

Captain's log, stardate 68097.5:

The Bellerophon has received a distress call from Outpost 119, one of Starfleet's resupply depots established in the outlying areas of the Typhon Sector. The message was badly garbled and we've been unable to establish further contact at this time.

"There is no response," Lt Xin Zhadesh said, his hands moving rapidly on his console at the operations station. "It appears that there is some sort of subspace interference."

"What kind of interference?" Captain (Carrie) K'danz asked, turning to face the Efrosian Ops Officer.

"I cannot say for certain, it is an anomalous reading," Zhadesh replied, his bushy eyebrows knitting together.

"Whatever it is, it is safe to assume that it is not a natural phenomenon," said T'Var, the *Bellerophon's* Vulcan chief science officer.

"How do you know that," K'danz asked.

"The anomaly shifts to match whichever subspace frequency we attempt to use, even when we cycle through the spectrum randomly," T'Var answered. "The probability of that happening naturally is exceedingly low."

"Who do we know that uses this kind of jamming technology?" K'danz asked, scanning her bridge officer's for an answer.

"It doesn't match any of the known jamming signatures," said Major Michael C. Drake, the *Bellerophon's* chief of security.

"How long until our sensors can tell us something useful?" K'danz asked.

"I can reroute some resources to have us in long-range within the hour," Zhadesh replied.

"Make it happen," K'danz ordered. "And let's see what we can do about neutralizing that jamming signal."

* * *

"Long-range scanners are showing lifesigns on the outpost and they all appear stable," Zhadesh said, addressing the *Belle's* senior staff in the ship's briefing room. "However, at this range we are unable to determine if the twenty lifesigns are those of *Outpost 119's* crew."

"What are the Outpost's defensive capabilities?" K'danz asked.

"It's a skeleton crew," Drake said. "They've got five Starfleet security officers under the command of Lt Commander Dan Reeves. Dan's a good man and a fine leader, but six men can't really do much if the outpost is boarded. Lt Commander Stavek is the strategic operations officer. We did a joint training exercise together once and he's as precise and calculating as any Vulcan you're likely to meet. However, the outpost is only equipped with four phaser banks and two torpedo launchers. She can put up a fight, but only for so long and only against a limited number of attackers."

"And the rest of the crew?" K'danz asked.

"Commander Thoran D'Jal is commanding officer," Commander Tom Paris said, reading from his PADD. "Lt Commander Sheila Koslowski is his XO. I've met her; she's got starship experience in the Gamma Quadrant."

"The remainder of the crew are assigned to station operations, which are essentially to repair and resupply Fifth Fleet vessels operating on this end of the Typhon Sector," Drake concluded. "All said, it's a rather small target in a lonely part of space."

"Who might want to hit it?" K'danz asked. "We're a long way from the Kairn border over here."

"Nausicans?" Zhadesh mused. "Maybe an aggressive Ferengi captain."

"Nausicans wouldn't bother with signal jamming," Drake said. "They're more the smash and grab type."

"And it would have to be a very aggressive Ferengi," K'danz said with a sigh. "And there are no signs of ships of any kind?"

"None," Zhadesh confirmed. "I have also adjusted the sensors to sweep for any kind of tachyon variance that might indicate cloaked ships, but the results have been negative."

"Well, someone doesn't want the outpost to communicate with the rest of the fleet," K'danz said. "Keep our current heading and speed, but bring us out of warp at a safe distance. If this is a trap, I don't want to step in it."

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Star Trek: Bellerophon

“Better Late than Never” By Chris Post

“It is a fascinating device,” T’Var said, explaining the jamming device the *Bellerophon* was encountering. “It has been designed to react counter to our sensors, moving away as we try to examine it.”

“And that’s what’s jamming our communications?” K’danz asked.

“It is jamming all communications within a 25,000 kilometer radius,” Zhadesh confirmed. “Nothing is making it in or out of the area of effect.”

“Can we disable it?” K’danz asked.

“Perhaps, said T’Var. “If we can catch it.”

“Can we?” K’danz asked.

“Its sensor aversion technology is making it impossible to lock transporters or tractor beam,” Zhadesh reported.

“Can you shoot the damned thing?” K’danz asked, looking toward the tactical station.

