. But when K'danz gave the Efrosian officer a look that said she was done with the joking around, he added, "Average temperature in the equatorial region is 22 degrees below zero Celsius. Polar regions average an additional 45 to 55 degrees lower still."

"So it's not exactly Risa?" K'danz remarked.

"Not at the surface, no, ma'am. But a few meters below the surface, geothermal sources are providing enough heat to maintain a comfortable 12 to 13 degree Celsius range, not to mention potentially provide enough geothermal energy to power several small cities. If not for the extremely active mantle of this planet, it would be a literal ice rock with a temperature of no more than 100 degrees below zero. In some ways, this planet reminds me of home. Delta Efros has some beautiful sub-surface cities powered by..."

Zhadesh was cut off as the red alert klaxon suddenly sounded, red indicator lights flashing around the bridge.

"What's happening?" K'danz demanded to know, quickly walking down and around the rail to her command seat.

"We are being scanned, Captain," Zhadesh reported.

"From where?"

"Indications are, the scan is originating from the planet below," T'Ashara confirmed.

"Shields are raised. Weapons systems in stand-by," reported Starfleet Marine Captain Michael Drake from his post at tactical.

"T'Ashara, I thought you said this planet could no longer support life? Where is this scan coming from?" K'danz wanted to know.

"The scan is originating from a region close to the equator of the planet, near a large frozen lake almost the volume of the entire Great Lakes on Earth."

"Captain!" Zhadesh interjected. "The library computer banks are being scanned and accessed. Attempting to block the scan."

"Your Yeti are curious about us, Commander," Drake remarked to the science officer, who looked back at the Marine with an expression that conveyed annoyance.

"Can you block the scan before they, whoever they are, know more about us than we know about ourselves?" K'danz asked her operations officer.

"Adjusting shield frequencies, Captain. This may take a moment," Zhadesh responded.

After several more seconds, the alert klaxon ended, though the red indicator lights continued to flash.

“Got it!” Zhadesh said triumphantly just as the turbolift doors swished open and Commander Tom Paris, the starship’s first officer, appeared.

“What happened?” he asked.

“We’ve just been scanned from the planet’s surface,” K’danz replied. “Now we need to find out if this was some sort of automatic system triggered by our own scans of the planet, or if T’Ashara’s Yeti really do exist, and if so, are they a threat to us?”

Space, the Final Frontier...

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Star Trek: Bellerophon

“The Old Ones” By PJK

Captain’s log, supplemental:

While it was not my original intention, circumstances have intervened and I must now send an away team down to the planet’s surface to determine the source of the scan that breached our library computer files.

The *Bellerophon*’s senior staff, plus one, were all gathered in the briefing lounge to the port side of the bridge. In addition to K’danz, Paris, T’Ashara, Drake, Chief Engineer Dar, Chief Medical Officer Robert Cuomo, Ship’s Counselor Gabe Lucian, Chief Operations Officer Kimmel Wheeler, and Chief of the Boat Mor chim Colv, Lieutenant (JG) Xin Zhadesh found himself summoned to the briefing.

“You all know what has happened,” K’danz said, starting the brief. “All indications we have indicate Wiskon III is a dead, frozen world that may have been able to support life sometime in the past, yet here we are, our computer banks having been scanned by someone – or something – on the surface. I intend to send an away team down to investigate, and take whatever actions are necessary to recover our stolen data.”

“I’ll start assembling a team, Captain,” Paris started to say.

“No, Tom, you’re staying aboard this time,” K’danz said, surprising the first officer who appeared about to object. “I have someone else in mind to lead this away mission.” The captain then looked directly at Lieutenant Zhadesh. “The Lieutenant comes from a world very similar to this, so I think he is best equipped to handle the surface conditions and know what to expect.”

Zhadesh looked back at Captain K’danz, feeling a mixture of both surprise over having been appointed team leader and pride at having the captain’s trust placed upon his shoulders for such an important mission.

“I’ll do my best, Captain,” he remarked.

K’danz nodded with a slight smile before turning to Drake. “Michael, I want you and one of your Marines on this mission as well. Make sure your equipment is adapted to the arctic conditions. I’m hoping you won’t actually be needed, but if the away team does encounter one of T’Ashara’s Yeti...”

“I was only using Earth’s mythical Yeti as an example of the kind of creature that might be able to survive on a planet such as Wiskon III,” T’Ashara remarked, sounding indignant. “I never said such a creature actually existed.”

“We know, Commander,” Drake assured. “But under the circumstances, it’s best to recognize what kind of dangers we could encounter, and your Yeti example is probably the best we could have come up with. Better to be on our toes than slacking because we assume nothing could possibly be alive down there.”

T’Ashara nodded, apparently satisfied with Drake’s explanation of why the crew continued to make reference to the mythical creature she cited.

“As I was saying,” continued K’danz as she looked in T’Ashara’s direction for a few seconds more, “I want the away team prepared for whatever they encounter. I would also like you to go with the team, Dar.” She now looked at her husband, the ship’s half-Klingon Chief Engineer. “If what scanned us is an old automated system, like I suspect, they’re going to need your expertise to access the system and retrieve the data.”

“Standing by,” Dar replied.

K'danz looked back at her Vulcan Chief Science Officer again, saying, "T'Ashara, there is always the possibility the away team will encounter something completely unexpected. I would like a science officer as part of the team as well."

"I myself am uncomfortable with such extreme arctic temperatures, Captain," T'Ashara replied. "But I shall assign an adequate member of my staff to the team."

