

Chief Engineer's log, stardate 66198.1:

Engineering division has completed the testing of the Bellerophon's spare warp core, and found everything to be satisfactory. I've assigned my assistant chief engineer to begin the overhaul of the Belle's power transfer network during tonight's mid-watch, and I'm hoping to have that complete within the next few days.

On a more personal note, I have continued to make my inquiries into the whereabouts of Doctor Juliani Gaeta with the Daystrom Institute, in the hopes of learning why his experimental FTL Jump Drive, tested aboard the starship Dauntless several years ago, is almost identical to the FTL drive we discovered aboard a seemingly abandoned alien warship several months ago. Their latest response indicates Gaeta has been away from the Institute, but had been making periodic progress reports that include his location, along with claims that he was continuing his research into perfecting his experimental FTL drive in the field. I had hoped that the Institute would put me in touch with Doctor Gaeta, but unfortunately they now say they have not heard from him in over two months, when he normally transmitted update communiqués every two to three weeks. I can't be sure if something has happened to Doctor Gaeta, or if my inquiries with the Daystrom Institute have caused him to go into hiding for some reason?

Commander Dar, Chief Engineer, USS Bellerophon, out.

Captain (Carrie) K'danz, commanding officer of the Intrepid-class starship *USS Bellerophon NCC-74705*, sat in her command chair on the bridge. The *Belle* had just completed their latest mission, a bio-survey of a class P world that, while filled with a diverse assortment of life, had not developed any sentient intelligence. Now the *Belle* was heading toward its next destination, continuing the bio-survey of Sector 50102.

As Captain K'danz reviewed an operations report on the fold-down monitor screen between the two command seats, Commander Dar – the half-Klingon chief engineer of the starship and the captain's husband – emerged from the turbolift behind K'danz's right shoulder. He stepped down to the lower deck and paused at the bridge engineering station, entering some data into the console and reviewing the results before turning around and walking over to his wife with a padd in his hands.

"You remember that scientist from the Daystrom Institute I've been trying to contact for the last few months?" Dar asked the captain.

"Yes," the human woman replied. "Doctor Gaeta, wasn't it? Any luck tracking him down?"

"Yes and no," Dar replied. He handed the padd he was holding to K'danz as he explained, "The Institute forwarded Gaeta's reported locations over the course of the last year before he dropped completely out of sight two months ago. I've been compiling the data, and I think I know where he was heading."

K'danz looked at the screen of the padd, which displayed a star chart with notations of systems and dates.

"It's not exactly a straight line, but it looks like he's heading toward the Typhon Sector to me," she remarked.

"Exactly," Dar agreed. "And it appears his path took a definite turn in our direction just a few weeks after we encountered that ship with the robot crew."

"Coincidence?" asked K'danz, looking up at her husband. "Or you think there's a connection?"

"Gaeta has connections inside of Starfleet. Otherwise he would never have been given the opportunity to test his experimental FTL on a starship," Dar remarked. "I'm sure he heard about our encounter with that vessel, and it prompted him to head out here. I'm just not sure why."

Space, the Final Frontier...
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Star Trek: Bellerophon

“Distant Early Warning” By PJK

(With apologies to the rock band **Rush**)

“I’ve calculated a probable route Gaeta would have to take if we assume he’s heading for the coordinates where we encountered that warship,” Dar explained, touching the screen on the padd and changing the display to the projected course. “We can intercept that course in just a few days.”

“But it’s in completely the opposite direction of the next system where we’re scheduled to perform a bio-survey,” K’danz remarked.

“I know,” Dar admitted. “But I was hoping we could put off the bio-surveys and see if we can track Gaeta down. It may be our only chance in the foreseeable future.”

K’danz looked at her husband sympathetically. “This whole situation regarding that alien FTL drive has got you aggravated, doesn’t it?”

“There are too many unanswered questions,” Dar replied. “I need to find out where Gaeta got his FTL drive design from. He claimed it was all his own research when he installed the prototype aboard the *Dauntless*, but what we found aboard that robot warship was too similar to be coincidence. And we were out beyond where any Federation ship had traveled before when we encountered that warship, so if Gaeta got his drive design from those robots, that begs the question; How?”

“I suppose there are no other Fifth Fleet assets that can do this in our place?” K’danz asked dubiously.

“I suppose the *Vengeance* could intercept Gaeta if they wanted to, but why would they want to? The Klingons have no connection either to him, his FTL drive, or those alien robots. And I doubt General Ke’reth and his crew would know what questions to ask if they did manage to head him off. No, Carrie, it has to be us.”

K’danz refocused her attention on the passing warp streaks on the viewscreen. She hated the idea of pulling her ship off-mission without higher authorization, but likewise, her engineer presented some compelling arguments. Finally K’danz addressed the officer at the helm.

“Mister Hickam, come to new course 300 mark 9.” She then looked at her husband and said, “That’s toward the coordinates of where we encountered that robotic warship. I’m just not sure what we’re going to find, considering that ship jumped away at the end of our first encounter with it.”