“Captain, it’s a tiny little thing, only ten centimeters,” Drake said. “Without phaser lock, it’d be like trying to shoot a mosquito with a phase cannon.”

“We could try a net,” Zhadesh suggested.

“A net?” Drake asked.

“We could use the main deflector to emit a non-targeted, wide-spectrum burst of verdion particles,” Zhadesh explained. “The device may not perceive the threat in time and be caught in the particle wave. If so, it should be disabled long enough for us to beam it aboard. Or destroy it if you prefer, Captain.”

“I’d like to get a closer look, so disable it and get it on board,” K’danz said. “How long will it take to modify the deflector?”

“We can have it ready in ten minutes,” said Dar, the *Belle*’s half-Klingon chief engineer, and husband of the captain.

“You’ve got five,” K’danz said. “We need to take this pest out of commission and complete our mission.”

Within minutes the modifications were complete and the bridge crew cast its net.

“We got it!” Paris exclaimed.

“That seemed almost too easy,” Captain K’danz remarked. “Now beam it to cargo bay two and put it in a level five containment field,” she ordered. “Mister Zhadesh, hail the outpost.”

* * *

“I know you haven’t had a lot of time,” Capt. K’danz said to her assembled senior staff. “But we need to have some idea of who hit us and why.”

“I’ve talked with Commander Stavek and gotten a bit of information in that regard,” Drake said. “It appears we’re dealing with a species called the Bespans. First contact was made only a few weeks ago.”

“What do we know about these Bespans?” K’danz asked.

“Not much,” Drake replied. “They are a warp capable humanoid species. When they first appeared at the outpost, the captain of their ship exchanged pleasantries with Commander D’Jal and said a diplomatic representative would return shortly.”

“They have a strange definition of diplomacy,” Zhadesh noted.

“You can say that again,” Paris interjected. “What kind of specs did their ship have?”

Drake brought up security footage recorded by the outpost on the wall display.

“As you can see, the vessel is about the size of a B’rel-class Klingon Bird of Prey,” he explained. “It fires a type of rail gun that uses a radioactive isotope as its base ammunition. It’s primitive by our standards, but it packs a punch.”

“What do the logs show happened?” K’danz asked.

“The ship approached and ignored repeated hails. It went weapons hot and opened fire just as the outpost’s shields were being raised,” Drake recounted, pointing at the display, which showed the Bespan ship firing, its molten rounds impacting the station’s unprotected hull. Suddenly, a small Federation ship appeared in the footage. “This Saber-class starship had the misfortune of coming out of warp just as the battle started.”

“So it wasn’t responding to help?” Paris asked.

“No, sir,” Drake said. “It arrived before the distress call went out.”

“Interesting,” K’danz said. “What kind of a fight did it put up?”

“I wouldn’t call it a fight,” Drake said. “They were caught flat-footed with their shields down. The Bespans beamed aboard, captured the bridge and fled.”

“Which direction did they go?” Paris asked.

“They left the way they’d come,” Drake said. “The most likely destination is a nebula several light years from here.”

"Can we catch them before they make it home?" K'danz asked.

"Based on a brief analysis of their vessel's warp signature, I would estimate its maximum velocity to be no more than warp five," T'Var said. "We can certainly overtake it, but the Saber is another matter."

"Let's assume they'll stick together," K'danz said. "I want us underway at maximum warp ASAP! Continue analyzing sensor logs and whatever else we have. I want to know as much as we can when we meet these Bespans face to face."

As the officers began to file out of the briefing room, K'danz's combadge chirped to life.

"Bridge to Captain K'danz," said the voice coming through. "You have a priority one communication from *Home Plate*."

"Acknowledged. I'll take it in my ready room in a moment. Patch it through there," K'danz replied.

"Good luck," said Dar, giving his wife a faint smile.

* * *

"The Admiral didn't have more information?" Paris asked. His years in Starfleet had curbed some of his brashness, but he could still get fired up at times. "It seems like she's holding out on us."

"I'm sure she is," K'danz agreed. "But anything else Starfleet Intelligence is aware of is apparently beyond our security clearance. All she would tell me is it is imperative we either get that starship back or destroy it to make sure it doesn't fall into enemy hands."

"So, Starfleet Intelligence is working with R&D, loses an experimental ship, and we're supposed to get it back without knowing what it does," Paris asked incredulously.