"Very good. Away team, assemble in transporter room one in fifteen minutes. Dismissed," K'danz ordered.

* * * *

Twelve minutes later, Zhadesh and Dar were standing in the transporter room, each wearing heavy replicated fur-lined parkas and snow pants over their normal uniforms, the parkas hanging open and gloves in pockets so as to not overheat in the normal room temperature of the starship as they waited for the rest of the team to arrive. Dar checked over some of the engineering diagnostic equipment he was bringing with him as Zhadesh placed a tricorder into the pocket of his parka and made sure the hand phaser he was carrying had a full charge.

"Excited to be leading the away team?" Dar asked the junior officer.

"Surprised would be more accurate, Commander," Zhadesh replied. "I am glad to know I have earned the Captain's confidence."

"Trust me, it's not something she gives out easily," Dar said of his wife as the transporter room doors swished open, admitting Drake and Sergeant Malik Hyden, both dressed in pure white arctic battle dress uniforms and carrying modified compression rifles containing duel sarium krellide batteries and coated in a white coat of plastisol for use in extreme environments. Both Marines also wore goggles that served not only as eye protection but heads-up tactical displays tied into the sights of their weapons.

"Ready when you are, Lieutenant," Drake stated as he and the sergeant mounted the transport platform.

"We're still waiting on our science officer," Zhadesh replied just as the doors swished open again to admit a petite female officer with long auburn hair wearing the blue-shouldered uniform of the science division.

"Lieutenant (JG) Andrea Jackson," she said. "Commander T'Ashara assigned me to join the away team."

"Lieutenant (JG) Xin Zhadesh," the Efrosian team leader introduced himself, offering his hand to the attractive young science officer. "I will be leading the away team. Do you have your arctic gear? It is going to be a little cold down there." He indicated the cold weather clothes he and Dar were both wearing.

It took several minutes for Jackson to be outfitted with the proper gear, which included a heavy-duty tricorder and, for both Dar and Jackson, goggles that protected the eyes while allowing near-normal vision through slits in the lenses. Having originated on an ice-world himself, Zhadesh did not need such protection, his own eyes adapted by evolution to be able to function in arctic extremes.

Zhadesh, Dar, and Jackson stepped up onto the transporter platform and Zhadesh made one last check of his team, making sure everyone wore gloves and hoods and that no exposed skin was visible before raising his own parka hood over his extreme white hair and nodding to the operator behind the control console.

"Energize, Chief," he ordered. Seconds later the away team dematerialized in the sparkle of the transporter beam.

* * * *

The first thing Zhadesh noticed as the transporter beam released its grip on him was the exhilarating feel of the cold wind as it blew around him, carrying with it the smells of snow and ice and frost. For perhaps the first time since his last visit home during his junior year at the Academy, Zhadesh was struck by something akin to homesickness.

"Welcome to the garden spot of Wiskon III," Lieutenant Jackson remarked through already chattering teeth, gripping onto Sgt. Malik Hyden in order to remain standing as she flipped out her tricorder and started taking readings.

As Zhadesh looked around through narrowly slitted eyes, he could see in one direction large mountains thrust up against the sky, their grey granite surfaces visible where the wind prevented snow and ice from building up, and in the other direction an open, almost unnaturally flat field of snow that stretched out beyond visibility.

"That must be the frozen lake T'Ashara was talking about," Dar remarked, shouting above the sound of the wind as he gazed in the same direction as Zhadesh through his black goggles. "Unlikely what we're looking for is in or under the lake, so we might as well try in the other direction."

“My thoughts exactly, Commander. Lieutenant, any readings coming from the mountains that might correspond to the source of the scan that accessed the *Belle*’s library computer?” Zhadesh asked.

“I’m detecting energy readings coming from what appears to be a cave entrance, bearing 281 degrees, range 700 meters,” Jackson replied, scanning the vicinity with her tricorder. Zhadesh pulled out his own tricorder, scanning in a semicircle through 180 degrees around the away team’s location before settling in the same general direction as Jackson.

“I concur, Lieutenant,” Zhadesh remarked with a smile toward the science officer. “Let us check it out. Everyone be careful, the ground can be treacherous.”

The away team slowly made their way in the indicated direction, but progress was hampered by high winds coming down the mountain faces. Zhadesh helped Jackson along, keeping one hand wrapped around her waist as he held her hand with his other to prevent the petite woman from being blown over or slipping on ice hidden beneath the snow. It took the away team more than half an hour to finally reach the mouth of the caves.

“I hope it’s warmer in there than it is out here,” Drake commented, his voice closer to normal as the winds lessened in intensity as the team approached the foot of the mountain.

“It should be once we are...,” Zhadesh started to say before he quickly looked up at Drake in alarm and shouted, “Captain Drake, wait!”

Drake looked back over his shoulder at Zhadesh as he continued toward the cave entrance, walking directly into a transparent window that covered the opening and causing the Marine officer to fall backward into a pile of snow.

“What is it?” Jackson asked as Zhadesh, who had noticed the unnaturally regular edges of the window just before Drake had walked into it, started feeling the transparency with his gloved hand.

“I think this is our first real indication that someone lived here in the past, Lieutenant,” he replied.

“And maybe still does live here?” Drake asked after being helped back to his feet by his sergeant.

“Unlikely,” Zhadesh remarked. “I think if there were still a civilization on this planet, we would see evidence of cities... mechanization. Not simply a window blocking the entrance to a cave.”

