

Away Team Commander's Log, Stardate 68105.1:

While the Bellerophon has gone ahead to chart chronoton anomalies near the Destran Cluster, a team consisting of Ensign Sang Li, Lieutenant (JG) S'Ratish and myself has taken a shuttle to conduct a survey of planet Leycol II, a class M planet in orbit around a yellow dwarf sun. Initial probe scans show the planet has a diverse ecosystem with many unique plant and animal species. However, preliminary findings indicate that the planet has never supported intelligent beings.

On a personal note, I am pleased to be given the opportunity to command this mission, but I have reservations about my team. Since Ensign Li came aboard last month, I have detected a subtle air of hostility from him. I hope that whatever his feelings are toward me, we will be able to work together and achieve our objectives.

"Sir, I am picking up a signal," S'Ratish said. "It does not appear to be encoded, but the universal translator is unable to decipher it." The Vulcan science officer pushed the keys to put the message over the shuttle craft's internal speaker system.

As the away team commander moved closer to the communication panel, Lieutenant Xin Zhadesh's bushy eyebrows furrowed. Puzzles – and linguistic codes in particular – were a pastime for the operations officer, but with no point of reference the language coming at him was a total mystery.

"Ensign, triangulate the point of origin and come about to its heading," Zhadesh instructed the young human at the shuttle's helm.

"Should we break off of the mission objective, sir?" Li asked.

"The planet is not going anywhere, ensign," Zhadesh replied, trying not to be irritated. "Now, come about."

"Course plotted and engaged," Li said. "Coming about to course 145 mark 7."

"That course will take us to the third moon of the fifth planet in this system," S'Ratish said. "Long range scans show both the moon and the planet to be inhospitable."

Zhadesh remembered from the mission briefing that the fifth planet was gaseous. Its moons had no atmosphere and were all cold and lifeless. The reports had not mentioned any signals, however.

"Could there be a downed ship on the moon?" Zhadesh asked. His small shuttle was not equipped for a rescue mission, but it could take on at least six more passengers.

"It is plausible," S'Ratish considered. "But the language in this message is unknown to us. We have no way of communicating with them."

Amongst the gibberish playing over the speakers, Zhadesh thought that he caught the word 'warning.' He shot a glance at S'Ratish, who was already working her hands across the console.

"The translator has made a correlation between this language and one from the archeological record of the Pulani people of Margif IV," S'Ratish said. "However, the similarity is suspect as there is only a two percent match in the structure."

"Two percent is better than nothing," Zhadesh said. "Ensign, come about to our original course, but hold this position. There is no sense in us heading into trouble if we can avoid it. Be ready to retreat if this warning turns out to be something real. S'Ratish notify the *Bellerophon* of our current situation and advise them that our survey of the planet is being delayed while we attempt to identify the source of this signal."

As his crew set about their tasks, Zhadesh sat down at his own terminal and began to compare the translator's findings against the message. If the 'code' of the language followed a pattern and he could use the archeological record as a guide, he'd have it in short order.

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Star Trek: Bellerophon

“Any Port in a Storm” by Chris Post

“Sir, you’ve been at for an hour,” Ensign Li said. “Maybe we ought to just go back and survey the planet.”

Zhadesh rubbed his eyes and let out a quiet sigh. The ensign was right, but it did not make giving up any easier. Worse, the tone in his voice made the junior officer’s suggestion seem like challenge. Zhadesh chose to ignore it for the time being.

By guesswork more than skill, Zhadesh had been able to decipher about four percent, but the message was still just a garble of gibberish. They were no closer to identifying what the warning could possibly be about than when they had started. As the message began to loop again, Zhadesh looked over to where his crew were sitting, waiting for his order.

“Head back to second planet and begin orbital pattern Omicron Beta,” the Efrosian said. “S’Ratish, catalog plant and animal species as indicated in our mission parameters, but look for patterns that might indicate previous cultivation or management. Mr. Li, pay special attention for alloys commonly used in space travel.”

