

Previously in Star Trek: Bellerophon...

After trying to contact Dr. Juliani Gaeta, creator of a new type of faster-than-light propulsion system that had been tested aboard the USS Dauntless several years earlier, and learning he was heading toward the Typhon Sector and the coordinates where the Belle had encountered an alien warship manned by sentient robots, the crew of the Bellerophon intercept Dr. Gaeta to learn where he obtained his designs for his FTL drive, which were remarkably similar to the propulsion system aboard the Cybot vessel they encountered.

Shortly after bringing Dr. Gaeta aboard the Belle, the starship encounters two Cybot warships repairing themselves in the Antliae system asteroid field, managing to board one of the vessels before being attacked. From their brief access to the Cybot's water-based information storage system, the Bellerophon crew is able to determine the Cybots intend to attack the humanoid civilization on the planet Sagion III, homeworld of the Belle's commanding officer's adopted son and a culture which recently signed a mutual defense pact with the Federation. Now Captain K'danz and her crew race toward the Sagion system in the hopes of stopping the Cybots from wiping out all organic life on Sagion III.

And now the conclusion...

Captain's log, stardate 66220.0:

The Belle has been joined by the IKV Hem bortaStaH and the USS Besiege. All three vessels are currently en route at high warp toward the planet Sagion III, where we hope to avert what could potentially be a devastating attack on the humanoid civilization there by what we are now calling the Cybots, a race of sentient cybernetic life-forms we first encountered six months ago.

K'danz, out.

Captain (Carrie) K'danz, the commanding officer of the Intrepid-class starship *Bellerophon*, found it hard to sit in her command chair. She knew her husband, the half-Klingon chief engineer Dar, was pushing the starship's engines to the limit in order to reach the Sagion system as quickly as possible, but she could not fight off the urge to want to go faster still.

Klingon General Ke'reth, commander of the *Hem bortaStaH* – or *Proud Vengeance* – had offered to tractor both Federation starships to his own and use his transwarp drive to reach the Sagion system sooner, but K'danz had declined the offer, calculating that by the time the ships could be prepared, locked in place, and travel through transwarp, the three ships could be at their destination already. Still, it did not reduce her unconscious desire to pace the width of her bridge.

“Captain, sensors are detecting several ships ahead,” reported Lt Xin Zhadesh, the *Bellerophon*'s chief of operations. “Range: 30,000,000 kilometers and decreasing rapidly.”

“Is it the Cybots?” K'danz asked, looking back toward the ops console.

“Negative,” Zhadesh replied. “Reading at least three dozen vessels traveling at low warp speed, on course toward the Typhon Sector. The warp signatures are not Starfleet or Federation.” Zhadesh paused for a moment to ascertain more detailed readings. “Warp signatures match what we have on record for Sagion III second-generation warp drive.”

K'danz exchanged a look of concern with her first officer, Tom Paris, who sat in the seat to the left of the command chair. She then said to Zhadesh, “Tell *Vengeance* and *Besiege* we're dropping to sub-light. Then hail the Sagion ships, Lieutenant.”

“Lead Sagion ship is responding on visual,” Zhadesh confirmed as the three Fifth Fleet vessels slowed to sub-warp. A few seconds later they were nose to nose with at least thirty five to forty space ships of various designs and purposes, from sleek couriers and yachts to small personnel transports and a number of large bulk cargo carriers.

“What a rag-tag fleet of ships,” Paris remarked as he too stood and joined K’danz near the center of the bridge. He then said to K’danz, “You don’t suppose...?”

“I hope not. It hasn’t been that long since we encountered the Cybot ships in the Antliae system,” she replied before addressing the ships on the viewscreen. “This is Captain K’danz of the Federation starship *Bellerophon*, in command of Fifth Fleet Task Force 51.1. Sagion vessels, are you in need of assistance?”

A second later the viewer image changed to that of a middle-aged Sagion man. The Sagions looked human, except for tanned skin slightly darker than Caucasian humans. K’danz noticed the man on the screen looked unkempt, as if he had quickly thrown on an outfit of clothing several days before and had been working and sleeping in them ever since.

“Thank the many deities you’ve come!” the man said to K’danz. “It was awful! Terrible!”

“What happened?” K’danz wanted to know. “Why do you have so many ships travelling together, and where are you going?”

“We had to run! To flee! They gave us no choice. They gave us no warning!”

“Who? Who gave you no warning?” Again, K’danz looked with concern at Paris.

“We don’t know who they are. All we know is their ships suddenly appeared in orbit over our planet. Within minutes, the first bomb exploded. Within hours, every major city on the surface of the planet was gone!”

“What kind of weapons did they use?” K’danz asked.

“Horrible! Horrible atomic weapons! They leveled cities on every continent. The government, they tried to do what they could, but our calls were ignored. What was left of the government put out a call to flee the planet. Take whatever ships were capable of spaceflight and just leave! We asked where we should go? They told us the Federation would help us. Then we never heard from them again.”

K’danz was at first reluctant, knowing the resources aboard *Starbase 719* were stretched thin following both the influx of Romulan refugees after their homeworld was destroyed and then the war against the Kairn that followed, but she could not let the Sagions simply die in space.

“I will contact *Starbase 719* in the Typhon Sector and request they send a ship to escort you back to our station until we can figure out where we can place you. Is this rag-tag fleet all that survived?”

“There are thirty seven ships that together make up our fleet,” the Sagion man replied, appearing slightly calmer since K’danz’s offer of help. “We know of at least two more fleets, one not far behind consisting of another forty two ships, and a third fleet of twenty seven ships that are making their way to the Woodron system. By a quick count, we estimate we have just over 13,000 survivors.” A tear formed in the corner of the Sagion’s eye. “We don’t know if anyone else escaped those... those monsters!”

“Can you tell us anything about your attackers? Anything at all?” K’danz asked.

“They never showed themselves,” the Sagion man replied, regaining some self-control. “Two ships just appeared in orbit and immediately started bombarding the surface with their atomic weapons. Then, after most of the major population centers had already been wiped out, they sent small ships down with robots aboard to hunt down and kill any survivors. They were brutal. Without conscience!”

“Tom,” K’danz said, looking at her first officer once again. “See to it that several replicators and other necessary supplies are transferred over to the Sagion fleet.”

“Aye, Captain,” Paris responded before quickly leaving the bridge to make the necessary arrangements. Meanwhile, K’danz addressed the Sagion man on the screen once again.

“Continue on your present course toward *Starbase 719*. The *USS Corsair* will rendezvous with you as soon as they can to escort you back. Good luck.”

“Thank you, Captain. Your aid is appreciated.” Then K’danz managed to see a new tear make its way down the side of the Sagion man’s face just as the image blinked back to the view of the dozens of refugee ships. Not too long after transferring the supplies and a dozen replicators, the *Bellerophon*, *Besiege* and *Proud Vengeance* resumed their course toward Sagion.

When the three ships arrived in orbit of Sagion III, what they found was a nuclear wasteland. The Cybot ships were gone, but an occupation force of sentient robots had been left behind to rebuild the planet once the fires started by the orbital nuclear bombardment stopped.

“All cities destroyed,” Lt Zhadesh reported. “Outlying rural areas uninhabitable. Water supplies contaminated. Infrastructure beyond repair. It is hard to estimate accurate casualty numbers, since many in the cities were simply vaporized during the initial bombardment, but based on our previous visit to Sagion two years ago I would place the number of dead at roughly one billion.”

“A billion people, simply wiped out of existence, for no reason,” K’danz remarked, unable to look away from the devastation displayed on the viewscreen. “If only we could have gotten here sooner.”

“There’s nothing we could have done, Carrie,” Paris tried to reassure her. “Not against something like this.”

Space, the Final Frontier...

