

Captain's log, stardate 68299.7:

I am pleased to have my first officer and Chief Operations Officer back aboard after their unexpected trip to Starfleet Command on Earth. With the Bellerophon's crew once more complete, we have been assigned to investigate the possible reappearance of the Bespans -- a warrior race who previously attacked Outpost 119 and commandeered an experimental Starfleet vessel.

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"So what do we know about this system?" Commander Tom Paris asked as he took a seat across the desk from the *Bellerophon's* commanding officer, Captain (Carrie) K'danz.

"Unfortunately not a lot," K'danz replied, handing her second in command a padd. "It's in Sector 50116. Initial probe data suggests the fifth planet is class M."

"Any inhabitants?" Paris said, scrolling through the reports.

"We don't know," K'danz answered. "The probe was on approach toward the planet yesterday, but *Home Plate* lost contact. As the data stream was cut, the probe detected a warp signature consistent with the Bespans."

"It's probably too much to hope they were just out for a pleasure cruise," Paris said with a slight grin.

"We can always hope," K'danz answered. "But Major Drake has the Marines on standby just in case."

Space, the Final Frontier...

These are the voyages of the starship *Bellerophon*!

Star Trek: Bellerophon "Molon Labe" By Chris Post

"Why so glum, chum?" asked Jax, the *Bellerophon's* Triexian bartender. A favorite of the crew, he was known for his warm smile and gentle demeanor as well as his flair for mixing drinks with his three arms. "You don't look like a guy who just got a week of shore leave on Earth."

Xin Zhadesh, the *Belle's* Efrosian operations officer, gave a short snort of a laugh and finished his drink. Motioning for another, he sighed.

"I was the first in my Academy class to make Lieutenant (Junior Grade)," he said, his bushy white eyebrows knitting together. "I even made full Lieutenant before some of my classmates got their first promotion to JG."

"That's great," Jax said, a smile spreading across his face. "What's the problem?"

"I had a chance to catch up with some old friends during my leave," Zhadesh said, more to his drink than to the bartender. "And in the time since, they have all caught up with me."

"C'mon buddy. You know it's not a race, right?" Jax said, wiping down a section of the bar while simultaneously toweling a glass.

"It is different for me," Zhadesh said, pausing to take a long pull off his drink. "I was the oldest in my class, 10 years older than some."

"So you've got to make up for lost time?" Jax asked.

"Precisely," Zhadesh said, taking another gulp.

"Listen, mack, it's not my place to tell anyone how to map out a career," Jax said, leaning on one of his three elbows. "But it seems to me that you're in a good place to learn. You're on the front lines and are given chances to prove yourself."

Zhadesh nodded, but said nothing.

"And," Jax added, gesturing with his remaining two hands, "I've been tending bar a long time and I can tell you, every lieutenant feels stuck. It's the make or break rank."

"How so?"

"You've been in what, six maybe seven years?" Jax countered with a question of his own.

"Almost seven years," Zhadesh answered.

"You traveled around, seen some things," Jax said. "Now, around this time, a lot of officers start to wonder if they've done enough. Maybe it's time to cash in their chips and leave the table."

"Leave the table?" Zhadesh asked. "For what?"

"Oh, it varies," Jax said, returning to wiping down the bar. "Some want a family. Others just want to wake up in the same place every day. Whatever it is, they start to question if this is the dance they really want to dance."

"Senior Officers: This is the captain," came the voice of Captain K'danz over the comm system. "Assemble in the main briefing room in five minutes."

"Looks like they're playing your song," Jax said.

* * *

"Long-range scans show that the M-class planet is most likely populated by an intelligent species," Lt Commander T'Var said. The *Belle's* Vulcan chief science officer was standing in front of the display panel which was now showing an array of biometric data. "There is evidence of agricultural irrigation and domestication of flora and fauna."

"And the technology level?" K'danz asked.

"Pre-warp, certainly," T'Var answered. "Probably pre-industrial."

"Okay, so the prime directive is in play," K'danz said. "We don't interfere directly, especially until we determine what the Bespans are up to."

"Speaking of our friends," Commander Paris interjected. "Any sign of them?"