“That may be true, but Gaeta appears to be headed there, so it’s as likely a place to start looking for him as any.” Dar then smiled slightly at his wife and said, “Thanks, Carrie.”

“I just don’t want to hear you complain if this little side trip of yours winds up damaging the warp drive or something,” K’danz replied, looking at the viewscreen once again.

* * * *

Several days later, the *Bellerophon* was fast approaching the coordinates of where they had encountered the star-shaped bio-mechanical warship with a sentient robot crew six months earlier.

On the bridge, Lt Xin Zhadesh, the starship’s Efrosian chief operations officer, reacted to an indication on his sensor monitor.

“Captain, long range sensors are detecting a small vessel at extreme range, almost dead ahead, maneuvering at sub-light speed.”

“Can you identify?” K’danz asked.

“Not yet,” Zhadesh replied. “But based on the maneuvers whoever is piloting that ship is performing, it looks like they are searching for something.”

On a hunch, K’danz activated the intercom. “Bridge to engineering.”

“Engineering. Dar.”

“Dar, we’re detecting a small vessel ahead. You may want to come on up to the bridge.”

“On my way,” Dar replied.

As K’danz deactivated the intercom, Zhadesh reported, “Now identifying the vessel in question as a Federation long-range runabout, Danube-class. No Starfleet transponder signal. It may be a civilian-owned model.”

“Thank you, Lieutenant,” K’danz replied. A moment later the turbolift opened and Dar stepped out, pausing near the upper railing to look at the main viewer.

“The ship is just coming into visual range,” K’danz remarked as she looked up and back to her husband. “Mister Hickham, increase magnification on the viewer.”

Hickham complied, and a second later the image of a Federation runabout was visible on the main viewscreen. The vessel seemed to be weaving back and forth, as if the pilot were intoxicated.

“He’s certainly not on a straight line from point A to point B, is he?” Dar remarked as he stepped down to the level of the command chairs and took a position next to his wife’s seat.

“Is he trying to evade us?” K’danz wondered out loud.

“Unlikely,” responded Zhadesh. “The runabout has been performing the same or similar maneuvers since he first appeared on sensors. I do not believe he is even aware of us yet.”

“Let’s make him aware,” K’danz said. “Mister Zhadesh, open hailing frequencies.”

“Hailing frequency open, Captain,” Zhadesh confirmed.

K’danz stood up and took a step toward the screen before saying, “Federation runabout, this is the starship *Bellerophon*. Please identify yourself.”

On the viewscreen, the wild maneuvering of the runabout came to a sudden halt. The small vessel slowed, but did not stop completely.

“The runabout is responding, visual signal,” Zhadesh confirmed.

“On screen,” K’danz ordered.

The viewscreen blinked to an image of the interior of the runabout’s cockpit. The only occupant visible was a middle-aged human man of Mediterranean-region descent, with a tan complexion and dark, curly hair.

“This is the runabout *Penobscot*, registered to the Daystrom Institute for Scientific Research, Doctor...” The man paused as he peered through the viewer. “I know you,” he finally said. “Captain... K-daan...? No. K’danz! Captain K’danz! I thought you were in command of the *Dauntless*, Captain?”

“I was, Doctor Gaeta, until a few months after we first met,” K’danz confirmed. “Now I command the *Bellerophon*.”

“What brings you all the way out here?” Gaeta asked.

“You do, Doctor,” Dar said, stepping forward. “I have some questions I need to ask you.”

“Commander Dar! You’re here too! It’s a grand reunion!”

“Doctor,” K’danz said, reasserting herself in the conversation. “This conversation would be much easier, and dare I say more productive, if we were face to face. Would you mind if we beamed you aboard for a meeting?”

“I really am such a busy man,” Gaeta replied. “However, it’s not like I’m on a time schedule right now, so yes, I suppose I can take some time and beam aboard your new starship. Just send me your coordinates.”

“*Bellerophon* will be alongside your craft momentarily. I’ll have my transporter chief coordinate with you as soon as we are. I look forward to seeing you again, Doctor.”

“The pleasure is all mine, Captain,” Gaeta remarked with a nod of his head. “I look forward to coordinating with your transporter chief. See you in a few minutes. *Penobscot*, out.”

As the viewscreen changed back to the image of the small vessel the *Bellerophon* was rapidly approaching, Dar turned back toward the turbolift. “Have security escort him to main engineering. I’ll meet him there,” he said.

“I hope he’s willing to give you the answers you’re looking for, Dar,” K’danz remarked.

“So do I,” Dar replied as he stepped into the turbolift and turned around. “So do I.”

* * * *

Several minutes later, Dar was down in main engineering, supervising the maintenance robot he called Wally as it completed minor repairs to one of the control consoles along the room's side.

"Good job, Wally," Dar said to the box-like robot as it finished what it was doing and backed out of the console access with its treaded wheels. The little robot, found the previous year aboard the alien vessel that Dar wanted to talk to Dr. Gaeta about, looked up at Dar with black binocular-like visual input devices and made a pleased-sounding electronic noise.