Star Trek: Fifth Fleet

“Apocalypse” By PJK

The three Fifth Fleet ships remained in orbit of what remained of Sagion III, taking scans of the planet to both document what had occurred and help figure out what might be the Cybot’s next move. It appeared the occupation force on the surface, who were able to easily function in the high radiation environment they created – and in fact Dar had hypothesized the sentient robots actually used the high background radiation as a potential power source – were attempting to build a factory of some kind amid the wreckage of the Sagion’s largest city, presumably to build more of the sentient robots and eventually the ships to carry them to other worlds, where the process would begin all over again.

Captain K’danz was sitting behind her desk in the ready room, talking on the monitor screen with Captain William McLeod, the commanding officer of the Leviathan-class starship *USS Besiege*. The two were discussing their options; trying to decide whether the three ships should continue to try and track the two Cybot warships that had attacked Sagion, even though there was no known way of tracking a Cybot FTL jump, or if they should simply return to *Starbase 719*, intercepting the Sagion refugee fleet along the way and helping to escort them back to the Federation starbase? The conversation was interrupted by the ring of the door chime.

“Excuse me, Bill,” K’danz said, touching the monitor control and turning the screen off for the moment. “Come.”

The doors slid open and Dr. Juliani Gaeta, a scientist from the Daystrom Institute who had claimed to have invented the FTL Jump Drive – a device he had actually copied from a crashed Cybot ship recovered a decade earlier – that had been tested aboard the starship *USS Dauntless* during the period of time K’danz had been in command of the Sovereign-class vessel, walked in.

“May I speak with you, Captain?” he asked as he approached the desk.

“What can I do for you, Doctor Gaeta?”

“I have a request,” Gaeta said. “I would like to depart in my runabout so that I can return to the Daystrom Institute and continue my work on my FTL drive design.”

K’danz looked at Gaeta skeptically as she said, “You mean the FTL design you ripped off from the Cybots?”

“How was I to know they still existed?” Gaeta asked defensively. “When we found that crashed ship, it appeared to be at least a hundred-thousand years old. No one had ever encountered that kind of technology before, and if I had simply passed it up we probably would never encounter it again!”

“Except that we did encounter it again,” K’danz countered. “And if you had let Starfleet know what you had found ten years ago, we might have been better prepared when we came across the Cybot ship last year, and perhaps this would never have occurred!” She gestured out the large forward windows of her ready room, where the dark brown surface of Sagion III, its atmosphere saturated by the dust and debris kicked up by the detonations of hundreds of nuclear weapons, could just barely be seen.

“Captain,” Gaeta said again, pleading. “It’s imperative I...”

A flash of light outside the window, quickly followed by a second, drew K’danz’s attention. She stood up to get a better look at whatever caused it, but was interrupted by the sound of the intercom.

“Bridge to Captain K’danz. We’ve got company again,” said the voice of Tom Paris. “The two Cybot warships just jumped into orbit with us. They’re now arming weapons.”

“Sound red alert, Tom,” K’danz ordered as she quickly moved around her desk and headed toward the door. She addressed Gaeta as she rushed out. “Get below, Doctor. We could be in for a rough ride.”

“But, Captain...!” Gaeta started to protest. K’Danz paused at the threshold of the bridge, turning back to look at Gaeta, her eyes flaring.

“Get below!” she shouted, then turned and entered the bridge.

Gaeta sighed, then glanced out the window at the alien warships in the distance. The ship they had boarded several days earlier in the Antliae asteroid belt was still missing one of its star-point arms, though a framework in the general shape of the missing section had been built – or perhaps grown – in its place. Even across the distance between them, the scientist could see missile launchers lowering into position in various places on the ship, preparing to unleash devastation against the three Fifth Fleet vessels.

“Frak this,” he said, quickly departing the ready room and heading for the turbolift. As he passed through the bridge he could hear K’danz order, “Strengthen forward shields. Arm torpedo tubes. Stand by to fire.” Seconds later he was in the turbolift.

“Shuttlebay,” he ordered. The turbolift beeped acknowledgement and quickly started to descend. Moments later he was inside the main shuttlebay, where his runabout, *Penobscot*, completely filled the space. Entering the small starship, he took his seat at the controls and started warming up the systems.

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“Captain, we may have a problem,” Lt Zhadesh reported.

“We’re facing down two armed and angry Cybot warships that are aiming nuclear-tipped missiles at us, and you think we **may** have a problem?” K’danz replied incredulously.

“I am detecting activity in the shuttlebay,” Zhadesh continued. “I believe the runabout we have stored there is powering up.”

“Gaeta!” K’danz growled before returning her attention to what was happening around her. “Helm, coordinate with the *Vengeance* and *Besiege* and prepare to warp out of the system. Hopefully the Cybots won’t follow us.” She then addressed Zhadesh as she added, “Lieutenant, connect me with the runabout.”

“You are on, Captain,” the Efrosian operations officer confirmed.

“Gaeta, power down your ship. You’re in no position to try and leave right now.”

“And you’re in no position to stop me, Captain,” Gaeta replied. “Open the shuttlebay door and let me launch, or you’ll regret what I do next.”

“Power down, Doctor!” K’danz warned again.

“Captain!” exclaimed Lt Commander T’Var from her post at the science console. “I am detecting an unusual energy reading coming from the runabout in the shuttlebay. Based on readings from the Doctor’s experiments aboard the *Dauntless*, I believe Doctor Gaeta is spooling up an FTL drive aboard his ship.”

“He’s got an FTL aboard that thing?!” K’danz questioned urgently.

“He did tell us his early trials were conducted aboard a runabout equipped with his FTL design,” Paris remarked. “I guess it just never occurred to us this was the same runabout.”

“He can’t simply jump right out of our shuttlebay, can he?” the captain asked.

“I do not see why not,” T’Var stated. “Our shuttlebay is simply another coordinate in space, though from my understanding of how Doctor Gaeta’s jump drive works, he may tear the ship apart if he uses it within close range of our hull as it rips an opening in subspace.”

“Doctor, this is the bridge. Power down your vessel!” K’danz all but pleaded. “Power it down now, or you’re likely to kill us all!”

Without a second thought, Gaeta entered jump coordinates into the control panel of the runabout, then placed the control key into its slot. As the FTL back behind the cockpit hummed, Gaeta silently counted down from five. On zero he turned the key, causing the *Penobscot* to jump. The sudden rip in subspace, coupled with the sudden vacuum where the runabout had occupied the deck, caused the hull of the *Bellerophon* to buckle and tear. On the bridge, alarms blared at almost every station and the *Belle* shuddered.

“Report?” K’danz demanded.

“Shuttlebay has lost pressurization. We have hull breeches on decks 9 and 10, sections 42, 43, 44, and 45,” Zhadesh reported as he gripped the edges of his console hard. “Trying to raise emergency forcefields, but I believe quite a number of the emitters have been damaged or destroyed.”

“Dispatch damage control crews. Seal that area of the ship!” K’danz ordered.

As the crew responded to the latest emergency, K’danz and Paris noticed that one of the Cybot warships suddenly jumped away as well.

“*Besiege to Bellerophon*. It looks like you just suffered an explosion without any fire in your shuttlebay,” stated the voice of Captain McLeod. “What happened? Are you in need of assistance?”

“Doctor Gaeta jumped his runabout directly out of our shuttlebay using his FTL drive. The damage is extensive, but we can handle it for now,” K’danz replied.

On the viewer, the *Belle*’s crew could see that General Ke’reth had already opened fire on the remaining Cybot ship with the *Vengeance*’s isokinetic cannons. The Cybots had, in turn, launched missiles at all three Fifth Fleet vessels. The majority of the missiles were simply vaporized by phaser fire, while the Klingon warship’s thermo-decimator blasted a hole right through one of the points of the Cybot ship near where a set of missile launchers was located.

“A couple more good shots like that and we might just well be done here,” Paris remarked.