With the team carrying out their tasks, Zhadesh turned his attention back to the message. It was nearly ten minutes long, he mused. Warning messages were usually much shorter. A message this long would more likely be a set of instructions, but instructions for what?

Using what little bits of the language he’d been able to tease out thus far, Zhadesh began to use his PADD to construct a code cypher algorithm to augment the universal translator. After another hour of work, he connected the PADD into the shuttle’s main computer and launched the program. A few minutes later, the translator showed an estimated five percent translation.

“Shaka, when the wall fell,” Zhadesh said, turning away from his work. He stood and walked the few steps over to the science station. “Anything of note?”

S’Ratish looked up from the console and shook her head. “Negative, sir. There is a fascinating abundance of life, but nothing to indicate that the flora or fauna were ever manipulated by any type of selective breeding.”

“Well,” Zhadesh said with slight smile. “We have only scanned ten percent of the planet’s surface. Keep working.”

Next he moved to the helm where Ensign Li was working his hands across his console. Zhadesh could not be sure, but the junior officer seemed to be harboring a grudge of some sort. He pushed the thought aside to refocus on the task before him.

“Is everything copacetic, Ensign?” Zhadesh asked.

“Yes, sir,” Li replied, still looking at his console. “It’s just that for a second I’d thought I’d found something, but now it’s gone. It must’ve been a sensor malfunction.”

“What was it that you think you saw?” Zhadesh asked.

“I can’t be sure, but I’d swear it was a building,” Li said, shaking his head. “Like I said, though, it was just a blip for a second.”

“Reconfigure the sensors to scan for anomalous materials in the location,” Zhadesh instructed. “We might be able to determine what caused the blip.”

“Aye, sir,” Li said, his hands moving quickly across the console. “Huh, I see now. It looks the area has a deposit of meteoric iron. That must have been what I saw.”

“Curious that the area does not appear to be in a crater,” Zhadesh said. “S’Ratish, what have our scans shown about meteor bombardment of this planet?”

“Our scans have not found anything significant to indicate an impact to justify that quantity of meteoric iron,” the Vulcan said. “It is improbable that it is a naturally occurring deposit.”

“Mark the location and continue our present orbital pattern,” Zhadesh ordered. “The mysteries seem to be piling up today.”

* * *

“Sir, we’re experiencing a power drain,” Ensign Li called out, tearing Zhadesh’s concentration away from his work. “It’s fast, too. We’re down forty percent already.”

“What is the source of the drain?” Zhadesh asked moving to the shuttle’s helm.

“It’s some sort of siphon coming from the planet surface,” Li said. “We’re down to fifty percent, sir. What should I do?”

“Break orbit and move us away, maximum impulse,” Zhadesh said, sitting down in the shuttle’s co-pilot seat and considering his options.

“Sir, power levels are now at fifteen percent,” Li said. “We can’t break orbit.”

“Rerouting all available power to the impulse engines,” Zhadesh said calmly. “Come to a heading of 176 mark 142.”

“New heading plotted,” Li said. “I’m giving it all she’s got, sir, but we’re still caught in the planet’s gravity. Power is at five percent and our orbit is decaying! We’re about to lose life support!”

“Come about and plot a course for the planet surface,” Zhadesh instructed. “Be prepared for a powerless final approach.”

“Sir?” Li asked quizzically.

“We are most likely going to crash,” Zhadesh said.

* * *

“Damage assessment?” Zhadesh asked as he picked himself up off the floor of the shuttle. From what he could tell from the inside, the vessel was still in one piece. The landing had been rough, but the vessel had come down in a relatively marshy location, providing it with some cushion at the point of impact.

Ensign Li dragged himself up, using the pilot seat for leverage. He had a gash on his forehead and his vision was a blurry. It took him a moment to compose himself and bring the ship’s control panel into focus.

“All systems are down,” Li reported. “Main power and auxiliary power both read zero. The ship is dead.”