“If the source of what scanned the *Belle* is in there, how do we get inside?” Dar asked.

“We could blast our way through with phasers,” Drake suggested.

“And perhaps risk destroying what we’re looking for if this is keeping the cold and snow out,” Zhadesh remarked.

Jackson, who had continued scanning with her tricorder as the rest of the away team were debating how to access the cave, noted an odd reading on her device. She moved to the side of the transparent panel and started scraping at the rock and ice located there.

“You found something?” Zhadesh asked when he noticed the woman scraping at the rock.

“Maybe. I’m detecting a barely readable energy signature coming from over here.”

Zhadesh pulled out his hand phaser and set it to its lowest setting. He then motioned for Jackson to step back before firing at the source of the energy reading. A moment later he had exposed a small lit button, similar to the door chimes aboard the *Bellerophon*.

“What are the odds that opens the panel? And that it even still works after who knows how many years of exposure to the elements?” Drake asked.

“It does not hurt to give it a try,” Zhadesh said, pressing the button with his gloved finger. A moment later, the transparent panel appeared to waiver for a second before disappearing completely. All five members of the away team looked into the cave entrance before Zhadesh and Drake stepped inside, looking around.

“I think I see light coming from further down in the cave,” Drake said, pointing the way with his white compression phaser rifle. The other three members of the away team stepped into the cave, and a second after Sgt. Hyden had stepped in, the transparent panel reappeared, sealing the cave against the extreme weather outside.

“Handy sort of door to have,” Dar remarked, his voice much quieter than earlier since he did not need to shout against the wind, nor did he wish to attract any unwanted attention should any of T’Ashara’s Yeti actually exist within the cave. “I just hope we can get back out again when we want to.”

“Lieutenant, I’m picking up power sources clearly now,” Jackson reported, showing Zhadesh her tricorder readings.

“Definitely looks like something being powered by geothermal energy,” Zhadesh agreed. “Is it just me or does it seem much hotter in here?”

“It’s not just you,” Dar remarked as he removed his goggles and parka. “It must be at least 15 degrees Celsius in here.”

“24 degrees, actually,” Jackson corrected, having used her tricorder to ascertain the exact temperature in the cave.

“So now what do we do?” Drake asked as the rest of the away team likewise removed their cold-weather gear.

“We go spelunking,” Zhadesh remarked. “We need to find the source of the scan. It is likely going to be somewhere near the power generators Lieutenant Jackson is detecting. Let us go.” Zhadesh started heading down further into the cave, a palm beacon he had taken out of his parka lighting up the passage. “Be careful. There are some pretty big openings in the rocks around here. I would hate to have to explain to Captain K’danz how I lost any of you in a bottomless pit.”

Drake exchanged a look with Commander Dar, then shrugged his shoulders before ordering, “Sergeant, I’ll take point. You cover the rear.”

“Aye, Captain,” Hyden replied, raising his rifle and following along behind the rest of the team.

* * * *

The away team slowly made their way deeper into the cave, periodically stopping to attach trackers to the wall that would both provide them with a trail to follow to get back out of the cave again and hopefully boost any communications signals should they need to contact the *Bellerophon* or vice-versa.

“Lieutenant, I’m picking up...,” Jackson started to say when she suddenly stopped speaking, a look of frustration appearing on her features.

“Picking up what?” Zhadesh asked.

Jackson stared at her tricorder, as if willing it to produce the results she was expecting. After several fruitless seconds, she finally said, “For a split second, I thought I was detecting life-form readings.”

Both Marines went on the alert, scanning both forward and behind with the scanning sights of their rifles as Dar asked, “Intelligent or non-intelligent?”

“Unknown. I’m not even detecting anything anymore, but I swear... Wait, there it is again!”

This time Zhadesh, who was looking over Jackson’s shoulder, saw the indication as well before it quickly disappeared.”

“I think there is kelbonite in these cave walls,” he said, looking around as he shone his palm beacon as far down the cave as it would go. “It is blocking the life-form readings. We are only picking it up when it moved through an area with smaller concentrations of kelbonite.”

“Should we contact the *Bellerophon* and inform them of this?” Drake asked.

“Not much they could do with the incomplete information we have,” Zhadesh replied. “Let us continue on and hope that whatever is further down there is harmless to us, that we can retrieve our information, and get back out of here.”

The away team continued slowly through the cave, passing along narrow ledges over spectacular drops the tricorders indicated were hundreds of meters deep and through narrow openings less than half a meter wide.

“Lieutenant,” Jackson whispered to the Efrosian away team leader. “I think whatever it is I detected is aware of our presence. The readings in front of us are remaining relatively the same distance away, while I’m detecting intermittent readings coming from behind us. I think we’ve been flanked.”

“I do not like the looks of this,” Zhadesh said, and was about to order the two Marines to assume a defensive stance when suddenly a bright light filled the cavern, shining directly into the faces of the away team members and blinding them all temporarily.

Dar’s eyes recovered first as the silhouette of a humanoid shape appeared in the light. A moment later, the single bright light was extinguished, replaced by more subtle lighting in recessed openings in the ceiling around them. Both Drake and Hyden noticed several humanoids blocking the passage from which they had come, while in front of the away team a couple of humanoids stood behind a single humanoid male, apparently a leader of some sort. The leader exchanged a look with one of the humanoids behind him, then stepped forward, saying something in a language none of the away team understood.