Bellerophon fired off another volley of photon torpedoes at the Cybot warship. Several of them hit the vessel, causing more damage to the extremities of the vessel, but the majority of the projectiles missed as the warship unexpectedly jumped away.

“No!” K’danz cried out. “How are we supposed to know where they have jumped to?”

“We figured out they were coming here by analyzing the data we took from their computer core,” Paris pointed out. “Maybe we can determine their next target by continuing that analysis?”

“I suppose it’s worth a shot,” K’danz agreed grudgingly. She then looked over her shoulder at Lt Zhadesh, whose normally white hair looked blood-red in the alert lighting. “Lieutenant, work with Commander T’Var. Get the rest of the data you downloaded from the Cybot computer core analyzed and let me know if you discover anything significant.”

“Aye, Captain,” Zhadesh replied before looking at the Vulcan woman sitting at the station almost directly forward of him. “Commander?”

“We should use the computer lab,” T’Var agreed.

As the Vulcan woman and Efrosian man left the bridge, K’danz slouched in her command chair, chin resting on the back of her knuckles, and stared at the screen.

“I only hope we’re not too late next time,” she remarked.

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Half an hour later there still was no word on what the Cybot's next target might be. Instead, K'danz was down in engineering, speaking with her husband and chief engineer.

"How bad is the damage?" she asked.

"On the whole, it could have been a lot worse," Dar replied as he called up a schematic of the *Bellerophon* on one of the monitors. "The shuttlebay is completely inoperable until further notice. We're missing sections of the deck and outer hull that I can only assume jumped with Gaeta when he left. But that's easily repaired back in dock. Our biggest problem is this...!" Dar touched a control and the schematic was replaced by a live image from the shuttlebay. As Dar had described, the interior looked like some giant had crumpled it like a sheet of paper and then tried to flatten it out again. Stars and the ugly-brown surface of Sagion III could be seen through numerous holes in the hull plating. And off in one corner close to the outer door of the now-unusable space, K'danz could see a slight green glow emanating from an opening in the bulkhead.

"Is that what I think it is?" K'danz asked, wondering how this day could possibly get worse.

"Yup," answered Dar. "Plasma fire. And it's threatening to spread."

"I thought plasma fires needed oxygen to burn, just like regular fires?" K'danz remarked. "If our shuttlebay is depressurized and open to vacuum, how is that burning?"

"That's part of the problem," Dar replied. "The fire started on top of one of the air supply lines that would be used to re-pressurize the bay following an emergency decompression. That line plus the EPS conduit that ruptured are supplying the fuel for the fire. As a result, it's burning at over 1600° Celsius. I need to get that fire locked down or we're eventually going to lose the ship."

"Can't we just send a damage control team in to put it out?"

"Normally, yes. But these aren't normal circumstances," Dar explained. "The deck is so badly damaged that even a crew in full EVA gear would have trouble getting to where the fire is. We have areas under normal gravity, others with zero gravity, and still others with higher than normal gravity. There's just no way to safely get a member of the crew over there. Truthfully, I'm not sure what to do at this point."

K'danz straightened up and turned around, leaning back on the console as she thought. If this plasma fire could not be brought under control, it would mean she would have to order the abandonment of the *Bellerophon*, something she was extremely reluctant to do.

As the captain contemplated her options in silence, her eyes fell on Wally – the small Cybot maintenance robot an away team had come back with after their first encounter with what appeared to be an abandoned Cybot ship the previous year – as it worked on several system consoles across the room. Suddenly a thought occurred to her. She looked back at her husband, who was looking in the same direction she had been.

"Dar, are you pondering what I'm pondering?"

"Sure, but I figured after all our other concerns, I didn't need to have the engineering staff inspecting every console themselves today."

"No! I mean Wally!" She indicated toward the little 'bot, who turned to look at K'danz at the mention of his name. "Can we send him into the shuttlebay to put out that plasma fire?"

"Well, I suppose I could hook him up with a couple of portable plasma extinguishers. But it could be just as hazardous to him as it would be to a biological member of the crew. That fire's spewing a lot of radiation right now, and I'm not sure how that would affect his circuits."

"Do we really have a choice at this point?" K'danz asked. "It's either him or one of the crew."

"I guess not," Dar replied sadly. "Especially so soon after losing T'Ashara. But I'd hate to see anything happen to the little guy." He then called out, "Wally...!"

Like a puppy when his master comes home, the little maintenance 'bot came 'running' over on his treaded wheels, making a happy-sounding electronic noise.

"Come on, little buddy. I need you to do us a favor."

The little robot made another noise that sounded vaguely like, "Okay." With a last glance at his wife, Dar led Wally toward the nearest damage control locker, hoping what they were planning would work.

* * * *

Another thirty minutes later, Dar and K'danz were on the bridge. The space was darkened, only red light illuminating the bridge as the *Belle* remained at alert status. The main viewer displayed an image of the heavily damaged shuttlebay.

The main door beneath the control booth opened, and the robot Wally rolled in, the doors closing behind him to prevent any more loss of atmosphere if one of the emergency forcefields in the outer corridor lost power...again. Wally looked around in a manner K'danz would have described as nervous if she was not aware the little 'bot did not have emotions.

Dar had attached two fire suppression bottles to Wally's back, with hoses attached to his primary arms. He had also installed a back-up system within Wally's body, in the hopes it would not actually be needed.

Wally finally began to roll across the damaged hanger deck, avoiding openings and places that looked weak. At one point the 'bot hit a null gravity bubble and started floating off the deck. Dar, at his console, almost bolted toward the turbolift until Wally drifted back into an area of gravity and slammed back down on the deck, almost tipping sideways off his tracks. He seemed extra cautious after this incident, moving more slowly and deliberately, as he tested every few meters in front of him. Finally, after what seemed to those on the bridge like hours but was actually only twelve minutes, Wally reached the vicinity of the plasma fire.

It was worse than when K'danz and Dar had looked at it from engineering. The fire had spread several meters within the bulkhead and part of the hanger deck. Wally seemed to study the green glow of the fire for a moment – apparently mesmerized by the patterns of flame.

“Come on, Wally,” Dar implored. “Put out the fire.”

Almost as if he heard the chief engineer, Wally turned his visual input devices in the direction of the camera watching him, then looked back at the fire and raised his right arm. Seconds later the hose attached there spewed what looked like white foam. The foam dispersed into a fine white powder in the near-absolute zero temperature of the open shuttlebay, some bouncing off the bulkhead as it hit and returning in the general direction of the robot, coating him in a fine white dust. The rest of the fire suppressant vaporized as it hit the green flames. The fire flared briefly before starting to diminish.

“That's it Wally!” Dar cheered. “Keep it going!”

Wally continued to shoot suppressant at the fire. Just as it seemed the fire might go out, the first canister ran dry. Wally looked at his right arm in what appeared to be surprise, shaking it up and down as if that might get the flow moving again.

“Come on, Wally! Switch tanks, before the fire reasserts itself!” Dar said aloud.

Wally was still looking at his right arm, apparently puzzled, before his visual inputs turned toward his left arm. He aimed the second arm at the fire, and a moment later the foam emerged from the hose. The plasma fire, which had started to grow in brightness again, was again muted by the suppressant. A short time later, the second tank was empty and all that remained of the fire was smoke wafting into the damaged bay. Wally performed a little spin on his tracks, then looked up at the camera input again as if looking for encouragement.

On the bridge, the crew was elated that the little robot had managed to put out the fire, until some of the smoke coming from the deck behind Wally increased. Lt Commander Hickam was the first to notice.

“Captain,” the helm officer called out. “It looks like the fire is re-flashing in the deck.”

“Dar, can you warn him?” K'danz asked, looking at her husband.

“I never had the opportunity to fit Wally with any sort of communications device,” Dar replied with a shake of his semi-ridged head. “And with the shuttlebay depressurized, the normal intercom isn't going to work without any sort of medium like air to carry the sound vibrations.”