As Wally screwed the access cover back in place, the doors at the far end of the room opened, and 2ndLT Asra walked in escorting Dr. Juliani Gaeta. Dar noted the man was walking with a severe limp, his right leg apparently having been replaced with an artificial prosthesis just above where his knee had been.

"What have we here?" Gaeta asked as he approached Dar, his eyes never moving away from the boxy maintenance 'bot. "I've never seen anything like this aboard a Starfleet vessel before."

"He's a one-of-a-kind," Dar confirmed. "Picked him up during one of our missions last year. We call him Wally."

"Wally?" Gaeta questioned. "Why Wally?"

"Because my father's brother, Walter, was a really short guy that used to wear these incredibly huge dark glasses when I was growing up on Sherman's Planet. I used to call him Uncle Wally. And this little fellow reminded me of my uncle."

Wally, who had been watching Gaeta – specifically his artificial leg – ever since he entered engineering, rolled closer to the professor. Gaeta was about to greet the little robot when a scanning beam from a spot between the robot's 'eyes' inspected the prosthesis. Then, without warning, Wally reached out and took hold of the leg above and below the artificial knee.

"Whoa! What's it doing?!" Gaeta demanded to know as he tried to step back away but found himself firmly in the grip of the little robot. A small door opened on the front of Wally's chassis and a third arm emerged, this one ending in a multi-tool attachment. The third arm connected with the joint in the knee and started turning, adjusting, tightening, and lubricating. Less than five seconds later, Wally released his grip on the leg and, as the third arm was retracted back inside and the little cover door closed, he wheeled back and looked up at Gaeta.

The professor stared at Wally for a moment, almost in horror, before looking down at his artificial leg. He then placed some weight on it, bouncing in place before starting to walk in a small circle around Dar. Even the chief engineer was able to note that Gaeta's limp was gone.

"Amazing!" Gaeta remarked. "I've been trying to adjust the tension in that joint for close to a year so it would operate correctly and have never been able to do it right!" He was smiling broadly as he continued looking at the leg. "Simply amazing!" Gaeta then looked at Wally again. "Where exactly did you obtain it?"

"That's the main thing I wanted to talk to you about, Doctor," Dar said, sending Wally over to his 'pen' in the corner of engineering before gesturing for Gaeta to follow him over to the engineer's office. "Last year the *Belle* encountered... well, actually we were intercepted by an alien warship that employed a graviton beam to literally rip us out of warp and hold us helpless. We discovered the ship was very old and had been crewed by what appeared to be sentient robots, all of whom were inoperative due to age and fatigue. Something the away team did while we were aboard activated that little guy and he automatically started repairing the crew."

"That's fascinating," Gaeta said. "But what does it have to do with me?"

"I need to know if you ever had any interaction with that ship we found."

Gaeta's expression turned hard as he replied, "I know nothing about any alien warships with robot crews. What in the worlds would make you think I would?"

"We discovered evidence aboard the ship that hinted you may have... visited there at some point."

Now Gaeta was actually getting annoyed.

"What kind of evidence?" he demanded to know. "I granted you and your captain the courtesy of coming aboard to answer your questions. I assumed it had something to do with my work, perfecting my drive system. Instead I come here to be accused of... Of what? I'm not even sure what you're accusing me of here! I've never

even traveled this far outside the Federation before in my life! How could I have visited... or whatever it is you are accusing me of... an alien space vessel all the way out here?!"

"Which raises another question, Doctor," Dar said, completely ignoring Gaeta's tirade. "What brings you out here, so far beyond the Federation border? When I contacted the Daystrom Institute, they informed me you were away performing research to perfect your FTL Jump Drive. What are you doing out here that could help you perfect your invention, Doctor?"

"That sounds pointedly like another accusation, Commander," Gaeta remarked.

"Six months ago, this starship happened upon an alien vessel, immensely old, that employed biomechanical elements in its design..."

"Biomechanical you say?" Gaeta asked, clearly not expecting Dar to say those words. Gaeta's anger quickly faded and he looked contemplative for a moment.

"Yes. Parts of the ship were biological in nature. It also used water as a data transfer medium, much as our own isolar systems use wavelengths of light. But the part that seemed most curious to me was the vessel's mode of propulsion."

Gaeta now started to look nervous as he said, "Okay, I lied when I said I had no knowledge of the alien warship you found. As you probably know, I have several high-ranking friends in Starfleet back on Earth, and they passed on a preliminary report to me on the vessel you found, though I was not aware it was biomechanical in nature or that it was you or Captain K'danz that were responsible for this discovery. I had hoped that, if the vessel were still around, it might provide... inspiration..."

"Inspiration, Doctor?" Dar questioned. "Or another working prototype of your FTL drive?"

"What do you mean?"

"In the process of exploring the ship, in the space that could best be described as an engine room, I found several FTL turbines that were almost exactly like the prototypes you installed aboard the *Dauntless* three years ago, except each turbine was at least five times larger."

Gaeta looked amazed at what Dar was telling him.

"Where did you get your FTL drive design from, Doctor?" Dar asked pointedly.

"I developed it over the course of many years of research and..."