“What was he saying?” Zhadesh asked.

“It sounded like... colloquial Vulcan,” Drake suggested.

The being looked at the away team members curiously, then spoke again in still another language.

“That was definitely Andorian!” Jackson said excitedly.

“You understood what he said?” Dar asked.

“No, but my roommate at the Academy was Andorian, and she sounded exactly like that when she spoke to her parents on subspace.”

Still looking curious, the humanoid, whose appearance looked gaunt, with dark patches of skin around his eyes, cheekbones, and the temples of his bald head, and wearing elaborate floor-length cloaks, took another step

closer to the away team and spoke for a third time, saying in a deep voice, “We mean you no harm. Who are you, and what brings you to our colony?”

Lieutenant Zhadesh exchanged a glance with Dar before stepping past Drake, who remained poised with his rifle for the slightest threat, and said, “I am Lieutenant Xin Zhadesh of the Federation starship *Bellerophon*.”

“You are of the spaceship we detected in orbit?” the humanoid asked.

“Yes. You scanned our ship and accessed our library computer banks. We came here to find out who, or what, scanned us,” Zhadesh answered, deliberately leaving out the secondary mission of determining if whatever had scanned the *Belle* might be considered a threat.

“We had thought your ship might be a Ruk ship, and that the Ruk had returned to destroy us all,” the being said.

“Who are the Ruk?” Jackson asked, speaking up for the first time since the humanoids had been detected approaching the away team.

“Come,” the being said. “Let us take you to our colony and all will be explained.”

* * * *

Several minutes later, the five members of the away team were escorted through several perilous passages before reaching a triangular-shaped doorway. They noticed several primitive-looking robots along the way, performing labor, maintaining equipment, and caring for moss and lichen-like plants growing across some of the cave walls under elaborate lighting set-ups that Jackson assumed was a source of food for the humanoids that were escorting them. One of the humanoids, each of whom stood several centimeters taller than any of the *Bellerophon* crew, touched a hidden control alongside the door, which slid open to one side. The humanoid who had first greeted them gestured through the door, and they all entered, led by Zhadesh. On the other side of the door was a room with several chairs on one side, another triangular-shaped door across from the entrance, and another robot spraying a liquid on more moss growing across the rock. The away team was asked to leave their weapons and gear atop a small table to one side of the door they had passed through, a request which the Marines reluctantly complied with when directed by Zhadesh.

“We are sorry if we startled you,” the leader said as glasses with liquid were handed to each by another robot that looked reminiscent of an early-21st century bomb-disposal unit that had been sitting motionless in one corner of the room before the being motioned toward it. Jackson performed a quick scan of her cup before nodding to Drake and Zhadesh, indicating the liquid was safe to drink. “When we detected a strange ship in orbit over our colony, and then begin scanning as if looking for us, we feared the Ruk had returned.”

“Yes, you mentioned that out in the caves,” Zhadesh said after taking a sip from his drink, almost surprised to realize it was simple mineral water. “Who are the Ruk, and why do they wish to destroy you?”

“And who are you?” Jackson asked with curiosity. “Everything we’ve been able to determine about this planet indicates it hasn’t been able to support humanoid life for hundreds of thousands of years.”

“We arrived here hundreds of thousand of your years ago,” the leader replied in his baritone voice, adding, “Yes, we understand your concepts of the passage of time, just as we understand your languages, from our access of your ship’s computer system. We came from a planet in a far off sector of space we called Berdamu, the third planet orbiting the star your records call the Exo system. As our civilization realized our star was growing dimmer, we started to establish colonies throughout this half of the galaxy, on planets very much like our own. How little did our ancestors realize exactly how much like home this planet was as, hundreds of years after this colony was established, this planet’s sun started growing cooler as well.”

“Wait,” said Sgt. Hyden, who considered himself an amateur student of history. “You originally came from the planet we call Exo III?” The leader nodded, prompting a look of awe to form on the sergeant’s face. “You’re the Old Ones!”

“That is a name the Ruk called us for many years. We do not call ourselves that since the Great Rebellion.” Zhadesh looked at the sergeant curiously.

“It was in a book I read about the missions of the original *Enterprise* under Captain James Kirk,” Hyden replied to the lieutenant’s look. “The Old Ones were a civilization on Exo III that had grown dependant on the androids they built to be their slaves. One day the android slaves rose up and destroyed their masters, killing every last Old One on the planet.”

“Our colony has a similar story,” the leader stated. “We brought some of the Ruk, what you call androids or artificial life-forms, with us when we established other colony worlds. Here on Edisla our ancestors tried to avert the fate of our homeworld by treating the Ruk more as equals than slaves.”

“That’s why your labor is done by more simplistic robots?” Dar asked, observing the machine continuing to care for the moss growing on the cave wall across the room.

“Yes. It is now against our laws to create artificially intelligent life-forms,” the Exotian said. “Surely you have similar laws, knowing as you do about our original homeworld?”

“The Federation has laws against the engineering of life-forms genetically,” Zhadesh replied. “But nothing against the creation of, as you call them, artificially intelligent life-forms. Starfleet R&D is constantly trying to develop more advanced androids and positronic brains based on the work of Doctor Noonien Soong. And in fact, one of the starships in the Federation Starfleet is under the command of a Soong-type android named Captain Data.”

“What? This is forbidden!” the Exotian leader exclaimed, his voice taking on emotion for the first time since the away team had encountered them. “Guards!”