“We need to do something! If he leaves that fire behind, the ship is doomed,” K'danz emphasized.

“Even if he sees it, I'm not sure if there is much he can do. Both his suppressant tanks are empty, and it would take nearly an hour for him to get out of there, re-load new tanks, and get back in.”

The crew continued to watch the scene unfold on the main viewer. Wally started to roll back toward the exit door. After only a meter, he turned his 'head' around and noticed for the first time the heavy smoke coming from the deck. He then turned his whole body back and, with superior strength, started ripping the plates up from

the deck. In less than thirty seconds he had exposed another damaged plasma conduit, with a moderate flame of green flowing over it.

Wally looked back and forth at both his arms, knowing the tanks supplying those hoses were empty. A small door on the robot's chest then opened, and a third hose extended from it.

"Oh no," remarked Dar. "I was hoping he wouldn't have to use that."

"What is it?" K'danz asked.

"It's a form of gelled explosive, a derivative of a substance called napalm," Dar explained. "I figured if it came down to it, we might have to put out the fire using a small explosive, like they used to do with oil well fires in the 20th century, but only if Wally wasn't able to bring the initial fire under control."

"What will that stuff do to the ship?" K'danz inquired.

"Nothing, except put out the fire. I'm worried what it will do to Wally!"

As the bridge crew watched, Wally began to spray the gelled explosive toward the flame. As the foam suppressant had done, the gel immediately solidified, except this time instead of dispersing as a powder, the substance solidified as a single mass. The chunk of what was now essentially ice hit the deck hard, pieces of it breaking off and flying away. The main section of the mass hit the deck close enough to the vicinity of the renewed fire that it quickly melted again, spreading on the deck before itself catching fire and exploding with a huge bang. The crew on the bridge felt the explosion through the deck, and in the brief instant before the flash of the explosion overloaded the camera input, Wally could be seen flying back and away from the explosion. It took nearly half a minute for the camera input to reset itself and the image of the shuttlebay to return. Once it had, the crew could see a large hole nearly three meters across in the deck where the plasma conduit had been. There was no evidence any fire remained. There was also no evidence that Wally was still present.

"Where did he go? Where's Wally?" Dar exclaimed, sounding like a boy who had lost his dog.

"I hope he wasn't destroyed in the explosion," Hickam remarked.

"He's got to be there somewhere," K'danz said, trying to calm down her husband. She then added under her breath, "Maybe not all in one piece, but he's got to be there." She then ordered Marine Captain Drake, "Michael, switch to another camera."

The Marine security officer acknowledged, then began cycling through visual pick-ups.

"Aft shuttlebay." The image showed another angle on the devastation caused by fighting the plasma fire. "Main deck." The image now showed the center of the shuttlebay, where shuttlecraft would normally be kept staged, ready for flight if necessary. "Main entrance." The third view showed the forward area of the shuttlebay, with the still sealed door, but no sign of the little maintenance 'bot. "Control booth interior." The new angle showed the interior of the booth overlooking the shuttlebay, including the currently non-functioning controls and the large window looking out on the bay itself. Wally was not visible anywhere. "Upper catwalk." The next view showed the catwalk that connected with the control booth. Gripping the safety rail tightly was a robotic hand, connected to a boxy yellow body that was hanging several meters above the hanger bay deck below. The coating of fire suppressant powder was now completely gone, and except for his current predicament, the robot looked completely intact. His visual input devices swung back and forth rapidly, as if he were looking desperately for help or a way off the railing safely.

"That fire suppressant he got covered in must have protected him from the explosion," Dar explained before rushing out of his seat and heading toward the turbolift. "Hold on, Wally! I'm coming to help you!" As Dar stepped up to the upper bridge level, he addressed the first officer, "Tom, shut down the gravity in the shuttlebay. It'll make it easier to pull him up on the catwalk." As Paris acknowledged and moved up to the operations console, Dar disappeared into the turbolift.

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Captain Cathryn Pearson, executive officer of *Starbase 719* and duty officer of Beta Shift, looked at the display on the master systems display, currently configured to show the interior of spacedock and the disposition of the several ships – mainly merchant vessels – currently located there. The cargo carried *Erstwhile* had just entered

dock after another run between the starbase and the recently established Romulan colony several sectors away, and Pearson was expecting a visiting Starfleet vessel to contact the station with an estimated time of arrival shortly.

At the Ops science console, Lt Commander Makia Kyman reacted to an unexpected reading on her console.

“Captain Pearson,” the woman called out. “Sensors are detecting a small space vessel that suddenly appeared. Bearing: 222 mark 9. Range: 200,000 kilometers.” Kyman looked over at Pearson and added, “Whatever it is, it has turned toward the station and is approaching at one-quarter impulse speed.”

Pearson moved away from the master systems display to look over the shoulder of Lt Ashari Pel, who manned the operations console.

“Confirmed,” the unjoined-Trill woman stated. “Vessel is a Danube-class Federation runabout.”

“Cancel the red alert I was about to call out,” Pearson said jokingly. “Now someone explain to me how we didn’t detect that runabout before it dropped out of warp?”

“As I said, Captain,” replied Kyman. “The vessel simply appeared out of nowhere. To the best of my ability to determine, it was never in warp to begin with. In fact, the runabout’s warp drive is still in an inactive state.”

“A runabout does not simply appear out of nowhere,” Pearson remarked. “Hail the vessel.”

A moment later, the main viewscreen above Ops displayed the view of the runabout’s cockpit.

“This is Doctor Juliani Gaeta, piloting the runabout *Penobscot*, registered to the Daystrom Institute for Scientific Research. I need clearance to land in one of your docking bays as soon as possible!”

“Doctor Gaeta?” Pearson replied, a smile spreading across her lips. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you. I’ve heard much about you, particularly from Captain K’danz. Clearance to land in Docking Bay 44 is granted. But be warned, Doctor, based on information sent to us by the crew of the *Bellerophon*, you are to be placed under arrest the moment you step aboard our station.”

“Fine. Whatever,” Gaeta replied. Pearson only now noticed the look of fear in the man’s eyes. “Just as long as you keep me away from them!”

“Who? The crew of the *Bellerophon*?”

“No! The Cybots! They’ve been following me since I left Sagion!”

Pearson started to ask how Gaeta was being followed when a series of alarms suddenly sounded throughout Ops.

“A second vessel has now appeared,” Pel reported. “Much larger, at least two times the size of a Sovereign-class starship. A configuration I have never seen before.”

“Library computer matches it to the configuration of a warship discovered six months ago by the *USS Bellerophon*,” Kyman reported after comparing configurations.

“The Cybots,” Pearson remarked as she pressed the intercom on the console in front of her. “Admiral Raijth to Ops immediately!”

“Cybot vessel is opening launch tubes and arming missiles,” Col Sean McIntyre, the Starfleet Marine officer manning tactical reported.

* * * *

The *Bellerophon*, *Besiege*, and *Proud Vengeance* were en route toward the Algore star system, the two smaller vessel ‘lashed’ to the larger Klingon ship by strong tractor beams as it towed them through transwarp. Zhadesh and T’Var’s analysis of the data recovered from the Cybot’s water-based computer memory had revealed that after Sagion, the Cybot’s next goal was the next closest populated star system approximately 25 light years away.

“What do we do if, like Sagion, we arrive at Algore and the Cybots have already attacked the planet?” Paris asked the captain, his hand gripping the armrests of his chair in order to keep from being shaken out of it by the rough transit.

“I would prefer not to think of that,” K’danz replied, likewise holding on tightly. “I’m hoping we get there at least before the Cybots attack, if not before they even arrive. Either way, if we see any Cybot vessel, we attack

with intent to destroy. I've made that perfectly clear to both Bill McLeod and General Ke'reth. Both seemed agreeable to the idea."