"Bull!" Dar interrupted. "I can buy two widely disparate cultures coming up with similar concepts for FTL propulsion. It happens all the time with differing forms of warp drive. The physics require similar designs, no matter the origin. But the FTL drive I saw on that ship was too exactly like your prototype to be coincidence. You took the FTL drive from somewhere and tried to pass it off as your own! If you have never been aboard the warship we found out here, where did you get it from, Doctor?"

Gaeta seemed ready to refuse to answer, until Dar gestured at Wally. The little robot started moving toward the two men.

"What's it doing?" Gaeta asked with fear.

"Wally fixed your leg. He can un-fix it too," Dar remarked.

Just as Wally arrived in the engineer's office, Gaeta held up his hands and said, "Alright, alright! It's true. I didn't come up with the design for the FTL Jump Drive all on my own." As Dar crossed his arms across his chest and smiled smugly, Gaeta continued, "But I didn't get it from the ship you found either. I wasn't lying when I said I have never been out here."

"Then where...?"

"About ten years ago I was part of a team that helped analyze the wreckage of an unknown alien craft that had evidently crashed on the red moon of Cerberus II and been buried thousands of years ago. The craft had been biomechanical in nature, like the warship you described, except all the biological elements had long since decomposed."

"What kind of a craft was this you studied?"

"We surmised it was a scout or fighter of some kind. Really no larger than one of your Hornets. But some of the technology in it was amazing. We could not locate any evidence the craft ever had a pilot. What you describe of the warship you discovered having a crew of sentient robots lends credence to the hypothesis that the craft itself

was sentient when it was operational. Within the wreckage was a device which at first seemed to serve no purpose we could determine. It looked like a turbine or gyroscope when we first examined it. I removed the equipment and started studying it in the lab at the Institute. It took me nearly a year before I was able to determine it was a compact, self-contained faster-than-light propulsion system that – rather than warp space as our own FTL drive does – literally jumped the craft from one location to another. I spent the next five years reverse engineering the drive and replicating it, first in an exact copy that I installed and tested aboard the *Penobscot*, later designing and building larger copies that I installed aboard the *Dauntless*. But the larger I made the drive – necessary in order to propel a vessel the size of a starship across vast distances of space – the more unstable they became, making the programming of jump coordinates unpredictable.”

“Is that why we nearly jumped halfway across the quadrant when we tested your drive aboard the *Dauntless*?” Dar asked.

“I’m afraid so. So when I heard another ship had been discovered out in deep space with what appeared to be FTL Jump Drives aboard, I hoped that studying these drives might provide me with the insight into creating a stable, starship-sized drive unit. I had no idea what you had found was identical to the small drive I used as the basis of my research.”

“Enough so that I have to believe that had the same origins,” Dar confirmed. “Unfortunately, the ship we found is no longer out here.”

“It’s not?” Gaeta questioned.

“Like I said earlier, after we somehow activated Wally...” Dar gestured down toward the small maintenance ‘bot. Wally looked at Gaeta and flapped its visual input devices, almost as if it were wiggling eyebrows. “...He repaired and reactivated the ‘crew’ and, after we beamed back aboard the *Bellerophon*, they jumped the ship away, who knows where?”

“That... That’s unfortunate,” Gaeta remarked. “Perhaps we can figure out where it went?”

“Unlikely,” Dar replied. “Our science officer, T’Ashara, said the jump drive is impossible to track, since it is literally jumping over light years of space instead of warping through them and leaving a traceable trail.”

Gaeta looked like some of his confidence was restored as he remarked, “Nothing is truly impossible, Commander.”

* * * *

Captain’s log, stardate 66206.3:

Doctor Gaeta has agreed to join us as we search for the biomechanical warship we encountered last year. His runabout has been stored in our main shuttlebay for the duration. We’re now at the coordinates where the alien ship ripped the Belle out of warp six months ago.

K’danz, out.

The *Bellerophon*’s command staff plus guest were gathered in the conference lounge next to the bridge. On several of the monitor screens along the far bulkhead were displayed images of the alien ship’s interior – taken by the away team as they attempted to free the *Bellerophon* from the grip of the warship’s graviton beam – as well as diagrams of the ship’s design as best could be surmised based on the starship’s sensor readings of the vessel.

“As I’m sure Doctor Gaeta knows better than anyone else here, the jump drive the biomechanical warship is equipped with is very different than traditional warp drive,” Commander T’Var, the ship’s new Vulcan chief science officer, the replacement for Commander T’Ashara’s after her recent death, remarked. “My predecessor stated it then and I will state it now; we have no method of successfully tracking where such a drive could take that vessel.”

“If we knew the crew’s motivations – what their intentions were once the ship was completely reactivated – we would have a better idea of where to look,” the Tellarite Chief of the Boat Mor chim Colv remarked. “That vessel could have jumped anywhere within a hundred light years radius, and that was six months ago!”

Captain K’danz, who sat in the seat at the front of the table directly below the large forward-facing windows, noted her new chief operations officer seemed more pensive than usual, his ice-blue eyes staring at the top of the briefing table, his fingers clasped and held just under his nose.