“Injuries?” Zhadesh asked, apparently ignoring the first report for the time being.

“I’m banged up a bit, but nothing too bad,” Li said, cracking a sardonic smile. “Do all your landings go this well?”

Zhadesh once again ignored the Ensign’s comments. Had they come from a friend, Zhadesh would have taken them as good-natured, but he sensed a level of hostility beneath the surface with this human. Rather than dwell on the matter, he turned to S’Ratish who was cradling her left arm against her chest. Green blood was seeping through her uniform jacket.

“It is broken, sir,” the Vulcan said matter-of-factly. “It will require treatment.”

Zhadesh moved to the cabinet where the medical supplies were kept and quickly set about gathering the items he needed. He had actually set a few of his own broken bones to conceal his holodeck activities from the *Bellerophon*’s medical staff. Overriding security protocols was frowned upon, after all.

Moving beside the science officer, Zhadesh was silently thankful that it was the Vulcan who was injured; keeping the patient calm would not be a problem. All the same, he gave her a hypospray with a pain reliever and sedative before starting.

“That will numb the pain, but I will not lie to you,” he said. “This is going to hurt.”

“Your warning is appreciated, but unnecessary,” S’Ratish said, her gaze aimed at some distant point. “You may proceed when you are ready.”

First, Zhadesh removed his patient's jacket and cut away her shirt sleeve, doing so as gingerly as possible. Only once did the stone-faced Vulcan show a twinge of a grimace. Her wound was bad; the bone was broken jaggedly and had torn through the bicep.

"Could be worse," Zhadesh said, with a faint smile that twitched the edges of his long mustache. Looking over his patient, he was a bit overwhelmed. Taking a deep breath, Zhadesh pulled the arm slipping the broken bone back beneath the skin and muscle. S'Ratish let out a sharp cry, her eyes rolling back and the hand of her good arm clenching and unclenching. Just as quickly, though, she composed herself, taking deep breaths and performing what Zhadesh imagined was some sort of Vulcan calming exercise.

With the bone set as best he could manage, the Efrosian began using the med-kit's cellular regenerator. Because of the damage and his inexperience with such levels of trauma, the process was slow. In the end, however, Zhadesh was satisfied that with the job he had done. S'Ratish would need a follow-up with a real doctor, for certain, but she was no longer in pain and could function again.

"All right," Zhadesh said, standing up from his patient. "We are going to need to figure out what happened and how we get ourselves out of here."

* * *

"Try it now," Zhadesh said, his head and arms still inside the shuttle's lower console control panel. There was a flicker of lights inside the shuttle, but it lasted only a moment.

Sliding out from under the console, Zhadesh let out a sigh and pursed his lips. "So much for rerouting the warp nacelle's auxiliary power reserve through the EPS grid," he said. "This shuttle is completely without power."

"It doesn't make any sense," Ensign Li said. "What could have drained the systems so completely?"

S'Ratish shook her head and spoke. "We will not be able to make that determination with the information we can obtain from within the shuttle," she said. "However, we will have to ascertain what caused our initial power loss as it is the most likely reason for our continued problems."

"You are correct," Zhadesh confirmed. "But without scanners, we do not even know for sure where we are or what is waiting for us out there."

"Can't we just wait for the *Bellerophon* to come back and pick us up?" Li asked.

"Our total power failure means our emergency beacon has also failed so our crash will most likely go undetected. We will not miss our rendezvous with the *Bellerophon* for 10 days and the meeting point is approximately 26 hours from here at maximum warp. Based on those factors, we cannot logically expect rescue before our food supplies are exhausted," the Vulcan science officer explained matter-of-factly. "Given the alternative of waiting here to perish, I prefer to take my chances exploring the planet."

"It is a large and unmapped planet," Zhadesh said, mentally running through lessons for planetary survival he had not used much since graduating from Starfleet Academy. "I am open to suggestions as to where to start."