"Estimated time of arrival at Algore; ten seconds," reported Hickam from the helm.

"Very well, Mister Hickam," K'danz replied. "All hands, all stations; prepare for re-emergence into real-space."

Just outside the orbit of the planet Algore Prime, a purple swirl throwing off lightning-like electrical discharges appeared. From within the swirl, the *IKV Hem bortaStaH* emerged, still carrying both the *Bellerophon* and *Besiege*, one above and one below. Once clear of the corridor the Klingon vessel's captured Borg transwarp coil had created, they separated, each taking a slightly different course toward the planet directly ahead.

"Any signs the Cybots have been here?" K'danz asked.

* * * *

"The Cybots are here," Captain Pearson stated as Vice Admiral Val'ri Raiajh emerged from the turbolift and walked directly to the console at the center of Ops. "Shields are raised. Weapons systems arming."

"Why are they here?" Raiajh asked, looking up at the image of the six-pointed star-like vessel on the viewscreen.

"Apparently they followed Doctor Gaeta and his runabout. He said every time he made an FTL jump – and he had to perform over a dozen of them to travel between Sagion and the station – the Cybot ship would appear just as he was finishing his calculations for the next jump."

"Where is Gaeta now?" Raiajh asked.

"He docked his runabout in Docking Bay 44. I had Michelle go down there to place him under arrest and escort him here to Ops. They should be arriving..."

Before Pearson had finished her sentence, the turbolift opened again and Dr. Gaeta, escorted by station security chief Commander Michelle Petersen, stepped out.

"Thank you for leading the Cybots to my station, Doctor," Raiajh remarked to the new arrival. "We haven't had anyone shooting at us in at least a few weeks. Thanks for breaking up the monotony."

"If you'll excuse me, Val, I need to go man the *Corsair*," Pearson said as she started to head toward the turbolift. "The *Wildcat*, *Erstwhile*, *Cassandra*, and several other ships are also scrambling to help defend the base."

"Good luck, Cathryn," Raiajh said, offering a slight smile just as the doors swished shut behind Pearson just as the second turbolift door next to it opened and several members of the Ops crew, including Lt Commander B'Elanna Torres emerged. Raiajh then turned her attention back on Gaeta, one eyebrow raised in a very Vulcan-looking manner, as she still expected an answer from the human scientist.

"I hadn't intended to lead the Cybots here," Gaeta protested with a sigh. "I only wanted to get back to the Daystrom Institute so I could continue my research. Even without a physical example of one of the Cybot starship-sized FTL drives, I learned enough during my brief visit aboard their vessel that I think I can make a real breakthrough!"

"And how did the Cybot ship manage to track you all the way here from the Sagion system?" Raiajh asked.

Before Gaeta could answer, Lt Pel interrupted.

"Admiral, The Cybot warship is opening fire!"

On the viewscreen, half a dozen missiles launched from the weapons arrays of the Cybot ship. The flight paths curved slightly as the weapons locked onto the target. Seconds later, all six missiles exploded against the shields of the starbase. Everyone in Ops grabbed onto the nearest console as the entire base shuddered.

"Shield 1-Beta down by 10%. Shield 1-Gamma down by 5%. No damage to the station structure," reported the McIntyre. "Slight rise in radiation levels in Quadrant 2 of the spacedock section."

"At least the Cybots don't have super-weapons like the Kairn," Raiajh remarked. "Return fire. Primarily target any incoming weapons." Raiajh then turned her attention back on her 'guest.' "Now, Doctor, I believe you were about to tell me how you think the Cybots tracked you?"

* * * *

Meanwhile, in the Algore system, the former Imperial Romulan Warbird – *UFNS Vedrex* – commanded by Commander T’Lees, arrived in orbit of Algore Prime shortly after the *Vengeance* and its two ‘passengers’ emerged from transwarp. T’Lees had responded to a call for assistance transmitted by K’danz, her vessel traveling close to the Algore system when the request was received.

A short time later, Captain K’danz – as the Task Group commander – was communicating with Chancellor Proje’, the leader of Algore Prime, assuring the Algorians that the sudden appearance of four Fifth Fleet vessels – particularly the large and heavily armed Klingon warship and the Mogai-class Romulan warbird – was in no way a prelude to attack, but in fact quite the opposite.

“We have strong reason to believe that your planet may be in grave danger,” K’danz explained. “A race of sentient robots we call the Cybots has already wiped out the civilization on Sagion III, and our intelligence points to Algore Prime as being their next target.”

“But why, Captain?” Proje’ asked, half-pleading, half-skeptical. “We’ve never even heard of these... these Cybots, no less done anything to them that might make them want to attack us.”

“We’re not entirely sure why, Chancellor,” K’danz replied. “As near as we can ascertain, they are just determined to wipe out humanoid biological life-forms in preference to their own cybernetic form of life.”

“And what can we do? From what you have described happened at Sagion, it appears we have little defense against these Cybots.”

“That’s what the *Belle*, *Besiege*, *Vedrex*, and *Vengeance* are here for. To help...”

“Captain, I am receiving a priority message from *Starbase 719*,” Lt Zhadesh interrupted.

“Excuse me, Chancellor,” K’danz said to the Algorian on the screen before turning her attention to her chief of operations. “What is it, Lieutenant?”

“They report the starbase is under attack by a Cybot warship. However, with the help of the *Corsair*, *Wildcat*, and several civilian vessels that were in port at the time, the base is currently holding its own.”

“Oh no,” K’danz remarked, turning her attention back on Proje’. “Chancellor, we may not be here as long as we thought. The Cybots have attacked our starbase in the Typh...”

K’danz was cut off by the alert klaxon suddenly going off once again.

“Cybot warship has jumped into orbit of Algore Prime with us,” Marine Captain Michael C. Drake announced.

“Status?” K’danz demanded.

“Shields raised and at full power. Weapons systems armed and ready. Same with the *Vedrex*, *Besiege*, and *Vengeance*.”

“For once we didn’t get caught with our pants down,” K’danz remarked. “Target the Cybot vessel and open fire before they get a chance to launch anything at the planet!”

“Targeting torpedoes. Phasers firing!” Drake confirmed.

* * * *

“As I’m sure you can imagine, the FTL drive is much more complex than the warp drive you are used to,” Gaeta started to explain even as the station continued to shake around them. Once the *Corsair*, *Cassandra*, *Erstwhile*, *Wildcat*, and three other armed vessels launched from the base to assault the attacking Cybot ship, the Cybots started making periodic jumps at irregular intervals to various positions around the starbase, usually just as the attacking vessels moved into weapons range. The Cybots would generally jump to the opposite side of the base from where the small ships were located, prompting the half-dozen vessels to have to maneuver around time after time trying to intercept the alien warship. “When you use warp drive, you’re warping space, and sensors can tell you what is ahead a reasonable distance away so that either your deflector can push it out of the way if it’s small, like hydrogen atoms and small micrometeoroids, or your helmsman can navigate around it, like asteroids, planets and stars.”

“Of course,” Raiajh agreed, wondering why she needed this remedial lesson in basic warp navigation, a class she had taken at the Academy over a century before.

“Jump drive doesn’t work that way. An FTL jump could theoretically move a ship a greater distance than maximum sensor range in literally a nano-second. What would happen if the coordinates where you intend to jump is occupied by, say, another ship or – God forbid – a small moon?”

“I would imagine you would either collide with that ship or moon or... or merge with it.”

“Merging, while not entirely accurate, is about as close a word as you’re going to get to describe what happens,” Gaeta explained. “Either way, let’s just say you’re going to be having a really bad day.”

“Granted,” Raiajh agreed.

“Part of the FTL design includes what I call a powerful subspace scanning array,” Gaeta continued.

“Subspace scanning array?” B’Elanna Torres asked.

