



GHOST SHIP

By Nathan Warner 2019©

“What can you tell me?” Captain Benjamin Whittaker leaned over the ops console on the bridge of the *U.S.S. Ardent* as Lt. Bajel interrogated his display.

“In a moment...Sir,” Bajel replied distractedly, trying to push the sensors through the radiation interference. Whittaker took the moment to glance back at the screen. Outside the warm confines of the *Defiant*-class starship, he could see the mysterious *Galaxy*-class saucer still floating dark and lifeless, shrouded in the mist and shadows of the Kingpin Nebula—a dense veil of stellar gasses caused by the supernova of SS1 several thousand years ago. It had left behind its dense neutron core—the Kingpin Pulsar, or “Old Spooky,” “Specter Stokes,” and “Ghoul's Gate” as it had come to be known by the occasional freighter captain out here in the Nomad Straits. The region had a reputation for being haunted, if you went by the stories they spread at distant ports.

For the last few weeks, Captain Whittaker had been on patrol, hunting Bolian pirates along nearby trade routes when he got the itch to check out this pulsar nebula blinking at him through the viewscreen. As they neared the nebula, they had detected a tritanium signature just a few thousand kilometers inside the nebula. Pushing the *Ardent* easily into the stellar gases, it wasn't long before they found the remains of the Federation starship, which they were currently trying to identify. The bridge lit up as the pulsar flashed them, blinding everyone for a moment.

Whittaker had thought the star was bright before, but now he had some lingering trouble adjusting his eyes back to the bridge lighting. Every ten seconds or so, the star's powerful gamma ray beams lit through this part of the nebula like a lighthouse, creating an eerie and foreboding effect in the fog of stellar material. "Like lightning," Whittaker muttered to himself.

"Sir?" Bajel looked up from his console, but then seemed to forget his own question and jumped right in. "Okay, the sensors were having trouble cutting through the unique properties of the nebula," he said, scratching at the back of his head, "But I think I've cut through the interference."

Captain Whittaker waited for an explanation of what he was seeing outside, but it never came. "And?" he asked.

Bajel had cocked his head slightly, as if listening for something, but then turned back to his instruments. "Uh...We're looking at the *U.S.S. Initiative*," he continued, "or at least what is left of it. It was a *Galaxy*-class ship that went missing in 2366—almost 10 years ago—while on a survey mission of the Bardem Asteroids." Whittaker straightened and stroked his beard.

"Initiative, Initiative," he muttered, running the name through his memories. "Oh, yes, I remember! It was under command of Captain Julian Sanders, as I recall. I think it was commissioned to push out our exploration of the Alpha Quadrant's frontier, past Bolian space."

Bajel wasn't listening, at least not to the Captain. He thought he'd heard that cry for help again. He slowly pulled himself back to his duties and realized the Captain was staring quizzically at him.

"Something wrong, Lt.?" he asked.

"Uh, no," Bajel shifted in his seat uncomfortably, "I just thought I heard something, that's all." He turned back to his display and continued, "There doesn't seem to be any damage to the hull, and life-support seems to be operational."

"Any life-signs?" Whittaker asked.

Bajel frowned. "I...I can't pinpoint anything, but I'm getting some odd fluctuating readings on that count," he said.

Whittaker looked at the console himself. "Hmm," he nodded, "I see what you mean." Life sign readings were fading in and out and jumping all over the place like faint static on an old 20th century TV. "Must be interference from the pulsar," he concluded, "If there are survivors, we have to mount a rescue. Can we beam over?" This question was directed at his Vulcan science officer, Lt. T-Larun.

"It is possible," she replied evenly without turning from her science station. "However, we would need to carefully time the transport so we are not caught in transmission when the gamma ray beam sweeps through this region of the nebula."

"A wise precaution," Whittaker said with a sly smile. "Wouldn't want to add myself to the nebula, now would I?" He was stroking his beard like he was trying to

wipe the caution out of his white hair. “Let’s do it,” he said. “Bajel, T-Larun - you’re with me.”

Bajel always found beam-overs uncomfortable, especially to derelict or damaged ships—you never knew what to expect. He’d heard of some really bad experiences from friends back at Starbase 203, where the *Ardent* was based. So, it was an immense relief when they materialized safely on the bridge of the *Initiative*, all limbs accounted for. He checked the air with his tricorder and nodded that it was safe to breathe, removing his own respirator only after the Captain and T-Larun had done so. The bridge was empty and dark, except for their hand beacons scanning across the empty seats and consoles. Yet, there was an eerie light from the viewscreen, which was somehow still on. Bajel had taken a few steps towards the science stations when, suddenly, the bridge lit up like day and black shapes clutched around his feet.