"I think I might have an idea," Li said. "I got a look at the telemetry as we were going down. This orbital pass had us in the neighborhood of that meteoric iron deposit I discovered."

"How big is this neighborhood?" Zhadesh asked.

"About 100 kilometers, give or take," Li said.

Zhadesh frowned. That would likely be three day walk, but they did not really have many other options. "Gather what supplies we can carry. Make sure your tricorders and phasers are in working order," he said, giving the shuttle's interior a final look. "We have some walking to do."

* * *

Li fired his phaser in a short burst. Unsatisfied with the results he fired again, this time a little longer. With a crackle, the small sticks he had gathered smoked and a flame flickered to life. He added some larger sticks and sat back.

“With luck, we will make it to the ore site tomorrow,” Zhadesh said, stretching the muscles in his back. It had been two days of hard marching through a dense forest. Hilly terrain and an amazing network of streams and rivers had not helped their progress, but the way ahead looked relatively flat and open. Somewhere in the distance a bird cried out.

“Our luck hasn’t been so good so far,” Li said, holding up his hand. He’d suffered a bite wound from a native mammal during their first day on the planet. The creature was small, about the size of the cats humans kept as pets, but it had proven quite aggressive.

“Gentlemen, need I remind you that it is merely a post hoc ergo propter hoc logical fallacy to believe that because events are connected sequentially, they are connected causally as well,” S’Ratish said. “Our crash was the result of a power drain, most likely the action of people we have not yet encountered. Mr. Li’s injury can be directly attributed to waiving rations at an unstudied creature and calling ‘Here kitty, kitty.’ As unfortunate as both occurrences were, neither was the result of supernatural intervention.”

Zhadesh laughed out loud and shook his head, his long white hair tossing back and forth. “Spoken like a true disciple of logic,” he said, the echo of the laugh still in his voice. “I have played enough hands of poker to know that, regardless of the laws of probability, some nights luck is with you and some nights it is not.”

The bird called out again, this time closer than before. Almost reflexively, Li threw more wood on the fire. The group had yet to encounter any large predators, but they had seen signs of them. Li thought about the large raptor feather he had found and shivered before moving closer to the growing fire.

“Let’s hope luck’s a lady tonight,” he said, his mouth curling into something between a grin and a sneer. “At this point, I’d be happy to settle for just a better run of bad luck.”

Li’s halfhearted laugh was cut short by the unseen bird. Instead of the long call that had pierced the darkness earlier, the bird now let loose with a series of short and frantic caws that were silenced by a reptilian roar.

“I’ve got a feeling that this is going to be a long night,” Li said, shaking his head.

* * *

Away team commander’s log, supplemental: I have had to opt against taking the direct route toward the meteoric iron deposit, having deemed it necessary to avoid the grassland savannah of this planet. The vast expanse is dominated by two life-forms. The first is a species of flightless bird, having four long legs and short wings. Despite the inability to fly, the birds still move in flocks, running rapidly across the plains. Standing a half-meter tall at the shoulder and a full meter high at their head, the birds have curved beaks like a raptor and hunt some sort of native rodent that dwells in the grasses.

The birds do not represent the top of the food chain, however, as they are the primary food source for the second species; a man-sized bipedal reptile. The reptiles are pack hunters that have developed a flanking attack that is particularly suited to their prey. As the bird flock moves in unison away from the obvious attack of one of the reptiles, they run headlong into the waiting fang and claws of the larger pack.

Skirting around the grassland has added two additional days to our travel and our rations and water supplies are now running dangerously low. Morale is difficult to gauge. Lt. S’Ratish is exhibiting typical Vulcan resilience while Ensign Li continues to push the limits of acceptable behavior for a junior officer.

“I wonder what one of those birds would taste like?” Li said, watching a flock move in sweeping arcs across the plain. “Chicken, or maybe turkey perhaps.”

“Ensign Li, we need to keep moving,” Zhadesh said, looking up into the tree where the human officer had climbed. “S’Ratish, what is your evaluation?” the Efrosian asked, turning to the Vulcan woman who was busy studying her tricorder.