"The ship itself isn't experimental," K'danz corrected. "It's a standard Saber-class hull, but apparently there is some experimental equipment aboard that SFI would rather not lose."

"That we can't know about," Paris added.

"Precisely. Look, Tom, I don't like fighting blind any more than you, but Admiral Raiajh assures me the equipment is for defensive and recon purposes and some of it isn't even fully functional," K'danz said. "Our job is just to get it back. Now, who is our best transporter technician?"

"What have you got in mind?" Paris answered with a question of his own.

"I'd rather not be responsible for destroying a Starfleet vessel and her crew, but getting to our people on the Saber won't be easy," K'danz explained. "We'll have to try to drag it out of warp and transport quickly. It will be a tight window."

"Chief Colv has the most hands-on experience," Paris mused, leaving a pregnant pause in the conversation.

"But...?" K'danz prompted.

"But Ensign Olak might be a better choice," Paris responded.

"Olak? From engineering? She's fresh from the Academy," K'danz said. "What makes you think she'd be the one to go with?"

"I was looking through her file when she came aboard," Paris said. "Did you have a chance to read her senior thesis?"

"I'm afraid not," K'danz said. "Give me the highlights."

"In a nutshell, she had some brilliant ideas on transporter theory," Paris said. "Probably the most revolutionary thinker on the subject since Montgomery Scott."

"Revolutionary how?" K'danz asked, the skepticism thick in her voice.

"Well, she happens to have developed an improved formula for ship-to-ship transwarp transporter lock," Paris said, a smile creeping at the corners of his mouth.

"Does she now?" K'danz asked. "And I suppose you know a couple volunteers who'd like to test her theory?"

"I can think of a few," Paris replied.

"And what do you think B'Elanna would say about that?" K'danz asked pointedly, referring to her first officer's half-Klingon wife currently serving aboard *Starbase 719*.

Paris pursed his lips and thought for a moment before letting out a slight chuckle. "It's a good thing she's back at *Home Plate*," he said.

"Probably good for both of us," K'danz said. "A warp-speed beam in risks the away team, but trying to drag the Saber out of warp risks both that starship AND the *Belle* along with both crews."

K'danz stood and looked out the viewport of her ready room. This wasn't the way a first contact mission should go, but the Bespans had thrown the first punch. If her crew could get Starfleet Intelligence its ship back without the loss of life, perhaps a diplomatic relationship with the Bespans could be salvaged.

* * *

"Bridge to Commander Paris," K'danz called through the comm system.

"Paris here, Captain. Go ahead," the *Bellerophon's* first officer responded, turning away from where Ensign Olak and the away team were rehearsing the transporter maneuver in the holodeck.

"We've nearly caught up with the Saber, Tom," K'danz said. "Should be in transporter range in ten minutes. Is your team ready?"

"Yes ma'am," Paris said confidently. "We just finished our last run through the simulation."

"I'm afraid to ask, but how did it go?" K'danz inquired.

"The timing is critical, but the formula seems like a winner," Paris said. "It's still a safer option than trying to lasso the Saber with a tractor beam."

"Get down to transporter room two," K'danz ordered. "And good luck."

"Understood," Paris said turning back to his team. "It's time. Let's go."

As the four-man squad of Starfleet Marine and the one other Starfleet officer filed out, Paris noticed the look on the Acamarian Ensign Olak's face.

"You okay?" he asked, the note of concern clear in his voice.

"Yes, sir," Olak said. "It's just I don't know that I'm ready."

"If I didn't think you were ready, I wouldn't let you disassemble my atoms," Paris said with a smile. "The thing is when you get to the point where you feel too comfortable... That's when I worry."

* * *

As the members of the assault team materialized on board the stolen Saber-class starship, several members stumbled and fell while one other, a young Catullan Marine named Lannick, became physically ill.

"Well, that was certainly an interesting sensation," Lt. Xin Zhadesh said dryly. His normally ruddy complexion had shifted to a pinkish hue; a sign those familiar with Efrosians would know meant the *Bellerophon's* operations officer was also feeling nauseous.

"I see now why Ensign Olak insisted on not beaming us directly onto the bridge," Paris said, forcing a short laugh. "I wouldn't have been in any condition to fight anything more vicious than a tribble."