“Whoa!” he gasped, spinning around, only to be plunged into darkness again.

“What’s wrong, Lieutenant?” T-Larun asked, and then added almost sardonically, “Did you forget we are in proximity to a pulsar?”

The pulsar, of course! Bajel thought—it’s light had flashed into the bridge through the viewscreen. He desperately tried to calm his racing heart. “Can we get the lights on in here?” he asked weakly, trying to massage the tension from his throat. T-Larun checked the Engineering consoles behind the archway.

“It seems the reactors are locked into life-support only,” she said, “And we can’t seem to access any other systems.” Whittaker nodded.

“Why don’t you head to the Main Shuttle Bay and see if there are any shuttles missing,” he said. “I’ll stay on the bridge and keep trying to access the ship’s logs. Bajel, I want you to go down to Sickbay and see if there’s any sign of the crew.”

Great, Bajel thought, I get the creepy doctor’s lair. He nodded to his captain uneasily and headed to the turbolift. The doors didn’t open.

“Oh, right,” he muttered, remembering that most systems were offline. He found the Jefferies Tube and started his descent to deck 12, wishing he’d been assigned the shuttle duty.

It had to be one of the creepiest things he’d ever done, climbing down the rungs in the dark, lit only by his flashlight, but in a few minutes, he was standing on deck 12 leaning out cautiously into the black corridor. A quick glance up and down the hallway confirmed all was quiet. *Too quiet!* he thought, missing the soothing hum of the ship’s subsystems. He shivered and tried to shake off the feeling he was being watched. Something about the ship really unnerved him.

He felt like he wasn’t alone. Someone was here. Very cautiously, he stepped forward into the corridor and then stopped in surprise. The air felt suddenly chill—like he’d felt once when there was a refrigerant leak on a Bolian mining vessel. Instinctively, Bajel rubbed his arms

and then cupped his hands to blow warm air on them, which caused him to glance down at the deck. He stepped back in shock as ice crystals had appeared, growing along the corridor toward him. In short rapid puffs, his panicking breath had become visible. *Okay, calm down*, he thought, *It's just the environmental systems going haywire*. That's when he heard the sounds. Voices! Someone was speaking just around the corner of the corridor.

"Hello, anyone there?" he called, "This is Lt. Pi Bajel of the *U.S.S. Ardent*." He listened for a reply, but the voices had stopped. Pulling out his tricorder, he scanned ahead, but it read only empty corridors. He took a cautious step forward. Nothing happened. He took a few more steps, pressing up against the corridor to see as much as he could around the bend.

Suddenly, from behind him, he heard a rustling sound, like someone was rushing up to pounce on him. Before he could turn around, he was struck hard, flying into the bulkhead and crumpling to the ground. His beacon went spinning to the deck, flashing across the walls like the pulsar outside. It briefly reflected off something moving away—something red and black—but only for a microsecond before clattering to rest facing him, blinding his eyes. Bajel scrambled toward his flashlight, and as he did so, he had the vague sense that someone was moving away from him down the corridor. He beamed the light down the curving hallway, but there was no sign of anyone.

“Hello?” he called, faintly. The returning silence was deafening, and as he climbed off the deck, he could hear every crinkle of his uniform straightening. At his feet, he found his tricorder, still beeping away in scanning mode. He bent down to pick it up and when he came up, he dropped it in surprise—a young girl in a pink dress was standing in front of him with a frightened expression on her face. Bajel stumbled back a few feet from the initial shock, but once he grasped the situation, he instinctively bent down to comfort the girl.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. As he reached out to reassure her, the girl shrieked in terror, turning on her heels and fleeing down the corridor, disappearing around the bend. Bajel was so startled that it took him a moment to gather his senses and pursue the girl, but she was nowhere in sight, and there were too many places she could have gone. He lifted his tricorder and scanned the area. Nothing. Bajel was pretty shaken. “There’s a reason I hate away missions!” he shivered.

He checked the tricorder logs and found that for brief moments, faint life-signs had registered during his recent encounters. He ran a quick diagnostic, but the timestamps remained.