“Something bothering you, Mister Zhadesh?” she asked.

Lieutenant Xin Zhadesh suddenly sat up straight, as if caught slouching by his primary school teacher. The Efrosian turned his eyes to look at the captain as he said, “When I interacted with that vessel’s water-based control interface, the sensory input I received was overwhelming. I am sure, had I been one of the robotic crew, I could have processed and comprehended everything as easily as I am holding this conversation with you, Captain. Being merely a biological species with a biological brain, all I can remember of my encounter with the vessel’s control functions are... I would surmise the best word to describe it as impressions. Vague recollections of images, and feelings, and needs and desires.”

“And what did the biomechanical ship... desire, Mister Zhadesh?” Doctor Gaeta asked.

“Resources,” Zhadesh replied.

“Resources?” questioned Captain Michael Drake, the Marine chief of security.

“Yes. The vessel was badly damaged,” Zhadesh replied. “Its support craft were, for lack of a better word, dead. It needed to repair itself and rebuild its support craft before it could continue with its primary mission.”

“And what mission was that?” Commander Tom Paris, the starship’s first officer asked.

“I... do not know, Commander,” the Efrosian replied.

“Well, if that ship needed resources, let’s determine what is the closest planet that can supply them in the sector and see if we can determine if that ship was ever there and – if so – where it went after that?” K’danz ordered. T’Var was already looking at star charts on one of the nearby monitors.

“The closest class-M planet to our current vicinity is Allatu II, approximately 33 hours distant at warp 5,” she stated.

“Sounds like as good a place to start looking as any,” K’danz agreed as she activated the intercom in front of her. “Bridge, this is the captain. Set course for the Allatu system. Ahead warp 7.”

* * * *

Just over 11 hours later, the *Bellerophon* was in orbit of the blue-green planet Allatu II. As it had when the *Belle* conducted a bio-survey of the planet several weeks earlier, the planet featured large salty oceans, numerous continents, myriad plant life, and creatures of the sea, land, and air, though no intelligent life forms. It also had no indications that the cybernetic life-forms were present, nor had they ever visited the planet in the near-past.

“The planet is exactly as we left it, Captain,” Paris remarked to K’danz as he, the Captain, Dar, and Dr. Gaeta stood in the middle of the bridge looking at the inviting world on the viewscreen.

“Well, there goes that idea,” K’danz remarked.

“Orders, Captain?” the helmsman requested.

K’danz continued looking at Allatu II on the viewer for several seconds as she thought. Finally she ordered, “Enter standard orbit for the time being, until we can figure out what our next step is going to be.” She then started heading toward the turbolift as she said, “I’m heading back down to crew’s mess. Hopefully I can finally finish dinner!”

“I’ll join you,” Dar said before looking at Gaeta. “Doctor?”

“I suppose I could use a bite to eat, and your replicators must have more variety than the one aboard the *Penobscot*.” All three headed for the turbolift.

A few minutes later, the three entered crew’s mess on deck 2, which also acted as the ship’s largest off-duty lounge. At one low table, Wally was playing a board game with ten year old Jacob Danz, the captain and engineer’s

adopted son. As he saw them enter, Jacob abandoned the game and rushed over, jumping into K'danz's arms for a hug before asking, "Can I have dinner now?"

"Sure. Anything you want... within reason!"

Jacob, who was about to run over to the replicator bank and order a ten-scoop ice cream sundae for dinner until his mother issued her warning, instead turned to the little maintenance 'bot that he had been playing games with and said, "C'mon Wally. We can get you some dinner too."

Wally made an electronic noise that sounded vaguely like "Yum!" as he followed behind Jacob.

"What does a robot eat for dinner?" K'danz asked as she watched her son and the little yellow robot move up to the replicator, the boy ordering spaghetti for himself and a half-liter of lubricating oil for the robot.

Dar watched his son order the replicator rations too, when a sudden thought occurred to him. He looked at his wife wide-eyed.

"Carrie," he said. "We're thinking too much like humans!"

"Of course we are. What should we be thinking like?" she responded back.

"No, you don't understand. When Lieutenant Zhadesh said the cybernetic life-form's ship was seeking resources, we naturally thought food, water and air. But what would a robot consider to be vital and necessary resources?"

"I would think raw materials to repair my ship and create spare parts," Dr. Gaeta remarked.

"Exactly!" Dar agreed. "That ship wouldn't be looking for a class-M planet! It would be looking for a star system that could supply the materials it needs; various metals, minerals, and energy sources!"

K'danz quickly moved over to the nearest intercom and signaled the bridge.

"Tom, what's the closest star system to the coordinates where we encountered that biomechanical warship six months ago that would be a source of energy and raw materials like metals?"

It took Commander Paris several seconds to look up the required information. When he finally responded he replied, "The Antliae system contains a highly active star, three radiant gas giants, and an asteroid belt between planets two and three that contains immeasurable amounts of iron as well as copper, gold, and other various metals."

"Distance from our current position?" K'danz requested.