“We will not find a shorter route to the meteor deposit, sir,” she said. “Based on the terrain ahead, I would estimate four hours to cross here.”

Zhadesh scanned the savannah ahead of them. He’d seen what the reptiles were capable of from a distance. The thought of experiencing it first-hand up close and personal was not something he was anxious to expose his team to.

“Alright then, everyone stay close together and keep an eye on our flanks and rear,” he said. “We do not want to be taken off guard.”

“Can’t ever be too cautious, eh, Lieutenant?” Li asked, a note of sarcasm in his voice.

Zhadesh took a deep breath, trying to keep calm. Truth be told he would have liked nothing more than take the direct route. If he had his Gin’tak spear he might have even been tempted to try it. However, his personal preference was not the right choice for a team commander to make, and he acted accordingly. Despite his efforts, Zhadesh had reached the limits of his tolerance.

“Do we have a problem, Ensign?” Zhadesh said.

“No, sir, no problem at all,” Li replied. “I just want to live to see the end of this mission. Rumor has it you have a habit of leaving people behind.”

“My successes and failures as a mission commander are a matter of record, not rumor,” Zhadesh responded, his voice growing course with anger. “If you have something to say, say it.”

Li looked at his commanding officer with eyes full of bitterness. His lip trembled slightly as words that had been waiting years spilled forth from his mouth.

“I loved her, damn you. I loved her and you let her die,” Li growled, his right hand clenching into a fist.

“What are you talking about?” Zhadesh said, taking a step closer to Li. If the young human was going to throw a punch, Zhadesh wanted to give him as little room as possible to maneuver.

“Andrea,” Li said, the anger in voice taking on an added note of sorrow. “Andrea Jackson, you bastard. She was my fiancée.”

The mention of the name left Zhadesh shell-shocked. Jackson was one of two fatalities from the first away mission he had ever led. She had fallen into an icy shaft on a frozen planet, literally slipping from his grasp. As the scene replayed itself in his mind, Zhadesh momentarily let his guard down and Li was quick to capitalize on the Efrosian’s mistake.

After the first punch staggered Zhadesh back, the pair grappled each other to the ground and wrestled for a dominant position. Consumed by their emotions neither was able to mount a decisive attack nor did they notice S’Ratish adjusting the setting on her phaser. A moment later, the fight was over.

* * *

“Gentlemen,” the Vulcan science officer said as the two men on the ground before her began to stir. “You obviously have an issue that needs to be resolved, but physical violence is not the answer. I suggest you put aside your differences and continue with our mission as the alternative is to die on this planet. I think we can agree that such an outcome would be unsatisfactory to us all.”

Zhadesh lifted his head slightly and looked over where Li was laying. He could understand the man’s feelings, as misguided as they were. As his own anger gave way to pity, he sat up and tried to shake of some of the effects of the phaser stun.

“Your logic is undeniable,” he said to S’Ratish. “I only ask that should you find it necessary to stun me in the future you use a slightly lower setting.”

* * *

“Any sign of them?” Li asked, his head moving back and forth as he tried to check as many directions as possible.

“None,” Zhadesh responded, his own eyes scanning the chest high grass in front him. A slight breeze was blowing and the grass moved in rippling waves. On any other day it would have been a beautiful sight to see the honey-colored ocean spread out before him, but given that a pack of hungry predators was hiding somewhere out there...

“Tricorder readings indicate seven life-forms in three groups,” S’Ratish reported. “Two groups of three are about five hundred meters ahead, off to our left and right. A solitary life-form is behind us, one hundred meters and closing.”

As if on cue, the predator following their trail let loose with a roar.

“And how far are we from the meteoric iron deposit?” Zhadesh asked.

“Approximately one kilometer,” S’Ratish said.

Ensign Li was anxiously sweeping his phaser back and forth, aiming at any sign of movement. “What’s the plan? What’re we going to do?”