After taking a few moments to compose themselves, the team broke into two groups of four. The first, led by Paris, consisted of Ensign Sang Li, a Starfleet helmsman, and Marines Sergeant Manny Ramirez and Private Lannick. They would be tasked with taking the bridge.

Zhadesh would command the second team, which consisted of Lt (JG) Ch'Tak, a Zaranite Starfleet engineer, and Marine Corporals Sam Untiedt and Jacob Killgore, both experienced Marine sappers, or combat engineers. Their mission was to disable the ship through any means should Paris and his group fail in their objective.

"Good luck, Xin," Paris said as the groups parted ways.

"Let us hope I do not need it," Zhadesh replied, sliding through an access port and into a Jefferies tube. When the port was closed, Paris and his group moved to their own position. It was safe to assume their beam-in had been detected, so it would likely be impossible to gain a total surprise. Paris hoped, however, to catch the Bespans off guard by accessing the bridge through a repair conduit.

"Weapons on maximum stun," Paris ordered. "They've got us outnumbered two to one, so be careful and work quickly."

* * *

"Internal sensors are now offline," Ch'Tak reported, his voice coming through the respirator he wore to protect him from the oxygen rich environment.

"Excellent," Zhadesh replied, his hands moving quickly over his own work station. "Computer, execute program Zhadesh Theta Omicron Seven on a twenty-minute delay." A second later the computer confirmed the order.

"What does that do?" Ch'Tak asked.

"It will cause a cascade failure of most of the ship's EPS regulators," Zhadesh said with a smile. "When it finishes its cycle, all that remains are warp core containment and life support."

"I thought our orders were to destroy the ship?" Ch'Tak asked.

"That's where we come in," Cpl Killgore said, crawling up to where the others were working, with Untiedt close behind. "If we don't regain control of the ship in the next hour, there won't be a ship left for the Bespans to take home as a prize."

Zhadesh nodded to the sappers, confident that they had done their jobs. Their knowledge of demolition and sabotage were brutally effective and if they said there wouldn't be a ship left, he had no doubts that they meant it.

"Zhadesh to Commander Paris," Zhadesh said, tapping his comm badge.

"Paris here. Go ahead, Lieutenant," came the reply.

"The Bespans are blind and will not be able to detect your approach. All other preparations have been completed," Zhadesh reported. "Now is as good a time to act as you are likely to have."

“Acknowledged,” Paris replied. “If this doesn’t work, you know what to do.”

“Affirmative.”

* * *

Springing forth from the repair hatch, Sgt Ramirez was able to fire a clear shot before any of the Bespans had a chance to react. The shot struck the alien in the command chair solidly in the chest and rendered him instantly unconscious. He then quickly ducked for cover as the Bespans hurriedly drew their weapons and retaliated with blasts of their own. Resuming his attack, Ramirez did his best to lay down cover fire, allowing his team to exit the hatch.

“Cease fire and surrender,” Paris called out. “I am Commander Tom Paris of the United Federation of Planets. I am reclaiming command of this ship!”

“This ship is ours,” one of the Bespans responded from cover behind a free-standing console. “We have claimed it as payment for your trespasses.”

Keeping his head low made it difficult to get a good look at his adversaries, but Paris could see that the Bespans stood about two and a quarter meters tall and were solidly built. Their skin was mostly blue, but there were what appeared to be red markings on the sides of their faces. Rather than hair, their heads were topped with a ridged crest about eight centimeters tall.

“If you have a grievance, Starfleet has teams of negotiators to help reach a settlement,” Paris said. “But I cannot let you have this ship.”

“I offer you this settlement,” the Bespan growled. “Surrender or die!”

The unmistakable sound of disruptor fire punctuated the exclamation, but it was followed quickly by a phaser shot from Lannick. The Bespan fell silently to the deck.

“Who’s in charge now?” Paris called out. “I’d still like to talk.”

Straining to hear, Paris could tell several of the remaining Bespans were arguing, but he could not make out exactly what they were saying. Regardless, the conversation proved distracting and the Starfleet Marines used the opportunity to reposition and take out two more Bespans, leaving four remaining conscious on the bridge.