“An array more powerful than anything any starship might have. More powerful than the sensor arrays on this space station,” Gaeta admitted. “Yet so compact, it could fit within the sensor pallet of a runabout.”

“What does this subspace scanner do, Doctor?” Raiajh asked.

“In the two to three seconds before the jump drive engages, the scanner verifies nothing solid occupies the coordinates programmed into the drive,” Gaeta explained. “By using subspace as the medium, the scanner is able to increase its range exponentially.”

“What kind of a range are we talking about here?” Raiajh asked. “It’s not unlimited, is it?”

“Definitely not. On the FTL drives I’ve managed to create based on the design found at the crash site on the moon of Cerberus II, the average maximum scan range is sixty five light years.”

“And the jump drive can’t jump past that distance?” Torres asked, genuinely curious.

“Actually, the drive, as it currently exists, can jump significantly past that, as the crew of the *Dauntless* learned four years ago. You just don’t know what you might be jumping into. Which is why I call the maximum scan range the Red Line. You don’t want to jump past that.”

“While the mechanics of your FTL drive are fascinating, Doctor, what does it have to do with either how the Cybots tracked you or helping us defend ourselves against the ship that is currently attacking the base?” Raiajh asked with an annoyed tone of voice as the station shook around them all again.

“I believe the Cybots were able to track where I was going by detecting my subspace scan. They could determine bearing and range based on the emissions from my FTL and simply calculate their own coordinates based on that information,” Gaeta replied. “And knowing what you’re looking for, you should be able to do the same with Hop-along out there.” The scientist gestured with his thumb toward the main viewscreen above Ops as the Cybot ship jumped away again, only to appear a nano-second later a third of the way around the base.

* * * *

“Carrie, I may have something here!” Dar called over from the engineering console on the starboard side of the *Bellerophon*’s bridge.

As the four Fifth Fleet vessels continued to press the attack on the Cybot warship, preventing it from preparing to launch any nuclear bombs or missiles toward the surface of Algore Prime, K’danz got up from her seat and moved over toward her husband’s station.

“Just before the Cybot ship appeared in orbit, sensors detected a brief disturbance in subspace,” the half-Klingon engineer explained, pointing out a sensor reading display on his console.

“Could it be due to the appearance of the Cybot ship? Some kind of rip in subspace similar to what caused all our damage in the shuttlebay?” the captain asked.

“That would have been my guess if we hadn’t also had sensor readings on Doctor Gaeta’s FTL jump out of the shuttlebay too,” Dar said. “Sensors detected the exact same kind of subspace disturbance exactly 2.5 seconds prior to the actual jump. And we detected the disturbance in orbit 2.5 seconds prior to the Cybot ship appearing there.”

“What do you think it is?” K’danz asked.

“I could be wrong, and I’ll have to ask Gaeta when and if we ever see him again, but I think it’s some sort of long-range sensor scan through subspace to determine if anything occupies the space the FTL-equipped vessel is about to jump into.”

An alarm suddenly sounded on Dar’s console. At the same time, Paris called out, “Captain, the Cybot ship just jumped to a new position, closer to the planet. They’re preparing to launch weapons against the planet’s surface!”

“Press the attack, and order McLeod, Ke’reth, and T’Lees to do the same!” K’danz ordered. “We have to keep the Cybots off balance!”

As the four Fifth Fleet ships maneuvered around to continue their attack on the Cybot warship, which had sustained considerable damage already, K’danz looked back at her husband. “Well?” she asked.

“Confirmed,” Dar replied with a self-satisfied smile. “I detected the subspace disturbance at the exact coordinates where the Cybot vessel jumped less than three seconds later.”

“Pass this information on to Mister Drake and all three of our other ships. Tell them what to look for.” She then turned toward the tactical console and said to her Marine tactical officer, “If the Cybots try and jump again, immediately target and fire on the new coordinates. You don’t need to await my order.”

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Drake replied with a grin.

“Captain,” said Lt Zhadesh. “Cybot ship is spooling its FTL drive again.”

“Stand by,” K’danz ordered, rushing back to her command chair.

Just as the captain sat back down, the alarm sounded at Dar’s engineering console.

“Firing!” Drake announced.

“The Cybot vessel has jumped,” Zhadesh reported a second later.

Three of the four Fifth Fleet vessels fired a full volley of torpedoes – photon torpedoes in the case of the *Proud Vengeance*, quantum torpedoes in the case of the *Besiege* and *Bellerophon* – while the *Vedrex* fired disruptor beams, but not at the place where the Cybot ship had just been moments before. Instead, the eighteen powerful weapons and numerous disruptor bolts converged at a point in low orbit over the surface of the planet. They had quickly travelled fifty thousand kilometers when suddenly the Cybot ship appeared directly in their path. All the weapons fire struck the alien warship – which was obviously not expecting the coordinated attack – collapsing its shields before tearing large holes in the superstructure.”

“The missiles aimed for the planet’s surface are no longer being prepared for launch,” Zhadesh reported. “I believe we have disabled those systems, at least temporarily.”

“Keep at them,” K’danz implored. “No need to let the Cybots catch their breath!”

“Captain,” T’Var said, looking at K’danz curiously. “I do not believe these robots have need of any respiration.”

“Just keep firing!” K’danz ordered with an annoyed look toward her new chief science officer.

As all four Fifth Fleet vessels maneuvered around to encircle the Cybot vessel, they continued to launch torpedoes, fire phaser banks, fire disruptor banks, or – in the case of the *Vengeance* – launch projectiles from the isokinetic cannons. The Cybot ship made several half-hearted attempts to launch weapons back at the starships, and even made one more jump to an even lower orbit over Algore Prime, but the Cybot weapons were of little use against each starship’s shields and another volley of torpedoes awaited the Cybots as they jumped to their new coordinates once again. Their ship started breaking apart, much of it falling harmlessly into the atmosphere of Algore Prime – where it burned up upon entry – or drifted away into deep space.

“Congratulations, everyone,” K’danz said with a smile on her face. “Mister Zhadesh, contact General Ke’reth aboard the *Vengeance*. Find out if it’s even possible for him to tow all three of our vessels back through transwarp toward the Typhon Sector? If not, we may have to leave the *Vedrex* here to stand guard over the planet in case the second Cybot ship abandons its attack on *Home Plate* and turns its attention here. Then contact Chancellor Proje’ and let him know his planet is out of danger... at least for the moment.”

* * * *

“Detecting the subspace scan,” reported Torres. “Transmitting new coordinates to tactical console and defense fleet.”

Aboard the Defiant-class *USS Corsair*, Pearson’s tactical officer reported, “Receiving new target coordinates, Captain.”

“Helm,” said Pearson. “Plot an intercept course to the new coordinates.”

Even as the helmsman entered the new coordinates into the controls, the Cybot ship appeared in the new location, on the complete other side of the starbase, the majority of the vessel protected by the bulk of the station’s spacedock.

“This is getting us nowhere!” Pearson complained. “Every time we get turned back around and make an attack run on that Cybot vessel, it jumps to another place out of our line of fire! And in the meantime it keeps launching missiles at the station. Sooner or later one is going to get through!”

“Should we split the defense ships up, place them around the entire station so that no matter where the Cybots appear, there will be one of our ships close by?” Pearson’s tactical officer suggested.

“That might work if we were a fleet of six Galaxy, Sovereign, or Prometheus-class starships, but not against a single Defiant-class escort and five armed merchant vessels! That warship would pick us off one by one with ease!”

“Then what do we do?”

“What we’re already doing until Val can come up with some better idea,” Pearson replied.

Back in Ops, Raiajh was racking her brain trying to come up with just such an idea as she received the latest damage reports.