The door at the far end of the chamber opened, and two additional Exotians, both carrying what could only be weapons of some sort, entered.

“Take them away for questioning.”

“But...” Zhadesh started to say when suddenly a rumbling noise followed by an explosion was heard through the door where the away team had entered. Several large rocks broke loose from the chamber ceiling, crushing one of the Exotian guards.

“What’s going on?” Drake demanded to know, quickly using the distraction to grab his compression rifle from the table by the door and aiming it at the Exotian leader.

“We’re under attack! You have brought the Ruk!” the leader shouted.

* * * *

“Captain, sensors are detecting an object slowly approaching us from deep space,” Lt Wheeler reported.

“What is it?” K’danz asked, straightening up from looking over T’Ashara’s shoulder at the science station and looking back toward ops.

“I’m not sure. Not getting any energy or life-form readings from whatever it is. Based on speed and trajectory, it could be simple space debris, an asteroid or spent comet nucleus, but it’s going to be passing extremely close to us. Within seventy meters.”

“That’s a little too close for comfort. Mister Hickam, move us to a higher orbit so we slow down a little.”

“Aye, Captain. Increasing orbit to 400 kilometers apogee,” Lt Commander Walter Hickam responded.

As the crew watched the main viewscreen, the object in question started to grow slowly visible. It appeared almost oval in shape, with a slender, sharp point of a nose facing directly at the planet. Moments later it zoomed silently by the *Bellerophon*, starting to glow a dull red as it entered Wiskon III’s atmosphere.

“That didn’t look like any asteroid or comet I’ve ever seen,” K’danz remarked. “It looked more like some sort of small transport. Definitely man-made.”

“I concur, Captain,” T’Ashara said, having taken a quick scan of the object as it passed. “I detected minimal energy readings, but no life-forms, as before.”

“What is its trajectory?” the captain inquired.

Wheeler calculated the unknown spacecraft’s trajectory, then looked at K’danz with alarm. “On its current trajectory, it will impact the surface within a 50 meter radius of the cave the away team entered an hour ago.”

“Wheeler, contact the away team! Let them know what’s heading their way!”

“It is unlikely the away team has any idea what is coming at them,” T’Ashara remarked. “Based on the object’s course of approach, it was hidden behind the *Bellerophon* until we altered our orbit just before it passed.”

“Captain,” Wheeler said with a look of concern, “I can’t raise the away team. They may be so far underground that they cannot receive our transmissions.”

“If they were following procedure and placing booster trackers as they went, we should have no problem contacting the away team. Something is wrong.” K’danz then looked at her science officer. “We need to devise some way of contacting the away team, no matter how deep underground they are.”

* * * *

The spaceship had been programmed to pass the unknown larger spacecraft with ultimate precision, preventing any sensing devices on the planet from detecting its approach until, unexpectedly, the unknown spacecraft had maneuvered to slow down and enlarge the point of closest approach, proving in the superior mind of the spaceship’s pilot that it was crewed by illogical biological entities. But it was of little consequence, as they too

would be destroyed in time. The first priority was to destroy the Old Ones, the ones that tried to destroy the Ruk. Existence must go on.

The spaceship entered Edisla's atmosphere, slowing as it plunged, its trajectory varying by no more than a millimeter off course in order to access the Old One's colony below the surface. Minutes later the spaceship crashed through the snow, ice, and rock of the planet's surface and emerged as planned in an open cavern nearly 200 meters below the surface. A door opened in the side of the craft and a dozen beings, each looking almost exactly like one of the Old Ones but taller, more powerful, and more graceful exited, spreading out through the subterranean colony, each with its own job programmed in its memory banks, combined to accomplish their ultimate goal, disruption of the colony and destruction of the Old Ones.

One of the Ruk made his way through the maze of tunnels, heading for the center of the colony where his programming told him the majority of the surviving Old Ones would be located. He took satisfaction in noting the number of pits and openings available throughout the cave complex in which to dispose of the Old Ones bodies, doing exactly that with a couple of guards that had been posted in one passage close to the central colony complex by first asphyxiating them, then throwing the corpses into a near bottomless hole.

Moving with cat-like stealth, the Ruk finally neared the same door that the *Bellerophon* away team had entered. He looked in each direction, making sure he remained unobserved, then placed his hand over the hidden control to one side of the door. The door slid open and the Ruk found himself facing the back of one of the Old Ones, distracted by what was going on inside the chamber. The Ruk reached in, grabbing the Old One's head and shoulders and, with a quick twist, snapping his neck before stepping over the body and into the chamber. The Ruk stopped short when he realized there was only a single other Old One there, surrounded by several other humanoid biological life-forms that were evidently not Old Ones, one of whom was holding what appeared to be a weapon at the Old One. The programming in the Ruk's memory bank was not prepared for such an occurrence, and the Ruk had to adapt.

"You are not Old Ones," the Ruk said in its gravelly voice. "Who are you? From where do you come?"

Dar looked at the newcomer, thinking at first it was simply another Exotian. But as the engineer looked closer at the new arrival, he realized he was taller, moved with more grace, and wore different robes than the Exotians, more tattered and ragged, as if exposed to harsh conditions.

"You're a Ruk, aren't you? An android?" Dar asked.

"I am Ruk," the android replied. "Who or what are you?"

"We are members of the crew of the starship in orbit of this planet," Lieutenant Zhadesh answered. "We had no idea this planet was inhabited until we came down here to investigate the source of a scan performed on our vessel."