"Just under five light years. Less than 24 hours at warp 9.6," came the reply.

"Set course for the Antliae system," K'danz ordered. "Warp 9.6!"

"Aye, Captain. Course is plotted and laid in. Engaging warp."

Dar and K'danz both instinctively looked out the large mess hall windows, where the planet Allatu II quickly fell away as the *Bellerophon* broke orbit and turned toward deep space. Almost thirty seconds later, the *Belle* entered warp, leaving the pristine Allatu II far behind.

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"Now approaching the outer edge of the asteroid belt," the gamma shift operations officer announced. On the main viewscreen, the orbiting debris field became more defined, easily seen as being made up of uncountable numbers of distinct objects ranging in size anywhere from a small chair to as big as a mountain, and a few even larger.

Down in crew's mess, K'danz was just about to lift her glass of Bajoran ale to her lips for the first time when the bosun's whistle sounded and the intercom intoned, "Captain to the bridge." K'danz exchanged one of her long-suffering looks with her husband, who was holding a glass of his own, before she got out of her chair and started toward the door. She paused a second later when she realized Dar was not right behind her.

"Aren't you coming?" K'danz asked as Dar lifted his glass to his own lips.

"The announcement said captain to the bridge. I'm not the captain," Dar replied with a smile.

"Well I'm ordering the chief engineer to accompany me," K'danz said with mild annoyance. "No way are you getting to sit here and enjoy your drink without me."

"Yes, dear," Dar commented mockingly as he put his glass back down and joined his wife heading out the door.

Not long after, both senior officers emerged on the bridge.

“Status?” the captain asked as she stepped down to the mid-bridge.

“We’re currently 500,000 kilometers from the outer edge of the systems’ asteroid belt,” the evening watch Officer of the Deck reported. “We weren’t sure exactly what we should be looking for – the cybernetic life-forms we encountered don’t leave a trace behind like the Borg – so we commenced a general scan of the belt.”

“And did you find anything?” Dar inquired.

“On screen, Lieutenant,” the OOD ordered the operations officer. The viewscreen immediately changed to a view of a medium-sized asteroid that had large chunks torn out of it. “We’ve determined there are more than five dozen asteroids in the vicinity that exhibit similar scarring. We believe they have been mined for metals and minerals.”

“Can’t be just a coincidence,” K’danz remarked with a look at Dar.

“Agreed.”

“Any indication where the cyber-bots might have gone from...?” K’danz started to ask when an alarm went off at the science console.

“Detecting a large, artificial object within the asteroid field,” the science officer on watch reported. “Bearing 235 mark 7, range 505,264 kilometers.”

“On screen.”

The viewscreen blinked, the new image showing another section of the asteroid belt, this time with a large, star-shaped craft in the distance.

“Thar she blows,” Dar commented before turning to the OOD. “Call Doctor Gaeta to the bridge. Tell him we’ve sighted his white whale.”

“Something must have happened between our last encounter and now,” K’danz remarked as she gazed at the ship on the screen. “There’s a whole lot more damage than when we were trapped by it. It looks like it’s missing one of its points.”

Sure enough, of the six long spindly points that had existed on the ship when it was first encountered, three on top – three on the bottom, all arranged in a triangular pattern, the longest top point was gone, looking like it had been literally ripped off the ship and exposing dark-red flesh-like material within the hull. The jagged end of what remained testified to the fact it was not an intentional design feature of the ship, looking more like one of the larger asteroids had plowed right through the alien ship and nearly destroyed it.

“Life signs?” K’danz asked.

“Not detecting any residual energy readings, Captain,” the operations officer replied. “But it’s really hard to tell with the amount of interference the local star is producing.”

“The star is giving off a powerful solar wind of charged particles,” the science officer at the port side console reported. “Probably one of the factors that went into the cybernetic life-forms deciding to come to this system.”

“Opinion?” K’danz asked, turning to look at the young officer at ops.

“As far as I can tell, that vessel is dead in space,” he replied.

The turbolift opened again, and this time Dr. Juliani Gaeta and Commander Tom Paris emerged. Gaeta paused on the upper level, entranced by the image on the viewscreen.

“Is that it?” he finally asked.

“As far as we can tell, Doctor,” K’danz replied, looking back at the scientist. “And what’s the likelihood that another of those biomechanical ships just happens to be in the same sector of space as where we encountered the first one?”

“I wouldn’t even begin to calculate those odds,” Gaeta replied.

K’danz turned her attention on her first officer. “Tom, put together an away team and beam over there. Make a survey of the vessel.” The captain noticed the look of anticipation on Dr. Gaeta’s face and added, “And take Doctor Gaeta with you. I think he needs to see that equipment and those systems for himself.”

“Thank you, Captain!” Gaeta exclaimed as Paris started contacting several off-duty members of the crew, including Lieutenant Zhadesh, with instructions to meet in the transporter room.

* * * *

“How difficult do you think it will be to disconnect one of the FTL gyros and beam it into one of your starship’s cargo bays?” Dr. Gaeta asked Dar as the away team outfitted themselves with tricorders, survey equipment, and in the case of Paris and the two Marine security guards that would accompany the team, phasers.