“Shield 2-Alpha now down to 62%, Shield 2-Beta at 54%, Shield 1-Beta down to 33%,” reported Colonel McIntyre. “Quadrant 2 of spacedock has been evacuated in order to head off potential cases of radiation sickness. And if the Cybot attack continues, it’s only a matter of time before they breach our shields somewhere, Admiral. We’re doing minimal damage to them before they jump to their next set of coordinates. Even knowing where they’re going is of little help right now, as the defense fleet can’t reach them in time and it takes us several seconds – sometimes up to 10 or 15 seconds depending on where the Cybot ship appears – to re-target the station’s weapons on the new coordinates.”

“B’Elanna,” Raiajh said, looking toward the Ops console. “Charge up the warp de-stabilizer. Target it at the coordinates of the next Cybot jump.”

“Yes, Admiral,” Torres replied as she activated the starbase’s powerful weapon, a device designed to overload one or more starship’s warp core systems with the intention of causing a complete system shut-down – disabling without destroying. The de-stabilizer had proven to work quite successfully during the Kairn attack on the base the previous year. “Thirty seconds until warp de-stabilizer is at full power.”

Raiajh watched on the screen as the station’s phasers and torpedoes fired against the Cybot ship as the defense fleet maneuvered around again to attempt to attack.

“Admiral,” said the tactical officer. “Detecting the subspace scan again.”

“Now, B’Elanna! Target the new coordinates and fire the de-stabilizer!”

* * * *

Gaeta took in what was going on around him. With the frustration caused in trying to battle the Cybot ship unsuccessfully thus far, no one in Ops – not even Commander Petersen – was paying him any attention. Gaeta slowly backed away, moving at a deliberate pace toward the nearest turbolift. Halfway there, he simply turned and bolted for the doors. Still, no one in Ops realized he had gone.

“Nearest transporter room,” Gaeta ordered the ‘lift. It took only a few seconds for the ‘lift to descend five levels. The scientist emerged in what appeared to be a cargo storage area with large double doors leading into a standard transporter unit. Hoping no one would notice, Gaeta overrode the equipment lockout and activated the transporter.

“With everyone distracted by the battle, this will be the perfect time to board that Cybot ship and beam back with some of their FTL drive components,” he remarked to himself as he checked to make sure he still had the tricorder on which he stored all his notes and data regarding his FTL jump drive project in his jacket pocket. “All I need is a few undamaged command and control units and the interface that connects the drive units to the water-based data transfer system so I can figure out how it works. If I just happen to be able to ‘acquire’ an FTL unit in the process, so much the better,” Gaeta figured to himself as he scanned the exterior of the station – locating the alien warship’s current location and the specific location of the so-called engine room aboard the vessel. “The Cybots aboard that ship should be as distracted by the ongoing battle as the starbase crew is here. I’ll be back off that ship before they even know I’ve been there.”

Gaeta finished programming the transporter, then grabbed several pieces of equipment from the storage locker, including several transport enhancers, and one of the remote activation units from a small compartment in the console in order to get back to the base once his ‘scavenging’ was complete. With a final grin, he mounted the transport platform. Seconds later he and his equipment dematerialized.

* * * *

Admiral Raiajh gave the order to activate the station’s warp de-stabilizer. Lt Commander Torres acted quickly, matching the aim with the projected coordinates of where the Cybot ship would appear, then triggered the de-stabilization field. Less than a second later, the Cybot warship appeared dead-center in the field.

“Got ‘em!” Torres reported with a smile.

Raiajh was about to congratulate her crew when on the screen the Cybot ship fired off several missiles, not in the direction of the station, but at the approaching ships of the small defensive fleet. A couple of the missiles missed completely as the ships maneuvered wildly to avoid both them and the de-stabilization field the station was still projecting, but two of the missiles struck the cargo carrier *Erstwhile*, badly damaging the ship. The small vessel began to drift powerlessly.

“How are they still functioning within the de-stabilization field?!?” Raiajh demanded to know.

“Apparently their engineering systems are so alien, so different from the warp core and electro-plasma distribution systems most Alpha Quadrant cultures use that it was completely ineffective, Admiral,” Torres replied.

“B’Elanna, deactivate the de-stabilization field. Then contact the *Corsair*. Have them pick up the *Erstwhile* and tow them out of there before the Cybots destroy Okona and his crew. And get the rest of the defense fleet out of there too. They’re just sitting ducks!”

“What do we do now, Admiral?” Commander Petersen asked.

“Keep fighting them until we can’t!” Raiajh replied. “Arm every weapons system we have. Get men out in the airlocks in space suits with hand phasers if we have to!”

“Admiral, I’m detecting triquantum waves, subspace disruptions with a field magnitude exceeding 2.9 teracochranes, and a symmetric power utilization curve; bearing: 010 mark 2; range: 100,000 kilometers,” announced Torres.

“On screen!” Raiajh ordered.

The viewscreen changed to the image of a purple swirl of energy in the distance, out of which emerged what looked like a misshapen Klingon vessel appearing to be having trouble remaining on a straight course. It was only as the transwarp corridor closed behind them that the Ops crew could see the strange lumps covering the top and bottom of the Klingon warship were actually the *Bellerophon* and *Besiege* which, like a Prometheus-class starship in vector assault mode, quickly split apart to attack the Cybot warship from multiple angles. As the *Vengeance* maneuvered to attack the Cybot warship, it also shut down its aft tractor beam, letting loose the *Vedrex* from where it had literally dragged the Romulan ship through transwarp.

“*Proud Vengeance* to *Starbase 719*,” said the voice of Klingon General Ke’reth over the speakers hidden around Ops. “Sorry I’m late joining the battle. My ship would have been much faster going through transwarp if I weren’t towing so much dead weight.”

Raiajh nodded in the direction of Commander Torres to open the channel, then said, "Better late than never, General. Glad you and your... friends... could join the party."

Aboard the *Corsair*, which had just placed the *Erstwhile* under tractor and begun towing it away from the Cybot vessel, the tactical officer looked over at Pearson with a gleam in his eye.

"You mentioned something about needing six Galaxy or Sovereign-class starships to defeat the Cybots? Will a couple of Federation starships, a warbird, and a qaDwI-class Klingon warship do, Captain?"

"It just might," Pearson replied, her expression taking on a hard edge. "But why take chances? Operations, contact Konstantin aboard the *Wildcat* and have them take the *Erstwhile* under tow so we can get back in this fight alongside the *Besiege* and *Bellerophon*!"

"Aye, Captain," the operations manager replied with a smile.

With five better armed and armored vessels now facing the Cybot warship, the ships spread, making use of the starbase as interference by the Cybots nearly impossible. Quickly, it became apparent the Cybot vessel's time was short.

* * * *

Gaeta materialized in the open space the *Bellerophon* crew had called the engine room. It looked very similar to the one aboard the ship he had boarded a few days earlier with the *Belle*'s crew, except the ceiling was lower, giving the space a more cramped feel to it. As the doctor had hoped and expected, several large FTL drives lined one wall of the space.

Gaeta immediately pulled out and unfolded his tricorder, setting it up on the edge of the open-topped water-filled tank that acted as the ship's computer core, hoping it could download all the data stored within while he performed his next task. He then started attaching the transport enhancers to the closest FTL drive unit – almost dropping one of the small transponders when the whole vessel shook under the onslaught of the Starfleet attack still on-going – with the intention of quite literally beaming the entire piece of equipment out of the Cybot ship once he had returned to the station. The sounds of battle and his own intent concentration prevented the scientist from hearing the sound of metal footsteps approaching the engineering space.

Gaeta managed to attach the sixth of eight transponders to the FTL unit when he heard a whirring and clacking sound behind him. Eyes wide, he slowly turned around, finding three Cybots standing there, their scanning red eyes moving back and forth, gun barrels in place of where their hands normally were aimed directly at him.

"Uh... Hi?" Gaeta muttered, not sure what else to say.

Two of the robotic life forms looked at each other. An electronic noise came from one of them which, when interpreted by Gaeta's universal translator, sounded like a primitive robotic voice.