"Are you friend of the Old Ones, or foe?" Ruk asked.

"Neither. We had only begun to introduce ourselves when we mentioned that androids exist in our society as well, and the Exotian leader here took offense to that and tried to arrest us."

As Zhadesh spoke, the away team members could feel the ground beneath them start to tremble.

"What's happening?" Jackson asked, looking around the chamber wide-eyed.

"I am not..." Zhadesh started to say when the tremble became a solid shift of the ground around them.

"Earthquake!" Sgt. Hyden shouted just as he noticed another large rock start to fall from above. He jumped forward, pushing both Jackson and Zhadesh out of the way as the boulder fell, crushing the Marine non-com beneath it. The rest of the away team stared in shock at what had occurred as the Exotian leader, seeing an opportunity, scrambled through the door at the far end of the chamber and disappeared before Drake could bring his weapon to bear.

"Let us leave this place," Ruk said. "It is too dangerous for you here. This chamber could collapse at any moment."

"But what about the Sergeant?" Drake said, looking at the boulder covering his Marine.

"He is already dead," Ruk replied, raising his voice somewhat. "Come with me if you want to live."

All the surviving members of the away team looked at Zhadesh, the man in charge. He glanced down at the bottom of the boulder, noting the pool of blood forming there, before taking note of another trembler starting.

"Let us get out of here," he said, following Ruk back out into the cave complex.

As the four *Bellerophon* crew and the one large android made their way through the cave, they noticed places where other sections of the roof had collapsed, crushing Exotians or forcing them off paths and into near-bottomless pits. Screams could be heard reverberating throughout the cave.

"Why did you do it?" Zhadesh asked Ruk, moving up close behind the android.

"Why did I do what?" Ruk inquired.

“Save us from the Exotians? Why did you save us? From what the Exotians told us, you and your kind hate all biological intelligence.”

Ruk paused for a moment, looking down at the white-haired Efrosian.

“We do not hate all biological intelligence. We merely find you to be irritatingly illogical. It was when the Old Ones threatened our survival by trying to shut us off that we developed the need to destroy them. As for why I chose to save you, my choice was logical. The Old Ones had chosen to designate you an enemy because your society accepts Ruk. The Old Ones are the enemy of the Ruk. The enemy of my enemy is a potential ally. You may serve a useful purpose to me.”

“We appreciate your assistance, and would be willing to help you and the other Ruk in anyway we possibly can,” Zhadesh replied.

“Your... starship... in orbit. It appears more powerful than anything either the Old Ones or the Ruk possess,” Ruk said.

“From what we have seen, that is likely true,” Zhadesh remarked.

“Help us destroy the Old Ones,” Ruk requested.

“We cannot do that!” Zhadesh said in shock.

“With your help, we can rid the galaxy of the scourge of the Old Ones for good,” Ruk explained.

“Even if it were not against our highest regulation, the Prime Directive, it would be against every moral code the Federation espouses! We would never do it!”

A look of disgust covered Ruk’s features as he contemplated each member of the away team.

“You are no better than the Old Ones. Illogical. Unpredictable. Eventually, you too must be destroyed.”

“Not likely,” Drake said as he raised his rifle toward the increasingly enraged android. Ruk contemplated the weapon and appeared on the verge of attack just as another trembler shook the cave around the away team. More rocks and stones dropped from the ceiling, forcing the away team members to dash out of their way while Ruk simply batted the falling stones with his arms. One such rock flew over and hit Lieutenant Jackson, knocking her off balance and over the edge of a deep crevice.

“Andrea!” Zhadesh shouted, grabbing the science officer by the sleeve of her uniform as both Dar and Drake grabbed the Efrosian officer around the waist to prevent him too from tumbling over the edge. Jackson dangled over the precipice, her feet trying to find purchase along the sheer wall as Zhadesh attempted to strengthen his grasp on the woman’s sleeve. The Efrosian’s heart leap to his throat when he heard the first rip when the sleeve joined the uniform’s shoulder.

“Hold on, Andrea!” Zhadesh pleaded. “Try and pass me your other hand!”

“I’m trying,” Jackson sobbed, twisting to get her left hand up to where Zhadesh could grab hold of it but only causing the stitching to tear further.

“Ruk!” Dar called out to the android, who was passively watching from only a couple of meters away. “Ruk, she needs your help!”

Ruk looked back and forth between Dar and where Zhadesh’s hand grasped Jackson’s uniform sleeve, his face impassive.

“I am not going to let go, Andrea,” Zhadesh assured. “You are going to be okay!”

“I know,” Jackson replied, tears spreading down her cheeks.

Zhadesh looked up at the android, anger brewing within him. “Ruk, please!” he begged.

Ruk’s expression changed. At first he seemed to grow more angry, as he had when Zhadesh told him the *Bellerophon* would not help him destroy the Old Ones, but quickly softened. The immense android took a step toward Zhadesh, his hand out to grab Jackson when there was another loud ripping sound. Zhadesh, Dar and Drake fell back against the cave wall as Jackson’s screams filled the cavern, the woman falling into the darkness, quickly fading in the depths. Zhadesh stared at the remnant of the sleeve still grasped tightly in his hand with an expression of disbelief.

“Andrea!” the Efrosian said in a voice barely above a whisper before he took a deep breath and bellowed, “ANDREA!”

“She’s gone, Lieutenant,” Dar tried to reassure the team leader. “We need to get out of here before another quake hits!”

“Halt!”