“We’re only going over to survey the vessel, Doctor,” Dar replied. “See what kind of damage the ship has suffered on the inside. Once that survey is done, if – and only if – the conditions warrant and Captain K’danz approves, we may be able to recover one of the FTL drives.”

Gaeta looked slightly hurt and disappointed at Dar as Paris, slipping a hand phaser into his holster, stepped up into the transport chamber and said, “Okay team, according to sensor readings, the main hub of that ship, where we found the control room and the engine room last time, are pressurized and contain a breathable oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. But we can’t be certain the structure hasn’t been weakened, so be alert, be careful, and be prepared for an emergency beam-out should it become necessary.” Paris then nodded and the away team took their places on the platform.

“Based on the tricorder readings from your last visit, I’ve entered coordinates for the largest open space aboard that ship. That should put you inside what you called the engine room, Commander,” the transporter technician reported.

“Very good. Energize, Chief,” Paris ordered. Seconds later the away team dematerialized.

Moments later the six member away team re-materialized in the center of a wide open space the equivalent of three decks tall aboard the *Belle*. Along most of the walls was equipment and control consoles, several of them looking like thin shallow pools of water similar to what had been found in the control room the previous year. Gaeta’s attention was drawn to what looked like four large turbines tipped on their sides that filled nearly half the space along the far wall.

“Look out!”

Just after materializing, Dar had to quickly step aside as another Wally came scooting by at high speed, evidently not expecting the sudden appearance of the away team. A second Wally treading its way more slowly through the space in the opposite direction stopped in front of the away team, looked at them for several seconds curiously, then continued on and out the open doorway into the corridor beyond.

“I thought you said Wally was one of a kind, Commander?” Gaeta asked Dar.

“Only one of his kind aboard a Federation starship,” Dar replied. “And when we were here six months ago he was the only maintenance robot we saw. Maybe there were others elsewhere?” The half-Klingon engineer looked around, a puzzled expression on his face. “Something seems different. I don’t remember this space being quite so tall the last time we were here.”

“Maybe it’s the lighting?” suggested Paris. “Last time we were here we mainly used palm beacons in order to see.”

“Maybe...,” Dar grudgingly agreed.

As the rest of the away team looked around at their surroundings, Lt Xin Zhadesh approached a large tank of water near the center of the room. Numerous filaments spanned from the open top of the tank to the overhead far above or to various pieces of equipment in the space, including the FTL drives. Along these filaments ran drops of water, some running down into the tank, other defying gravity and running up the wires, carrying information and commands to various systems throughout the warship. As Gaeta went back to looking closely at the drive units, amazed mainly by the water-based control wires running to it, the chief operations officer attached a specially built interface onto the sensor of his tricorder and dipped it into the tank, actually the warship’s equivalent of a library computer core.

“Commander, the interface is functioning,” he reported to Paris.

“Good. Make sure you record as much of the data as possible, Xin. We can analyze it at our leisure once we’re back aboard the *Belle*.”

Dar noticed Gaeta taking mental measurements of one of the FTL drive units. Pausing to let another Wally shoot by his legs, he joined Gaeta with the intent of reminding the Doctor that removal of one of these units would

be up to the captain, and with so much evidence that the ship was not dead as first thought – all the Wally-bots running around making repairs being primary among them – it would be unlikely they would be able to obtain Gaeta's prize. Halfway to the scientist, the chief engineer paused as he started sensing a subtle vibration through the soles of his boots on the deck. Evidently several other members of the team sensed the vibration as well, as Zhadesh pulled his tricorder out of the core tank and began scanning.

"I am detecting six robots approaching our current position. Unable to determine if they are aware of our presence or not."

"Even if they're not, they will be in a moment," 2ndLT Asra commented as she aimed her phaser toward the open door to the corridor.

"I thought sensor readings indicated no crew activity aboard this ship?" the Marine lance corporal that accompanied the team asked.

"Actually, taking into consideration the interference from the local star and the fact the crew aboard this vessel is entirely made up of robots, it would have been hard to determine with certainty if the readings we received from ship's sensors indicated an active crew," the operations officer remarked. "Too hard to differentiate."

"Do not fire unless ordered to!" Paris clarified as the lance corporal likewise aimed his weapon in the direction of the approaching robots. "After all, we're the aliens here! And the maintenance robots are ignoring us for the most part. Maybe the robot crew will as well?"

Through the doorway, six large shiny silver robots appeared, marching with a deliberate step. Each robot was identical, 2.3 meters tall with a single scanning eye on their face. They all stopped in unison as they noticed the Starfleet away team in the engine space. It seemed like several seconds passed as the two teams looked at one another until the robots lifted their arms, their hands folding back to be replaced by the unmistakable barrels of projectile weapons.

"Can we fire now?" the lance corporal asked nervously.

"*Bellerophon* to away team!" said the excited voice of Captain K'danz through each member's combadge, startling not only the away team members but the robots in the corridor as well. "Stand by for emergency beam-out!"