"None," said Major Michael Drake, the *Belle's* ranking Marine and chief of security. Drake stood and took T'Var's place at the display. "From what we can tell, the vessel that destroyed the probe was not the same as the one we encountered previously," he said, bringing up schematics of both ships for comparison. "Analyzing the data we could salvage from the probe's last transmission, it looks like the probe-killer is larger; probably designed for longer missions. We can also expect it to have heavier armaments."

"What about the Bespan technology we've seen before," Paris asked.

"We have to assume they'll have it," Drake said. "Mister Zhadesh and I have been working on counter measures."

"Such as?" K'danz asked.

"As you will recall, the Bespan sphere we encountered at *Starbase 119* blocked comms and was difficult to target," Zhadesh answered. "Because we were not able to study the sphere more closely we cannot stop either effect, but we believe we may be able to create a tetration carrier wave to get transmissions in and out of the affected areas."

"And the targeting problem?" K'danz asked.

"That's a bit trickier," Drake conceded. "It's still a bit shoot from the hip, but we're working on some phaser dispersal options that might improve our odds."

"Won't dispersing the phasers make them ineffective?" Paris asked.

"Against a vessel, yes," Drake answered with a nod. "But the spheres are tiny by comparison. Based on the data we currently have, even a weakened phaser shot will cripple or destroy them."

"How many phaser banks are you planning to modify?" Paris asked.

"Just one," Drake confirmed. "We're still keeping the option to pack a punch."

"Okay," K'danz said, standing from the table. "We're six hours out at present speed. Everyone get some rest and assemble on the bridge at 1700 hours."

* * *

"Third Rihannsu warbird uncloaking 200 meters to starboard," the Andorian ops officer called out.

"On main screen. Helm, come about and execute attack pattern delta seven," Zhadesh said from the captain's chair. "All available power to the forward shields."

"Captain," called out the Bajoran tactical officer. "Phasers are back online."

"Then target them at the new warbird!" Zhadesh ordered. "Fire photon torpedoes full volley, narrow dispersal at the first warbird and see if we can finish it."

Watching the display screen, Zhadesh and a majority of the bridge crew were taken off guard by a sudden and violent jarring that threw them from their posts. A shower of sparks erupted from the engineering station and everyone began to float.

"Ops, report!" Zhadesh called out, hanging onto the captain's chair.

"We've taken a hit," the ops officer replied. "A cloaked Rihannsu scout rammed us between decks ten and eleven. The hull is breeched. Artificial gravity, inertial dampeners and primary life support are all offline."

"Captain, your orders?" called the helmsman, trying desperately to stay at his post.

"Carry out the previous command," Zhadesh reiterated.

After a moment's pause, the helmsman complied with an, "Aye sir," that hinted at a note of disbelief. As the ship made its way through the maneuver, the crew the crew felt the effects. First, gravity returned to something near normal and then began to grow. No longer floating, the crew found themselves being pressed harder and harder against the floor.

"Fire, fire, fire!" Zhadesh called as the warbird's underbelly came into view. "Give them everything you have!"

Straining against the effects of supergravity, Zhadesh kept the viewscreen in his sight long enough to see the warbird explode into space. Then, there was a shaking more violent than before accompanied by a deafening roar.

"Program ended," said the voice of the computer. "Safety level exceeded."

"Computer," Zhadesh said, standing in the now-empty holodeck. "Analysis: what ended the program?"

"As a result of breaches and stress due to high gravity maneuvers, hull integrity was reduced to zero percent."

"Computer: Rate performance of the simulation."

"Primary objective - Rescue crew of *Kobayashi Maru*: Failure. Secondary objective - maintain safety of ship and crew: Failure."

Zhadesh sighed. He had run the simulation more times than he could remember. He had tried diplomacy, guns blazing, and varying combinations of both, but nothing worked. He briefly considered altering the parameters of the simulation, but decided against it. How had Quinton Stone ever managed to win this simulation?

"Paris to Zhadesh," chirped the comm.

"Zhadesh here, go ahead, Commander."

"I'm grabbing a bite to eat in the mess hall before heading to the bridge," Paris replied. "Care to join me?"

"On my way."

Exiting the holodeck, Zhadesh made his way to the officer's mess. Paris was waiting at a table.

"You look spent," the senior officer said. "Didn't you rest?"

"No, I was running a simulation in the holodeck."

"Hunting Mugato again?" Paris asked.

"Not this time," Zhadesh said, shaking his head. "I was attempting to complete the *Kobayashi Maru*."