“We move,” Zhadesh said, resolutely. “Forward, toward our objective.”

“That’s suicide!” Li exclaimed. “That takes right into the trap.”

“The odds of avoiding an attack are staggeringly small, sir,” S’Ratish agreed. “I estimate them at one in –”

“Never mind the odds,” Zhadesh said. “We have run out of luck avoiding these creatures. We are going to have to show them that we are not a part of their food chain. Now, set your phasers to kill and stay close to me.”

Moving through the tall grass took little physical effort, but the knowledge of what they were walking toward made each step increasingly agonizing. The savannah had grown silent, save for the sound of the wind in the undulating grass. It only took a moment for the serenity of the plain to be shattered, however.

The attack came rapidly as beasts sprang forth from three sides. Despite the fact they stood as tall as a man, the creatures leaped when they struck, attempting to use their mass and powerful hind legs to knock their prey to the ground.

The air crackled with phaser fire and reptilian shrieks. Three of the creatures fell in quick succession and the remaining four circled around looking for another opportunity to strike. When the attack came, phasers fired once more, the smell of ozone becoming thick.

Zhadesh spun as he heard Li cry out. The human was down; his phaser knocked out of his hand and lost in the tall grass. On the far side of him stood one of the reptiles; the last of the group that had attacked them. Unable to get a clear shot, Zhadesh responded with the first thought that came to his mind. Running quickly, he launched himself into the air. As he sailed over Li, Zhadesh dropped the junior officer his phaser and braced for impact before colliding full force with the beast.

As he had expected, the creature was solid muscle sheathed in armor-hard scales. The force of the collision almost knocked the air from his lungs and it was a feat of effort to wrap his arms around the monster’s neck. Having executed his maneuver as far as he had planned, Zhadesh was not exactly sure what to do next. With no better options, he opted to try to scramble onto the creature’s back, keeping as much pressure as he could apply to its throat. That plan proved to be ill-conceived and the creature quickly tossed the Efrogian from its back. Laying stunned, Zhadesh could do little more than raise his arms to feebly protect his head as the monster struck with powerful jaws full of knife-edged teeth. The pain from the wound shot through his entire body and he cried out as flesh was torn from snapping bone. The last thing he heard before slipping into darkness was phaser fire, echoing as though it were coming from a long tunnel.

* * *

Zhadesh awoke with a start and tried to sit up. Dizzy, he gave up and lay back upon the ground.

“Try not to move, sir,” S’Ratish said. “Your injuries have been treated, but there was a substantial loss of blood. Neither Ensign Li or I can transfuse you, so you will need to take things slowly.”

“Where are we,” Zhadesh asked. “Did we make it to the site?”

“Yes, sir,” S’Ratish confirmed. “Ensign Li carried you the remaining half-kilometer.”

“I will have to thank him for that,” Zhadesh said, giving a short laugh that ended in a grimace.

“Your wounds were substantial,” S’Ratish cautioned. “You will be sore for some time to come.”

Zhadesh offered up his uninjured arm. “Noted,” he said. “Now, help me up. I want to see what we came all this way for.”

S’Ratish complied, lifting her superior gingerly. Once he was upright and standing, she stepped aside to give him a better view.

“Although geology is not my specialty, I have never heard of anything like this,” S’Ratish said with a wave of her arm. “It is a remarkable find.”

Zhadesh was still trying to take the whole of the ‘find’ in. It looked like a monolith had been lain on its back upon the grassy plain. The black, porous rock stood out sharply from the amber colored vegetation, but from space their scans would have never shown them what they could now see.

Arranged around the exterior were glyphs and characters. The writing did not appear to have been applied to the surface, but was an integral part of the meteor, formed from veins of iron running through the base material. Zhadesh could not even begin to fathom the process that would have been used to create what was now before him.

“Judging the surrounding terrain, the object, although composed of meteoric compounds, could not have fallen from orbit,” S’Ratish said. “There is no crater or anything to one would expect to see as the result of an impact.”