"Take this biological life-form to the control center. Perhaps it knows information that can aid us in the defeat of the alien battle-ships."

"By your command," the second robot replied, the weapon on its right arm converting back into a hand which then grasped Gaeta by the upper arm and pulled him along out into the corridor, the scientist too shocked by his capture to resist. The two remaining robots then approached the FTL unit Gaeta had been trying to steal and studied the transponders.

"What is the purpose of these devices?" the first robot inquired.

"Unknown. They serve no obvious purpose," the second robot replied.

The warship shook violently again as more Starfleet weapons breached its defense. One of the robots turned just in time to see the tricorder Gaeta had left on the lip of the computer tank start to fall in. The robot made a desperate attempt to grab the device before it fell in with a splash, but was unable to grasp it as it had not converted its weapons back into hands yet. As the tricorder quickly sank into the deep tank, sparks started erupting from the water as the device's sarium krellide batteries overloaded.

* * * *

“Those last several torpedo hits have done some real damage!” K’danz remarked. “Let’s keep up the tempo!”

“Torpedo tubes are re-loading,” Drake reported. “Firing phasers.”

“Captain, I am detecting a cascade failure aboard the Cybot vessel,” reported Lt Zhadesh. “Most primary systems aboard that ship are shutting down, including weapons.”

“Perfect!” K’danz remarked with a grin. “Maintain fire!”

The *Bellerophon*’s primary phaser array fired as the Intrepid-class starship made another close pass on the Cybot vessel, cutting deep into the arms of the alien craft and causing it to near-literally bleed.

“A few more passes like that, and we should be done here,” the captain said with satisfaction.

* * * *

Still in the tight grip of the Cybot robot, Gaeta was being half-led, half-dragged toward the control room of the Cybot ship, and was only a dozen meters from the door when the lights dimmed. As the two continued walking down the corridor, Gaeta found his footing slip several times as more weapons struck the warship. Suddenly an idea occurred to him. Waiting for the next weapon hit, just as both he and his robot captor tried retaining their balance in the darkened corridor, Gaeta reached into a pocket in his jacket and retrieved his transporter recall device. He then smiled as he thumbed its activation button.

* * * *

The *Vengeance* lined up on the Cybot craft once again.

“Decimator charged and ready,” KI’HQaS, the warship’s tactical officer reported.

“Bah!” Ke’reth exclaimed in Klingonese.

The thermo-decimator on the nose of the *Proud Vengeance* fired its beam directly at the center of the Cybot ship. The decimator beam pierced the vessel’s hull. Seconds later it emerged out the opposite side, having vaporized the ship’s control center. The Cybot ship immediately broke in two, with secondary explosions blowing smaller pieces away from the hull. Within seconds, a large explosion engulfed the wreckage, scattering both metal biomechanical materials far and wide.

The crew in Ops started cheering. As the applause continued, Raiajh looked over at Commander Torres and said, “I want a full station systems status update in thirty minutes. Also, start contacting each of the ships out there; get their status and repair requirements and then start moving them into spacedock. While the shipyard crews work on their ships, I’m sure the starship crews could use a little rest and relaxation.”

“Aye, Admiral,” Torres replied.

Raiajh then turned slightly and was about to address Commander Petersen when her words caught in her throat. Looking around with a confused expression, the admiral finally asked, “Where’s Doctor Gaeta?”

“He was right...,” Petersen started to reply as she turned around, not seeing the scientist in question anywhere in Ops. She then checked her status board and confirmed, “His runabout’s still in Docking Bay 44, so he couldn’t have gotten far. I’ll put station security on the alert to keep an eye out for him.”

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Captain's log, stardate 66240.5:

Repairs to the USS Bellerophon are almost complete. We still have several days until the shuttlebay is completely back in service and all systems tested, so I have granted the crew extra liberty aboard the station in recognition of their service during these recent events.

Vice Admiral Raiajh is preparing for the arrival of the next group of refugees to the station, the survivors of Sagion III. She hopes to have a quick turn-around, re-supplying the Sagion ships and conducting whatever repairs are necessary before directing the Sagions to new homes in the Woodron and Verbena systems, where they can hopefully settle down and – with a little hard work – successfully re-establish their culture and identity. And with these two settlements, this will be the twelfth colony established since Starbase 719 officially became operational three years ago.

The protagonist of all these events, Doctor Juliani Gaeta, who disappeared aboard Starbase 719 during the battle, is still missing. Station security has searched for him everywhere, but there are no indications of where he might have gone or whether he is still somewhere aboard the station or slipped out on one of the ships that recently departed. In the meantime, with Doctor Gaeta and all of his research gone, the Daystrom Institute has requested the return of their runabout, the Penobscot, which is equipped with the only known remaining prototype FTL drive, which other scientists at the Institute hope to study and attempt to reverse-engineer in order to learn what Gaeta knew about the FTL.

K'danz, out.

As was typical whenever one or more vessels of the Fifth Fleet were in port, many of the senior ship's officers and members of the station command staff were gathered in the private room of the Bastogne Lodge. In one corner of the room were gathered the families; Konstantin Harkonnen and his wife Cathryn Pearson and their twin daughters, Val'ri Raiajh and Dr. Sylvan Xaran and several of their younger children, and Lt Ashari Pel and her husband Topuc – first mate of the *IMV Pariah*, with their own infant. Across the room, General Ke'reth and his chief engineer Kana sat drinking ale and swapping boastful stories with Commander T'Lees and her first officer Sub-Commander P'Tor and Captain William McLeod of the *USS Besiege*. At another table not far away, Commander Dar sat with Captain Thadiun Okona – master of the cargo carrier *Erstwhile*, talking about the recent battle and some of the questions raised by the Cybots' existence.

“How are repairs to the *Vengeance* progressing, General?” Captain K'danz asked as she passed the Klingon's seat carrying drinks for herself and her husband.

“Kana has threatened to cut out my heart and throw it into the warp core if I ever grant permission to tow three other vessels through transwarp again,” Ke'reth replied, prompting an evil smile on the face of his half-human engineer. “The *Vengeance* was capable of targ-backing your starship and the *Besiege* with no problems,” he remarked. “It was when we started towing T'Lees' sorry excuse for a ship she calls a warbird that the problems started. Came close to burning out the transwarp coil, and those things don't exactly grow on Sors, you know.”

K'danz offered the general her commiseration, then joined her husband and Okona at their table.

“It appears the *Erstwhile* took the brunt of the battle, Mister Okona,” Dar was remarking. “I would never have suspected a small cargo ship like yours could take the sort of punishment it received.”

“The *Erstwhile* is a special ship, Commander,” Okona stated with a tip of his mug toward the half-Klingon chief engineer as K'danz climbed into the booth next to her husband and leaned up against him. “Hardened against electro-magnetic pulse. Upgraded computer systems and shields. She's just full of surprises you would never expect; which is how I like it.” Okona then turned his attention – and his roguish smile – on K'danz and asked, “Any idea where those robots... the Cybots, I guess you called them... where they came from originally?”

“My chief of operations, Lieutenant Zhadesh, and my chief science officer, Commander T’Var, have been pouring over the data we collected from the second Cybot warship in the hopes of determining just that,” K’danz replied after a sip of her drink. “Where they came from? How they were created? If there are any more of their ships out there?”

“What do you think, Mister Dar?” Okona asked. “Did they originate from somewhere within our own galaxy? Or did they come from somewhere beyond?”

“Their ships were immensely old, somewhere on the order of 150,000 years. They could have come from anywhere. And unless something specific is stated in the data we recovered, we’ll probably never know where they actually came from, or what caused their grievance with humanoid biological life-forms. I doubt we’ll ever know all the true answers to our questions.” Dar then took another sip of his own drink before adding, almost as an afterthought, “And I doubt we’ll ever encounter another life-form quite like them ever again.”

The End