"The *Kobayashi Maru*?" Paris repeated with a grimace. "That's not a simulation; that's an exercise in frustration. Trust me, once is enough. And I don't know anyone who chooses to go through it after graduating the Academy! Why would you want to put yourself through that?"

"I think my career may be stalling out," Zhadesh said. "I am a 40-year-old lieutenant."

"What?" Paris said incredulously. "Listen, I was in Starfleet, out of Starfleet, back in Starfleet, promoted to lieutenant, demoted to ensign and promoted back to lieutenant all before my career got going."

"I suppose, but my career got off to a fast start and now ... not so much," Zhadesh said with a frown that brought down the corners of his bushy mustache.

"At least you didn't get Harry Kimmed," Paris said.

"What?"

"Poor Harry was ops officer on *Voyager* when we were lost in the Delta Quadrant. Almost seven whole years and never got promoted," Paris explained. "He was an ensign the entire time! Even joked good-naturedly about it once or twice. Took getting back to Earth before he ever saw a new pip." Zhadesh sighed. "Hang in there, Lieutenant," Paris added. "At the rate you're going, you'll still have a command before I do."

Any response Zhadesh might have had was cut off by the sudden bleep of the ship's intercom, followed by the voice of Captain K'danz as she said, "Senior officers to the bridge." Paris quickly forked a few more morsels from his plate into his mouth.

"So much for dinner," he said.

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“Long range scanners are showing two Bespan ships in the system,” K’danz briefed her officers. “Since they destroyed our probe, they’ll most likely be expecting a Starfleet response, so I don’t think we’ll surprise them.”

“Any back-up on the way?” Drake asked from the tactical station.

“*Besiege* is rerouting, but won’t be here for at least ten hours,” K’danz said. “No one else is even close.”

“‘Explore the frontier,’ they said. ‘Seek out new worlds and new civilizations,’” Paris said with irony.

“Look, Tom, I know it’s not ideal, but if anyone should know that an Intrepid class ship can hold its own, it should be you,” K’danz remarked.

“So, what are our orders?” Drake asked.

“We are to investigate the destruction of the Federation probe and report back on Bespan activities in the area,” K’danz said, quoting almost word-for-word the instructions from *Home Plate*.

“And what are supposed to do about the Bespans?” Paris asked.

“We are to convey the Federation’s eagerness in opening formal diplomatic relations.”

“Based on our previous encounters, how well do you suppose that will go?” Drake asked.

“Probably not as well as we’d like,” K’danz said. “But the last thing Starfleet needs is another war in the Typhon Sector.”

* * *

“The spheres are seriously hindering our sensor abilities,” T’Var reported. The *Belle*’s chief science officer was working intently at her station. There was almost a note of frustration in the Vulcan’s voice. “Ops, what can you do to compensate?”

“My first option would be to destroy the spheres,” Lieutenant Xin Zhadesh said, raising his bushy Efrosian eyebrows. “However, I believe that might be seen as a provocation.”

“Yes,” K’danz said flatly. “It would.”

“As it is, I can tell that there are settlements, signs of agriculture and basic infrastructure,” T’Var said. “Technology appears to be on a level equivalent with Earth’s Roman Empire.”

“Anything to support the Bespan claims that this is one of their colonies?” K’danz asked.

“The technological level is highly inconsistent, but there is nothing to disprove the claim,” T’Var reported.

“Incoming hail from the Bespans,” Zhadesh reported.

“On screen,” K’danz said.

“Your time is up, Captain,” said the Bespan captain almost as soon as he appeared on the viewer. He appeared middle aged, having the characteristic blue skin with red markings on the sides of his head. The single crested ridge that ran along the top of his head seemed to K’danz to be a little taller than those of the other Bespans she had encountered. “We have been generous in allowing you to remain this long.”

“Captain Reeviak,” K’danz began, making sure to roll the R in the way the Bespan had upon their opening communications an hour earlier. “Thank you for allowing us to map this system, but we would like very much to speak with your colonists. It is our hope to establish a trade partnership with them.”

“Out of the question,” Reeviak responded quickly. “We do not do business with thieves. You have one minute to plot your course out of the system.”

The screen went black and K’danz turned to Zhadesh.