“What the...?” He mumbled and tapped his communicator, “Bajel to T-Larun, are you getting any weird life-sign readings?” The line was dead. “Bajel to Whittaker? Bajel to Ardent?” he called a little more desperately. Nothing. “Great!” he muttered. Very cautiously, he pressed on.

But he had only gone a few feet when, suddenly, something gripped his left arm and a loud voice practically yelled in his ear, “Look out behind you, Mark!” Bajel hadn’t heard anyone come up behind him, and he twisted around in panic. There, standing only a few feet away, a Starfleet officer motioned with a look of fear and anguish on his face, pointing down the corridor behind Bajel. Bajel stumbled and fell backward. His heart was pounding like an overloading warp core. He was passing out! With all his strength, he pushed his senses back to the surface just long enough to realize the officer was pointing behind him. He spun around and scrambled backwards, half expecting to see a Borg drone or a Gorn mercenary, but his light showed nothing. He peered cautiously forward but the corridor was empty and there was no sign of any “Mark,” either. “What’s the matter, Sir...” he started asking, turning to the officer behind him. He stood dumbstruck. The officer was gone.

Bajel was out of his mind, and to make matters worse, his left arm felt suddenly cold and oddly weak. He put his hand into the light and gasped. The edges of his fingers looked dissolved, faded, fuzzy – frantically, he pulled up his sleeve to see his arm also looked like it had shrunk.

“No, no, no...” he gasped, “What is this!” He tapped his communicator. “Come on, come on!” he grunted, but there was no connection. He glanced ahead. Sickbay was only around the bend! He staggered madly forward until he found the closed doors of the medical bay.

He smashed into them, clawing wildly at the seam. With adrenaline pouring through his heart, it only took a few seconds for him to pry the doors open—he staggered in and stopped dead in his tracks.

In the center of the room, a dark shape was bent over a table. It seemed to be muttering or moaning something as it rocked in and out of the ghostly shadows. With a sort of morbid curiosity, Bajel was transfixed, and without realizing he was doing it, his fingers widened the beam on his flashlight. The sinister figure slowly revealed itself, until in a moment, Bajel realized it was the chief medical officer bending over an operating table in the dark, doing surgery. That didn't seem to calm his panic, and it only grew as he noticed the body. On the operating table, someone was lying motionless – their skin and tissues appeared to be partially dissolved.

At that moment, the doctor turned around and her eyes seemed to meet Bajel, but without saying anything, she took her mask off and rubbed her temple between her long black bangs. “If only I had discovered it earlier!” she exclaimed bitterly, throwing her implement at the wall behind Bajel before entering her office. Bajel didn't even flinch. He was transfixed by the body on the table, and then glanced to his own arm. Was this the same thing? His skin and muscle tissue on his hand seemed to be dissolving and he could see his tendons gleaming in the light of his beacon. A chill numbness had been spreading through his left side—tingling along towards his heart cell by cell. His leg was losing strength.

“Doctor!” he cried, staggering into her office, “I need some help!” But to his shock, the office was empty. He glanced frantically under the table, but no one was there. His arm went completely numb and his left foot crumpled as he staggered hysterically back out into the main room, trying to keep his balance. The body was still on the table, and Bajel was drawn, almost against his will, to the operating table. In horror he bent over and looked down into what was left of the man’s face—all the edges had been softened and were fading out into a sort of scintillating fuzziness and then into nothing. It was bone and tissue, nothing more! At the sight, Bajel’s terror came up, and he vomited his consciousness on the floor, collapsing in a heap, fading out.

Suddenly, behind him, the doors opened. He dared not turn around – not that he had the strength to do so – but before just before his heart gave out, T-Larun stooped beside him and picked him up.

“Your communicator appears to be damaged,” she said calmly, tapping her own, “T-Larun to *Ardent*, two to beam out.” Almost instantly, Bajel felt himself pass into pure energy and for a brief moment, felt like he was being sucked towards somewhere or pulled into some other state, but then he felt its grip release, and he knew nothing more.

A few days later, Bajel woke up in Sickbay. He had just enough time to check that his arm was still attached and looking normal before Captain Whittaker and T-Larun entered from the corridor and approached his bed.

“How are you doing, Lt.?” the Captain asked. Bajel held up his fully healed arm.

“Better, now that I’ve seen this!” he said weakly. Just then, Dr. Gamros turned from a nearby console and noticed the visitors for the first time. He quickly moved between Bajel and his visitors, shaking his Andorian antennas disapprovingly at them.