"How did they...?" Gaeta started to say just as the transporter field took effect and the away team dematerialized.

Several minutes later, Paris, Dar and Gaeta emerged on the bridge, which was bathed in red light.

"How did you know we were about to be attacked, Captain?" Paris asked as the three joined K'danz mid-bridge.

"We didn't," K'danz replied. "I just wanted to get you out of there before anything happened once **that** showed up." The captain pointed at the main viewscreen. Paris, Dar and Gaeta all looked, seeing for the first time the second biomechanical warship slowly closing on the *Belle*. "That jumped into the system just after you beamed aboard the other warship."

"There are two of them?" Paris asked unbelievably.

"Not only that," said Lt Commander T'Var from her post at the science console. "But sensor readings match. Confirmed, the second ship that just arrived is the one the *Bellerophon* discovered six months ago. I am detecting the residual gravitons built up in the arm of the ship from the beam that captured this vessel last year."

"Captain, both vessels are arming their missiles," warned Captain Drake. "They're targeting the *Belle*."

"Helm, get us out of here!" K'danz ordered. "Now!"

"Engaging warp drive," confirmed Lt Commander Hickam.

Dar quickly moved over to the engineering console on the starboard side, replacing his assistant chief in the seat. "I can give you all speeds up through warp 9.9!" he stated.

"Warships have launched missiles!" Drake reported.

On the screen, three missiles from each ship, all trailing long tails of smoke marking their paths, converged on the small Intrepid-class starship as its warp engines folded into position and engaged. Moments later all six missiles passed through the exact spot where the *Bellerophon* had been as the starship disappeared into warp.

* * * *

The chime to the ready room sounded. K'danz, who had been reading with her son on the couch, looked over and said, "Come." The doors swished open and Dar stepped in, holding a padd in one hand.

"T'Var and I just finished analyzing the data we obtained from the cybernetic life-forms..."

"Doctor Gaeta has started calling them Cylons," K'danz stated.

"Cylons? Where did he get that name from?" Dar asked.

"Said it was the name of a race of robots from some campy science-fiction entertainment during Earth's 1970's," the captain explained. "I actually prefer Cybots myself."

"Yeah, so do I," Dar agreed.

"Speaking of Doctor Gaeta, where is he? I haven't seen him since the away team debrief."

"Last I saw he was down in crew's mess in a funk over not being able to retrieve one of the cyber... one of the Cybot FTL drives and was trying to get himself drunk on synthahol."

"He does realize that you can't actually get drunk on synthahol, right?" K'danz asked dubiously.

"I don't think he really cares right now. But you should care about this!" Dar presented the padd he had been holding to K'danz. "We may need to call in a few other ships for this."

"Is this information accurate?" K'danz asked with concern as she read the file on the padd.

"It's unlikely the... the Cybots anticipated we would find or board their ship, so neither Mister Drake nor I suspect disinformation. The hardest part was interpreting their coordinate system so we could verify the target."

"And were you able to?" K'danz asked, looking up at her husband, concern still overshadowing her eyes.

"T'Var is relatively certain... or to quote, '96.675% certain,' that the planet the data is indicating is Sagion III," Dar explained.

The mention of his original home planet caught young Jacob's attention.

"What about my planet?" he asked.

"Nothing to be concerned about, Jacob," K'danz assured. "Why don't you go get a drink out of the replicator?"

As Jacob moved over to the replicator to order a cup of chocolate milk, Dar sat down on the couch next to his wife, talking quietly.

"According to the data we retrieved from that ship, the Cybot's intent is to attack the civilization on Sagion III, take control of the planet for themselves, build more Cybots and vessels from the resources available, and move on to the next available system with the intention of eventually controlling at least half of the quadrant."

"We need to send a warning about this imminent attack to both the Sagions and *Home Plate*," K'danz advised.

"Tom already transmitted the communiqué," Dar confirmed. "Admiral Raiajh has expressed her thanks for the early warning. She's alerting the sector for imminent attack and has dispatched a communiqué of her own to the Sagions."

"Admiral Fil recently signed a mutual defense pact with the Sagions," K'danz remarked as she stood up and looked at her son, who was still standing near the bulkhead-mounted replicator happily sipping brown liquid from his cup. "Jacob, stay in here for a little while. Mommy will be right back." She then said to Dar, "Come with me." The two officers stepped out of the ready room and up to the mid-bridge.

"Status?" K'danz asked Commander Paris, who currently occupied the command seat.

"On course to system currently designated 50102-VII, for bio-survey. Speed: warp 5."

"Come about," K'danz ordered. "Lay in a course for Sagion III. Maximum warp."

"We're going to try and head off those ships before they attack?" Paris asked, standing and joining K'danz and Dar.

"We must," K'danz confirmed. "It's our only real choice."

"Course plotted and laid in, Captain," the helmsman confirmed a moment later.

With a sweeping motion, K'danz pointed a finger at the viewer as she ordered, "Engage." Seconds later, the *Bellerophon* changed course, heading toward the planet Sagion III and whatever fate awaited her there.

To Be Continued...