Moving closer to the object, Zhadesh bent down and examined a large section of rock. There was something vaguely familiar about the markings it bore and he quickly reached for his PADD. Within moments he was working on an update to his cypher algorithm, a broad smile stretching the whiskers of his mustache.

“What is it, sir?” S’Ratish asked looking over Zhadesh’s shoulder.

“These markings, here and there,” Zhadesh said, gesturing with his free hand. “These are not Pulani, but more closely resemble the glyphs used by the Valeer people who lived on Couvit III. Phonetically, they would be similar, but structurally they are quite different.”

“I don’t follow,” Li said, joining the other two members of the team.

“When I was developing my cypher to decode the language from the signal, I was basing it on an audio analysis of the transmission,” Zhadesh explained. “It was a total mistake because the universal translator had made an erroneous phonetic match.”

“Erroneous phonetic match?” Li asked quizzically.

Zhadesh shook his head. “Yes, exactly,” he continued. “Like the way the Andorian word for cake sounds like a crude Earth expression for coitus.”

“Okay, so what does that mean for us?” Li asked with a shrug of his shoulders.

“Judging from the Lieutenant’s emotional response, I would deduce that he has had an epiphany,” S’Ratish interjected.

“Yes, indeed,” Zhadesh said, pointing to his PADD. “Using this written guide rather than an audio analysis should help us fully translate the transmission we heard before. However, it will take some time and we will need to scan all of the glyphs on this obelisk to make the translation as accurate as possible.”

Li looked the width and breadth of the stone and let out an audible sigh.

“Well, let’s get to it,” he said.

* * *

“Any luck?” Li asked anxiously as Zhadesh worked on his PADD. The two had not spoken much since they had faced the reptile attack, but Zhadesh could sense a change in the junior officer. The subtle anger was gone. It seemed as if the man had found some peace.

“Actually, I think I have discovered something,” Zhadesh replied. “From what I can tell, this is what drained our power after we failed to properly respond to the signal we received.”

“Any speculation as to why it did not down the previous probes sent to this system?” S’Ratish asked.

“It seems this planet was ‘claimed’ by whoever placed the obelisk and the beacon that sent the signal,” Zhadesh mused. “They appear to only react when they detect manned spacecraft.”

“React how?” Li asked pounding his fist on the side of the obelisk. “It’s just a big space rock.”

“Do not forget, Ensign Li, this rock is extraterrestrial and it has a unique composition,” S’Ratish explained. “Despite its lack of technological components as we know them, the fact remains that our power was drained.”

“Great,” Li said sullenly. “So any ship that comes to rescue us is going to get drained too?”

“Affirmative,” Zhadesh replied. “Unless we can respond to the beacon and get it to deactivate.”

“So have you figured out how to respond to the beacon?” Li asked.

“I believe so, but first we will have to return to our shuttle and restore enough power to transmit a subspace signal,” the Efrosian replied. “Unfortunately, I’m not sure how to do that.”

“I might have an idea,” Li said. “Let’s get back to the ship and get off this forsaken planet.”

* * *

“Well, what do you think?” Li asked his senior officers, a look of hopeful anticipation clear on his face.

Zhadesh studied the ensign’s work, running through various scenarios in his mind.

“Where did you learn this?” the Efrosian asked suspiciously. “I do not believe it is part of the standard helmsman training.”

Li chuckled and shook his head. “No, it’s not,” he said. “It was a training exercise I went through before being assigned to the *Bellerophon*; one of those ‘worst case scenario’ kind of things. I can’t take the credit, though. It was a Bolian engineer who thought it up.”

“I have never heard of anyone using hand-held devices to restore power to Krellide storage cells,” Zhadesh said, running his hand over the interphasic compensator that had been connected between a daisy chain of PADDs, phasers and tricorders and the storage cells. “It seems a bit ... optimistic.”

“I estimate this plan has only a 6.593 percent chance of success,” S’Ratish said. “The odds of igniting the plasma conduit by using the phasers in this manner is significantly greater.”