“The patient needs rest!” he said. Bajel motioned to the Doctor. “And...I’ll get it,” he muttered, “But first... answers, please.” T-Larun stepped up to the bed.

“We were able to recover the *Initiative’s* logs,” she said, “and from what we’ve reviewed, it appears that the Kingpin Nebula also attracted the attention of Captain Sanders.” She paused, as if to let her estimation of human folly settle into Captain Whittaker’s ear before continuing. “Sanders took the ship into the stellar cloud to take measurements of the pulsar. The maximum velocity their deflector could handle in the lighter extremities of the nebula was warp one, but within only a few minutes of entering it, they experienced an unexplained warp core breach. Captain Sanders separated the ship to save the crew, but the Drive section was destroyed. No lives were lost, but as the Saucer started back out under full impulse, the crew began coming down with ‘unusual’ symptoms.”

Bajel held his arm up. “They started turning fuzzy...didn’t they?” he asked, still feeling the effects from the doctor’s last hypospray.

T-Larun reluctantly nodded, not approving of his unscientific terminology. “More accurately, they were

undergoing a form of matter-to-energy transformation,” she said, “And we’ve been able to isolate the source—a strange form of energy in the nebula that appears to disassemble biological material on the atomic level, transforming it into energy itself.”

“Right,” Bajel interrupted, “kind of fuzzy...like a transporter?”

T-Larun again nodded reluctantly. “In a crude manner of speaking,” she said, “but like your analogy, it appears the crew was slowly ‘transported’ right out of corporeal existence before they could exit the nebula. Their energy patterns were trapped to float around inside the ship. But the most fascinating aspect of the phenomenon is that whenever the Kingpin Pulsar’s gamma beam sweeps through the nebula, the biological energy is re-materialized into previous patterns – almost manifesting as ‘memories’ of the actions that the biological matter once performed.”

“You mean people,” Bajel corrected, repeating it to fill the awkward. “You meant people...not biological matter.”

Captain Whittaker stepped up. “Yes, that’s what she meant,” he interjected sympathetically, nudging T-Larun aside a little, “And so, it would seem that what we experienced over there were like ‘memories’ of the crew physically manifesting themselves – almost ghosts of their former selves – popping up in places they had been, doing things they had done, whenever the Pulsar illuminated the ship.”

Bajel nodded weakly. "Can they be rescued?" he asked.

Whittaker shook his head. "No, I'm afraid not," he said sadly, "We barely escaped ourselves as the same symptoms began manifesting on the *Ardent*, but we managed to warp out of the nebula just in time before the damage to the crew was permanent."

Bajel tried to sit up, but Dr. Gamros instantly appeared beside him, twitching his Andorian antennae disapprovingly. "Stay down!" he growled, pressing Bajel firmly back into his bed. "You will stay down, or I will make you stay down," he said, as if daring Bajel to make a move. He seemed genuinely disappointed when Bajel didn't try, and his antennae slowly relaxed.

Only after he'd moved on to another patient did the Captain take a breath. "I'm not afraid to admit it," he muttered, "but he scares me!" T-Larun didn't disagree, which was telling.

"What will happen now?" Bajel asked, returning their thoughts back to the *Initiative*.

T-Larun straightened. "Until Starfleet is able to safely recover the ship, we have placed a locator beacon on the hull," she said. "In addition, we spent the last two days anchoring half a dozen warning buoys around the supernova's perimeter, designating it a space hazard. Suffice it to say, some of the brightest scientific minds in Starfleet will be visiting this phenomenon for years to glean its data."

Bajel sighed, *Trust a Vulcan to drift from the heart of the matter*, he thought. “What about the crew?” he asked with a little exasperation.

Whittaker nodded, understandably. “Starfleet is preparing a memorial marker and a memorial service for the *Initiative*’s crew to mark this tragedy,” he said, “The service will be held on the *U.S.S. Burbank* when it arrives with the families of the dead officers next week.”

“I should like to attend,” Bajel whispered.

“We will all be in attendance,” Whittaker said calmly. Bajel was beginning to feel exhaustion creep up on him. But before he passed back into sleep, he turned to his captain.

“Next time there’s an away mission to a ghost ship can I please just realign the deflector or polish your golf trophies?” Whittaker smiled.

“I think my trophies could use a good polish,” he said, but before he finished, Bajel was snoring, and Whittaker quietly retreated from sickbay with T-Larun to let the lieutenant continue his recovery under the overprotective watch of Dr. Gamros.