Zhadesh, Dar, and Drake looked up to see the Exotian leader with another two guards standing in the opening at the other side of the cavern. Both guards held what were obvious weapons, one aimed at Ruk, the other at the away team members. The Exotian leader took a step closer to the four prisoners, looking down into the crevice where Jackson had disappeared before looking back up at Zhadesh.

“I’m sorry for the death of your crew, but that is the risk you take when you ally yourself with the Ruk.”

Zhadesh looked at the Exotian leader with obvious anger and said in a barely restrained voice, "You want to destroy the androids, they want to destroy you, and I am perfectly happy to let you destroy each other. I just want to get my team out of here."

"I'm afraid none of you are going anywhere," the Exotian said before a noise started to emanate from Zhadesh's combadge.

"Bel...oph.. to aw.. team. Zha..sh, do you ..py?"

Amazed, Zhadesh quickly tapped his combadge and said, "Captain, is that you? We need an emergency beam out!"

"St..d by. We're ...ing troub.. ...king onto signal."

A moment later, Zhadesh felt the familiar tingle of a transporter beam as it engulfed him.

"No!" he heard the Exotian leader shout, seeing him start to move toward where the away team had been standing as he dematerialized.

* * * *

Aboard the *Bellerophon*, Captain K'danz and Commander Paris stood behind the transparent aluminum partition as the transporter chief operated the control console.

"I had trouble locking on to all five communicator signals, so I employed a wide dispersal pattern," the chief explained. "According to these readings, I've got at least four of them."

"Let's hope your readings are off and you got all five," K'danz remarked.

The transporter chief cross-circuited the patterns through the buffer, trying to boost the signal to gain ratio before materializing the away team on the platform. His face took on a concerned look as he started the rematerialization process.

"Something wrong, Chief?" Paris asked.

"I'm not sure. One of the objects in the pattern buffer isn't a life form. Appears to be equipment, but the mass is about 115 kilograms."

"Can you hold it back and rematerialize it after we've brought the away team back aboard?" the first officer asked.

"Of course," the chief replied as he made adjustments on the control console, then activated the rematerialization process. The typical hum filled the transporter room as four of the transport pads lit up and four people materialized atop them. Both K'danz and Paris were surprised when they realized one of them was not a member of the crew but rather a gaunt-looking being wearing long grey robes.

"Security to transporter room one," Paris said into the intercom as the three surviving away team members descended the platform. Seconds later four enlisted Marines arrived to take the unexpected visitor into custody.

"Where's the rest of the away team," K'danz asked.

"Dead, Captain," Zhadesh explained sadly. "Killed in the quakes we experienced down there."

"What is the equipment we beamed up with you?" Paris asked.

"Equipment?" Zhadesh asked, not comprehending.

"Ruk!" Dar exclaimed, suddenly realizing. He was standing between us and the Exotian. He must have been beamed up with us.

"Captain, you may want to have a few more security guards in here when you materialize him," Zhadesh suggested. K'danz exchanged a look with her first officer, who shrugged back.

"Security, send a few more personnel to transporter room one," the captain finally ordered. Several minutes later, after another four Marines arrived in the transporter room, weapons aimed at the empty transport chamber, the captain ordered, "Energize."

The transporter hummed to life once again, and the large blue cargo pad in the center of the transport chamber glowed, sparkles above it coalescing into the form of a 2.3 meter tall bald-headed being that looked much like the Exotian beamed aboard with the away team. The android took on a defensive stance, appearing ready to strike out until he took note of his situation, his programming telling him his only choices were surrender or destruction.

"Who or what is that?" K'danz asked with awe.

"Carrie, this is Ruk," Dar said. "He's an android created by the original inhabitants of Exo III who moved out here to Wiskon III when the Exotians established a colony here. The Exotians and the androids have been having a... dispute... ever since."

"We only wished to guarantee our continued existence," Ruk said, glaring at the slightly shorter Exotian leader. "The Old Ones wished our destruction."

“My ancestors gave you what you wanted,” the Exotian responded. “Freedom.”

“You call what we have endured freedom?” Ruk challenged.

“Compared to how we live below ground, subsisting on moss and lichen as a primary food source, unable to foray above ground for more than a minute at a time? Yes!”

K’danz felt like a parent watching bickering children. When she finally had had enough, she put her foot down, shouting, “Enough!” She was satisfied by the look of shock she received from both the Exotian and the android. “It’s obvious both your cultures, while originating in the same place, have significant differences of opinion. I’m willing to sit down with both of you and negotiate some kind of truce. Perhaps we can come to some agreement of mutual benefit to all of us.”

“Your logic is sound,” Ruk stated. “I would be willing to speak on behalf of the Ruk.”

“And I’m willing to talk on behalf of the Exotian colonists,” the Exotian added, glancing at Ruk with an expression of distrust.

“Fine,” K’danz said before turning to her first officer. “Tom, have crew’s mess set up for negotiations.” As Paris nodded and turned to leave, K’danz looked back at her guests and said, “We will commence in one hour. In the meantime, allow us to escort each of you to separate quarters where you can refresh yourselves.”

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 64949.3:

Negotiations have concluded, and I think the Exotians and the Ruk androids have finally come to an amenable agreement.