“To Hell with it,” she said. “Zhadesh, rig the communications and send a message to the surface. Helm, come about for a course back toward *Home Plate*, but do it ... slowly.”

“Captain, there is very little chance anyone on the surface will receive the message,” T’Var interjected.

At almost the same instant, Zhadesh exclaimed, “Incoming message, audio only, from the planet!”

“Let’s hear it,” K’danz ordered.

“Federation vessel *Bellerophon*, this is Tarocles, listener of the planet Sheltana. We are under siege and require assistance.”

“Well,” said Paris. “That changes things.”

* * *

“There will be no accord,” Reeveik said angrily. “This system has been claimed by conquest and is now part of the Bespan Commonwealth.”

“Conquest?” K’danz retorted. “These people have no starships. They have no means to defend themselves against your forces.”

“Do you wish to fight as their champion, Captain?” Reeveik asked, moving close to his transmitter so that his menacing face filled the *Belle*’s main viewer.

“No,” K’danz said, taking a tone something akin to a parent explaining something to a child for the third time. “The Federation Starfleet are emissaries of peace. We seek to resolve conflicts without bloodshed.”

“But you are armed,” Reeveik said with a sneer. “Your Federation is as full of liars as it is of thieves.”

“Your taunts are not going to provoke me, Captain Reeveik. Contact your superiors and consider my offer to broker a peaceful arrangement between your people and the Sheltanans,” K’danz said before motioning for Zhadesh to cut the transmission.

“Major Drake,” K’danz said, turning to the face the tactical station. “How do we stack up against the ships?”

“They’re heavy cruisers,” Drake replied. “They’re armed with plasma charged railguns and missiles. One on one, they’d be no match for the *Belle*. But they appear to be agile and, in tandem, they could likely get in close and do some damage.”

“Captain, if I might add,” Zhadesh broke in. “I’m detecting levels of contained radiation that would indicate their missiles carry nuclear payloads. They don’t pose a significant risk to us, but directed at the planet, they would be devastating.”

“How far out is the *Besiege*?” K’danz asked.

“Five hours, based on last reported position,” Zhadesh answered, adding, “New transmission from the planet.”

“Federation vessel, this is Planetary Governor Acterion. On behalf of my people, I formally request your protection from the Bespan menace.”

“Governor Acterion, we are currently trying to reach a peaceful resolution with the Bespan captain, I will keep you apprised of our progress.”

“Captain,” Zhadesh said, urgently. “The Bespans are attempting to target lock our ship.”

“All hands, red alert!” Paris called out.

* * *

“Status report!” K’danz called out from the captain’s chair.

“Shields are holding at seventy-five percent,” Drake reported. “That last missile caught us broadside. I can’t get a good angle of attack with either phasers or torpedoes.”

“We need another ship to split them up,” K’danz said. “How far out is the *Besiege* now?”

“I have contacted Captain MacLeod. He reports they have pushed to maximum warp, but are still more than two hours away,” Zhadesh said. “There may, however, be another option.”

“The *Flyer*!” Paris said, turning from the position he had taken at the helm.

“The *Flyer*?!” Drake asked, shaking his head. “It’s a fine shuttle, but she doesn’t have much in the way of firepower.”

“She doesn’t have to fire a shot to run interference,” Paris said. “I could strafe and pull one of the cruisers away. It would give Major Drake a chance to lock and fire.”

“It’s too risky, Tom,” K’danz said. “Besides, with Commander Hickham injured and in sickbay, I need you here to pilot the *Belle*.”

“Captain,” Zhadesh said. “It is the best chance we have. Let me take the *Flyer* out with a copilot.”

“Very well,” K’danz said. “But you had better bring Tom’s baby back in one piece.”

“Understood,” Zhadesh said with a nod toward Paris, before he turned and headed toward the turbolift. “Bridge to Ensign Li. Report to shuttlebay one.”

* * *

"I'm synchronizing to the *Belle's* shields so we will pass right through," Zhadesh said as the shuttlebay door began to open. "Take us out straight and fast."

"Then what?" Ensign Sang Li asked, surprising Zhadesh with his level of calm.

"Are you familiar with shuttle maneuver known as Mercury's Lance?" Zhadesh asked.

"Yes," said Li with a smile.

"Have you ever witnessed it inverted?"

"No, but it sounds like a hell of a ride," Li replied as the *Flyer* shot from the shuttlebay.