“There’s still time to surrender,” Paris called out, but he was cut short as disruptor fire erupted from the Bespans’ position. Beams of energy struck the console behind which he was hidden, causing sparks to flash around him. The Marines returned fire and another Bespan tumbled to the deck.

“I’m hit!” Ramirez yelled out over the din a moment later. The Marine had his left arm tight around his torso as he fell back behind a bridge console. As the Starfleet personnel moved to cover their comrade, the Bespans launched a counterstrike, moving to get at the wounded Marine in hopes of capturing a prisoner. As two of the aliens leaped over the console, they were startled to discover Ramirez waiting for them with a smile and raised phaser rifle. A few quick phaser blasts left the Bespans sprawled on the deck amid the Marines.

“I wish to negotiate my surrender,” the final Bespan called out, standing and raising his hands above his head.

“Paris to Zhadesh,” the Starfleet commander hailed. “We’ve got control of the bridge. Turn off your booby traps and get up here.”

* * *

“Sergeant Ramirez received minor injuries during the firefight to capture the bridge. He is healing and will be ready to return to duty in a few days,” chief of security Major Michael C. Drake reported. “We currently have a dozen Bespan prisoners under guard.”

Captain K’danz nodded from her seat at the briefing room table. Drake was the last of her senior staff to report during the mission debriefing and, while it had been carried out with only the one injury, K’danz still felt like it was something less than a success.

“Are any of the prisoners talking?” she asked.

“Not a one,” Drake replied. “They haven’t even asked to talk to their own people.”

“That’s probably just as well,” K’danz said with a slight sigh. “Their people aren’t responding to any of our communication attempts anyway. Well, I think that’s it. Good work everyone.”

“What about the Saber?” Paris asked the captain.

“What about it?” K’danz answered with a question.

“What was it doing out this far anyway? Is it assigned to the Fifth Fleet?” Paris asked. “And what’s so special about that little cruiser?”

“As of now, the vessel is an experimental systems platform,” K’danz said. “It doesn’t even officially have a name. It’s just designated *NX-76948*. All I’ve been told is we are to tow the ship back to *Starbase 719* and not ask any questions. Everything else is need to know.”

“I believe I have some information that might be of interest,” Lt Xin Zhadesh interjected. With all eyes on him he continued, “While I was connected into the ship’s systems I noticed several oddities.”

“Don’t keep us in suspense Mister Zhadesh,” K’danz prompted in spite of her reservations.

“The first thing that caught my attention was an unusual amount of power being routed to the deflector array,” Zhadesh said. “Tracing it back to engineering, I discovered the vessel is equipped with what appears to be an improved quantum slipstream drive, or at least a drive that operates on similar principles of physics.”

Paris whistled. He’d been on the *USS Voyager* when the slipstream technology had been discovered. Using it had gotten the crew of the lost ship closer to home, but had proven too dangerous for regular use.

“It’s a good thing the Bespans didn’t use that drive,” Paris said. “We would have never caught them.”

“The drive required a command override to engage,” Zhadesh said. “But we were more fortunate that the Bespans were not able to activate the other experimental device I determined is aboard.”

“And that is?” K’danz said, trying hard not to become frustrated by her operations officer’s flair for dramatic storytelling.

“The vessel is equipped with what is basically a larger version of the Bespan device we encountered at *Outpost 119*,” Zhadesh explained. “Had it been operational, we would not have been able to lock our weapons, tractor beam or transporters onto it.”

“Wait a minute,” Lt Commander Dar interrupted. “Who equipped that ship with such a device? It’s not even Federation technology!”

“Based on its placement and integration into the ship’s systems, it was either built into the vessel or part of a significant retrofit,” Zhadesh said confidently. “There is no conceivable way the Bespans could have done the work in the brief amount of time they controlled the starship.”

“The leader of the Bespans said something about the ship being payment for our trespass,” Paris remarked, recalling the battle to re-take the ship from the aliens. “Could this device have something to do with what he meant?”

“So, Starfleet Intelligence has had dealings with the Bespans before,” Michael Drake said, shaking his head.

Captain K’danz rubbed her eyes. There was much more going on here than what had initially appeared to be. Her orders were clear, however; deliver the prisoners and the stolen starship to *Starbase 719* and then continue the *Belle*’s exploration of the sector. All the same, she could not help thinking that she would be seeing the Bespans again sometime in the future.

The End