

Eve of Destruction

(Part One)

“Captain’s log, stardate 56449.1. The Athena is now heading back to the Federation, leaving Arosian space, or what used to be Arosian space. The fate of the Clements and its crew has been determined and in my judgement, their fate should remain as Captain Edmund Rice and his crew had decided it to be, because their fate is our history and who are we to judge which history is better? With our mission complete, we are heading home, but have not yet shifted our engines into chronometric displacement mode, as we are conducting one last survey of this space. Afterall, that was the mission of the Clements, and there is still much to learn from the wreckage of the Arosian Empire.”

It was not quite oh-eight hundred hours yet, when the third shift would hand off to the first shift, and Captain Leonard Thorpe of the United Federation of Planets starship *Athena* was in the deck two duty lounge having a late breakfast, when he was joined by his first officer, Julia Bayanhong. She had friend eggs on toast, which Thorpe thought was an odd selection for her. Then again, breakfast muffins with sausage and scrambled eggs was not exactly a much better choice healthwise.

“Healthy choices, sir?” Bayanhong said, looking at what was on the captain’s plate.

“Is yours much better?” he asked, as he continued to eat his, while sipping on the coffee.

“Occasionally, I like to get away from Ger’s recommendations and have something that actually tastes good.”

“And you don’t feel I’m thinking the same way?”

Bayanhong just smiled, as she dug into the fried eggs and toast, thick so-called “Texas” slices with Omicron Ceti IV eggs and seasoned with pepper from Andor and a little of the spice from Exoneration. She tried to have this more often than perhaps Dr. Psakolaps would have liked, but those Omicron Ceti IV eggs were actually low in “bad” cholesterol and high in the “good” variety. On top

of that, her breakfast tasted good too. She took a sip of the tea, and then said, "But I can imagine that you're having what you're having because of what's on your mind."

"And what do you think is on my mind?"

"What you're going to stay to Starfleet Command when we get home."

"Well," Thorpe sighed, "I do owe them an explanation. I doubt that any of those that sent us on the mission expected this kind of outcome, that the disappearance of the *Clements*, and the fact that Captain Rice basically disobeyed standing orders and Starfleet procedures, was in fact in the historical record as we know it and we should not change it. Changing history is not without risks."

"But don't you get the feeling sometimes that the history we know is in fact altered history?"

"And history has been altered countless times before," the captain pointed out. "Ever since the universe created equations where the time variable could be manipulated, history can be and has been altered. We could almost pick and choose our history, and I would take this one."

"Because it's the most comfortable for us?"

"Because it is the most familiar to us," Thorpe said, a forkful of breakfast sausage temporarily parked in front of his mouth. "I mean, the history that we were exposed to has the Arosians winning the war."

"But they could not ultimately win. At some point, *overhimpennyon* would have affected them. They could not keep it back forever. We think of it as a disease, but in reality, it was a biological weapon. The Arosians were doomed."

"And yet, in the history that Starfleet would have wanted us to restore, the Arosian War went badly for us. The Federation, and the other Alpha Quadrant races, would take a beating before that biological weapon finally kicked in and destroyed the Arosians too. What then? Remember, the Arosian War occurred *before* the Bajoran wormhole was rediscovered. If that had been found, and the Dominion realized this and came to our quadrant, the pickings would've been much easier for them. Is *that* the history that Starfleet would've wanted for us?"

"If that was the natural course of history—" Bayanhong started.

But the captain cut her off, saying, "But it is not. It is as non-natural as the history we are most comfortable with, because there is not—and probably cannot be—a truly 'natural' history, not without changing the laws of physics."

"And that's what you're going to tell Starfleet Command?"

"Perhaps. I'm still working on my report."

"And that's why we're still using the engines in the normal mode, and not the chronometric displacement mode?"

"Perhaps." The captain was about to elaborate on what he was thinking, but he heard his commbadge chirp. Tapping it, he said, "Thorpe here."

"TKor, sir," came the response, the flat-sounding voice of their Vulcan intelligence officer, and at this time, the third-shift conn officer. "There is something that the sensors picked up that is possibly of interest."

“What?”

“They picked up the unexpected phenomenon of a star simply winking out of existence.”

“What?”

* * *

Thorpe and Bayanhong made the short trip to the bridge, where the third-shift officers were still at their posts, as their shift still had a few minutes to run. Some of the other first-shift officers were arriving on the bridge as well. T’Kor sat in the captain’s chair, but surrendered it to the captain as he stepped down to the command deck. He did ask, “Now, how exactly does a star disappear?”

Third-shift sensor officer Lieutenant Judy Capullo looked up from her position on the central console, behind the captain’s chair, and explained, “The navigational system picked it up. The navigational scanners were using that particular star, as it is a class G1 star about eight light years away from us at that point, as part of the tracking system. However, the system detected an error when one minute later, the star was not there anymore and the sensors could not find it. A couple of minutes later, it appeared again, but that is only because we’re moving away from it faster than light.”

“A star basically disappeared in one minute?” Thorpe asked.

“Apparently so,” Capullo answered. She called up some displays, using the data in the navigational logs. That showed the stars that were in the vicinity and the ones that the navigational sensors had identified and were tracking through parallax to correlate their actual position to where they should be according to their course. The stars that the system was using, generally G-class or brighter stars within twenty light years, were marked. Two images were displayed and they were identical in all respects except one, one of the stars in the image time-stamped one minute later than the other was missing.