* * *

"*Flyer* is away," T'Var said from the ops station.

"Okay, Tom, give them room to do their thing, but be ready to position a shot for Major Drake," K'danz said.

Watching the little vessel, modeled after Paris's own design for the *Delta Flyer*, the bridge crew seemed to draw a collective gasp.

"I thought they were going to strafe the Bespans, not fly up their nose!" Drake exclaimed.

As the *Flyer* approached the larger ship, Li began to execute Mercury's Lance. The vessel swept back and forth in a fast arc from left to right, hampering the Bespan efforts to target the craft with their railguns. The *Flyer* then veered hard right before spiraling counterclockwise to the left, up and over the cruiser's main bridge.

The cruiser, either attempting to follow the shuttle or avoid a collision with it, banked to its right and down. The movement created the opportunity Drake had been waiting for. A volley of photon torpedoes and a solid blast from the *Belle's* phasers raked across the Bespan ship. In seconds, the ship was in a slow tumble through space as atmosphere vented through hull breaches.

"Captain, the Bespan vessel has an uncontrolled plasma fire in its weapons hold," T'Var reported. "There is very little time before a fatal detonation. I advise we move away."

"What about the other cruiser?" K'danz asked.

"It is already powering up its warp drive," T'Var replied.

"Get us clear and tell the *Flyer* to return to the shuttlebay," K'danz ordered. Moments later the wounded Bespan cruiser exploded in an impressive display.

"Scan for survivors," K'danz ordered, her eyes moving back and forth across the main display screen.

"None detected," T'Var said. "It appears all hands were lost."

K'danz sighed. It did not have to come to this. Who were these Bespans? And why did they want to fight?

"*Flyer* is aboard," T'Var reported.

"Good," K'danz said. "Now knock out those jamming spheres and let's beam down to meet our new friends."

* * *

Captain's log, supplemental:

We have found the Sheltanans to be a peaceful and hospitable people. They claim to be a remnant colony of a space faring people known as the Jovians who colonized this area of the galaxy centuries ago before mysteriously vanishing. The Sheltanans have lived (with the exception of their Listeners) for a millennium without contact from other races and have settled into a comfortable low-tech lifestyle. The Listeners are the keepers of the Sheltanans last remaining advanced technology: an ancient communication array which they use to pick up transmissions from across the sector. As it so happens, the Listeners were aware of us long before we knew of them. Their primary request is to be left in peace and I will make a recommendation to do just that to Starfleet Command, with the suggestion the system be quarantined with marker buoys. My concern, however, is that the Bespans will return with revenge in mind.

Captain K'danz was interrupted from her log by the chirp of her ready room's door chime. "Come," she called out.

Lieutenant Xin Zhadesh entered, standing at attention in front of her desk.

"You wanted to see me, Captain?" he asked.

"Yes," K'danz answered. "Those were some unorthodox tactics you employed out there. Care to explain?"

"There is a principle in Ch'Vashrek that essentially says 'Strike for the face.' You either get your opponent to duck... or you actually hit them in the face."

"Yes, but in this case, you'd have been hitting them in the face with your face," K'danz said.

"That is why I had Ensign Li perform the maneuver inverted," Zhadesh replied. "It allowed us a moment or two adjust our flight path based on the Bespan's response."

"You must have a lot of faith in Mister Li's abilities," K'danz mused.

"I do," Zhadesh said confidently. "In fact, I would like to recommend Ensign Li for a commendation. He showed not only skill, but courage and an unwavering dedication to his duty."

"I agree," K'danz said. "Actually, I already submitted my own recommendations to Starfleet, and I just heard back from the Admiral."

"Good news, I hope."

"Mister Li will be awarded the Golden Nova Medal," K'danz said. "The Admiral, however, had something different in mind for you."

Zhadesh stood silent with a puzzled look on his face as K'danz rose from her seat and came around her desk. Stepping up to Zhadesh, K'danz produced the black-centered pip that signified the Efrosian's promotion to Lieutenant Commander.

"You've earned this Xin, and have shown you are capable of the responsibilities that go along with it," K'danz said, pinning the pip on Zhadesh's uniform. "Now, report to shuttle bay one; Commander Paris wants to discuss some upgrades to the *Typhon Flyer* with you."

The End