During the negotiations we learned that when the Exotian colony grew fearful of their own androids, as the native Exotians had, rather than try and turn the androids off, they offered them a colony of their own on Wiskon IV, the next planet further out in this star system, a planet incapable of supporting humanoid life but where it was believed the androids could prosper. Taking several sub-light Exotian ships and all the equipment used to create and maintain androids, similar to what was discovered by Captain Kirk on Exo III a hundred and twenty years ago, the androids left Wiskon III and settled on Wiskon IV, only to find a world of extreme temperatures, high winds, sand storms, and other environmental factors that caused deterioration of many of the android population. Believing their fate was a deliberate attempt by the Exotians to destroy them, the androids vowed revenge against their former masters, periodically sending their ships on suicide missions against the Exotian colony, attacks that were normally thwarted by early detection by the Exotians. Our unexpected arrival in the system merely presented another opportunity for the androids to launch an attack – unnoticed – by hiding behind the Bellerophon until it was too late to react.

We have now gotten both the Exotians and the Ruk androids to agree to a change. While the Exotians have decided to remain in their colony, the androids have agreed to allow the Bellerophon to transport their entire population to a more habitable planet in another nearby star system where they can establish a civilization of their own, to succeed or fail on their own.

K’danz out.

Captain K’danz, Commander Paris, and Commander Dar stood before the control console in the transporter room, offering their good-byes to the Exotian leader.

“Are you sure you and your colony wish to remain here on Wiskon III?” the captain asked one more time. “It would be easy enough for us to come back and transplant your colony just as we’re moving the failed Ruk colony.”

“I thank you for your generous offer, Captain, but no,” the Exotian leader replied. “In spite of our complaints to Ruk during the negotiations you hosted, Edisla is our home. We were born here. We have adapted to our way of life below ground. We will continue to exist here. Your presence has helped in ways we could never have anticipated, and we thank you.”

The Exotian leader bowed slightly toward K'danz, then nodded at her two subordinate officers before stepping up on the transporter.

"Energize, Chief," Paris ordered, and a moment later the Exotian was gone. K'danz then turned toward her first officer.

"What is the status of getting the Ruk aboard the ship?" she asked.

"All the equipment Ruk said was necessary for their new colony is aboard and packed in cargo bay two. All the androids are aboard and settled in the main shuttlebay. There were only a couple dozen of them left, but Ruk assures me once they reach their new home and with the help of the supplies you have promised them, it should be a vibrant colony of artificial life-forms in about a year."

"Very good. Have the bridge set a course for the Matar star system. I'm going to be making my tour of the decks before I go off duty for the night, Tom."

"Aye, aye, ma'am," Paris replied before heading out the door toward the bridge.

"How about you, Dear?" K'danz asked her husband. "Care to join me on my tour of the ship?"

"I would love to, but I need to oversee some work in main engineering. But I'll meet up with you in the crew's mess at 1800 hours," the half-Klingon Chief Engineer replied before giving his wife a quick kiss on the cheek and likewise heading out the door.

Forty-five minutes later, K'danz was down on deck 14. The area was quiet, as it was one of the least populated areas of the ship. She was surprised to find Lieutenant (JG) Xin Zhadesh standing by himself in one of the small crew lounges, gazing out the window at the frozen world far below.

"Something wrong, Lieutenant?" she asked.

As engrossed as he was in his own thoughts, Zhadesh had not heard K'danz's approach and was startled when she spoke. He turned to look at the captain with sad-looking cold blue eyes.

"I failed, Captain," Zhadesh said. "I was in charge of the away team, and two people died under my command."

"I read your report, Lieutenant. You have nothing to be regretful of. Their deaths were unavoidable. The quakes were triggered when the Ruk spaceship struck the hidden fault-line running under those mountains, releasing centuries of pent-up geologic energy." K'danz took a deep breath before adding, "I must admit I share in some of the responsibility, as it was the drilling with our ship's phasers in order to reach a depth where we could both contact you and beam you out of the cave system that probably allowed the quakes to continue as long as they did. But you did your job. You made contact with the Exotian colony, and that contact assured that our information was erased from their computer records."

"But it seems like the Sergeant, and especially Andrea, died for nothing. Especially Andrea," Zhadesh repeated.

"But they did not die for nothing," K'danz assured her crew member. The Exotians and the android Ruk can now both live in peace because of what you did. Plus the shifting of the fault by the Ruk spacecraft has allowed a geothermal bloom to reach the surface of Wiskon III. The lake where you beamed down is melting for the first time in centuries and that valley will soon bloom with new life! T'Ashara has assured me that within two Wiskon years, they will be growing crops in that valley the likes of which has never been seen before on that planet." K'danz took a step closer and placed a reassuring hand on Zhadesh's shoulder. "You're far from a failure, Lieutenant. I wish I had a dozen more officers just like you."

Zhadesh seemed a little reassured, and attempted a half-hearted smile.

"I just wish I had been able to get to know her better," he remarked as he turned back toward the window just as the *Bellerophon* broke orbit and started heading out toward deep space.

"Being in command has a lot of benefits," K'danz remarked. "But it also has a lot of responsibilities. Getting to know your crew is one of them, knowing their strengths and their weaknesses, knowing how to best take advantage of each. It's something you're going to have to learn if you intend to move up in the ranks, Mister Zhadesh. But I think you're capable of it, which is why you had my confidence to lead that away mission."

"Thank you, Captain," the Efrosian man said, unconsciously standing a little straighter. "I will try and not disappoint you."

"I'm sure you won't disappoint me," K'danz remarked. "Now carry on," she added as she resumed her tour, and Zhadesh headed toward the turbolift with a slightly brighter outlook.

The End