Ensign Li shrugged. “It worked in the simulator,” he said. “But I guess it’s your call, sir.”

With the eyes of his crew upon him and no better option, Zhadesh knew what had to be done. “Make it so,” he said.

* * *

“Power levels are at 10 percent,” Zhadesh said. “Congratulations, Mr. Li.”

“Don’t thank me yet, sir,” Li said, the alarm clear in his voice. “There’s a power fluctuation, I think the object may be up to its old tricks again.”

“Transmitting your message now,” S’Ratish said calmly, her hands moving quickly across the controls. “Monitoring for any variations from the alien source.”

Zhadesh was listening too, and did not attempt to hide a broad smile when the alien transmission acknowledged the shuttle’s message.

“Power fluctuations have ceased, sir,” Li said. “Power holding steady at twelve percent.”

“Excellent,” Zhadesh said. “Now, someone give me a damage report.”

“Primary systems are all offline,” Li said. “The thrusters are scrap and weapons systems aren’t much better.”

“Is there any good news?” Zhadesh asked.

“The replicator is operational,” S’Ratish said, wryly.

“Fantastic; someone get me a raktajino,” Zhadesh said. “And send a priority one message to the *Belle*; tell them we are going to need a ride.”

* * *

Lt. Xin Zhadesh sat in the observation lounge lost in thought as he watched the stars streak by outside the view port. He didn't notice the human ensign slip up behind him. It was not until the younger man cleared his throat, that Zhadesh even knew he was there.

"Excuse the interruption, sir," Ensign Sang Li said. "I never got a chance to thank you properly."

The ensign produced a bottle of Saurian Brandy from behind his back.

"I'm told it's a very good vintage," Li said.

Zhadesh took the bottle and motioned the junior officer to take a seat beside him.

"There is no need to thank me, you understand," Zhadesh said. "Anything I did, I did because I was doing my duty as a Starfleet officer and mission commander."

"You didn't have to jump on that lizard's back," Li countered. "I've never seen anything like that!. I've never even heard of anything like it. If you were willing to do that, after everything I'd said and done..." The ensign's voice trailed off and his eyes grew misty.

"If you would do that for me," he continued, pausing again briefly as his voice cracked with emotion. "Then I know you must have done everything in your power to save Andrea."

"I did," Zhadesh said sadly. "It is a burden to all who lead missions that someone under their command might die. Each loss is felt profoundly."

Li nodded mutely. For years he'd been consumed with a hatred for the Efrosian now beside him. Everything he had done in the intervening years – pushing himself through the Academy, jumping through every hoop and calling in every favor owed him to get assigned to the *Bellerophon* – in the end, all that hate had been misguided.

"My biggest regret," Zhadesh said, filling the silence between them, "was that I never got a chance to know her. She seemed like a remarkable person. Can you tell me about her?"

Li was silent for a moment as a flood of memories washed over him.

"We met at concert," he said. "Andrea was very musical. She could have been a professional musician, but her first love was the stars. She told me once that she had sewn her first Starfleet uniform for herself when she seven."

As he listened, Zhadesh uncorked the bottle of brandy and took a swig. It was indeed a good vintage. He took another drink before passing the bottle to Li.

"I used to love to make her laugh," Li said, taking the bottle and chuckling at his own memories. "She would sort of half-snort when she laughed hard and then laugh harder because she'd snorted."

He shook his head and took a drink from the bottle. It felt good to talk about Andrea, but there was something else on his mind. He passed the bottle back to Zhadesh.

"Sir, I've seen your mission report and it doesn't mention our altercation," he said. "I should be facing a court martial."

Zhadesh shrugged. "If I had included that, the *Belle* would likely have lost a good pilot and I would have missed out on this opportunity to get to know you. Now, please continue with what you were saying about Andrea."

"Well, there are so many stories I could tell," Li said, gazing out of the window and into the past.

The End