“What would cause that?” Bayanhong asked.

“I don’t know. Perhaps we need to take a closer look?”

Thorpe asked, “Can you get an approximate time at when that appeared to happen and how far from the star we were when it happened?”

“Within one minute, anyway.”

“Determine that, and that would allow us to determine a location where we can stop and let the light from the star’s last moments catch up with us.”

“Okay,” the sensor operator answered.

Moments later, the helm had a location that the *Athena* could head to. By now, first-shift pilot Sanjay Indesakar had taken over the flight control console, and he took the location that Capullo had determined and guided the ship there. During the brief journey to that location, those on the bridge speculated on what might have caused the star to disappear. “I don’t think it was any kind of nova explosion,” Capullo explained. “Other sensors would’ve picked that up. It’s

a G1-class star, and they are not the kind that would be destroyed in a nova explosion.”

Indesakkar suggested, “Maybe somebody closed a Dyson sphere around it.”

Although Thorpe found that suggestion unlikely, he did ask, “What do the mapping probes tell us about that star?”

Capullo already had accessed the information. “The star is only known by its serial number, and no local name is known. It is inside what was known as Arosian space, but does not appear to be associated with them. The system has planets, including one in the inhabitable zone that may be capable of supporting life, but there’s no data on that. The mapping probe did not get too close.”

A short time later, the *Athena* arrived at the location that Capullo had determined would give them another look at the star disappearing. Indesakkar reported, “Dropping out of warp now.” The image of streaking starlight and other artifacts of faster-than-light travel disappeared and the stars settled into their background positions. “Slowing down from thirty-three psol,” the pilot added, “changing ship orientation.” The stars that were visible now slid sideways across the field of view before they settled to a stop again.

“Which one is our disappearing star?” Thorpe asked.

Capullo tapped at the displays on her console and then transferred the image to the main screen. One of the stars that was visible was identified as the star in question, and graphics appeared around it. The mage on the screen was magnified, but still nothing much than a point of light was shown, given that the star was about eight and a half light years away. It appeared as a yellow midsize star, rather similar to Earth’s own sun, most on the bridge knew. The sensor officer continued with her analysis, and said, “A spectral analysis of the starlight shows nothing out of the ordinary, pretty consistent with a class G1 star, and also stable, no abnormal shifts or variations detected.”

“How long?” Bayanhong asked.

“Less than one minute, I estimate,” Capullo answered.

The bridge was mostly silent as that one minute counted down, as those on the bridge were unsure of what they were about to see, or if their observation of the event could lead to a possible cause for it. What happened to that star might be revealed in how the light acted in the final seconds, or even final fractions of a second. There was a rising sense of expectation as the minute counted down and then passed, and the seconds started to count up. Just when Thorpe was thinking that something was not quite right with their calculations or something else, the star simply disappeared from view. One moment it was there and the next, it was gone. The star disappeared so quickly it was like the starlight had been simply shut off.

“What I just saw,” Bayanhong remarked, “is impossible.”

“You’re right,” Thorpe added. “I’m not sure what that could’ve been.”

Capullo said, “This is that final second, slowed down considerably.” The image of the star again appeared on the screen, surrounded by assorted data points, including the time, showing it to the thousands of a second. The image

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played out at roughly fifty thousandths of a second of image per actual second, and in that time, the star stayed annoying stable and unchanging. Then, in the span of four of those fifty thousandths of a second intervals, the light shifted from yellow to orange to a red and a dark red, appearing dimmer each time, until there was nothing but darkness.

"It's like the star collapsed on itself," Bayanhong remarked, "but at a speed that is simply not possible naturally."

"And there's no natural process that would operate at that speed," Capullo added, "or that would cause a star of that size to collapse upon itself regardless of the speed."

"So it must be non-natural," Thorpe finally said. "A star-destroying weapon."

"Even a star-destroying weapon would show some sort of effect. Most would work by causing the star to basically go nova, but even so, star-destroying weapons are more theoretical than actual. The power demands would be incredible, even more so if the star was made to collapse upon itself. Even at this distance, we should be able to detect the power output of such a device. It would be a noticeable fraction of the stellar output."

"So what happened?"

"Unknown."

Bayanhong spoke up, saying, "It's worth a look."

Thorpe replied, "We are witnessing something that occurred eight and a half years ago. Would we still be able to determine what happened?"

"There's no way of knowing without going there."

Thorpe did think about it for a moment. He realized that the ship had no pressing mission to attend to and Starfleet had not ordered them to return to Earth promptly, so they were basically in that "go out there and explore" mode. Their whole point was to explore the unknown and unexpected, and this certainly qualified. He finally said, "Very well. Sanjay, set a course."

"Course laid in," the pilot replied, and to Thorpe, that was not completely unexpected. While they were waiting to see what happened to the star, he had plotted the course to it.

"Then go."

Under Indesakar's guidance, the *Athena* picked up speed again and then made the jump to warp and headed out to that mysterious star. "At our assigned speed," he added, "we'll be there in a day."

During that day, the crew did speculate on what happened to that star, which, Thorpe noted, had acquired the name of Cheshire, named after the cat in "Alice In Wonderland" that somehow managed to disappear behind its smile, or so he had been told. He had never read the book. The star had somehow managed to hide behind what was left, and as the *Athena* got closer, they realized that something did remain of the star. It was now a black hole, retaining the mass of the original G1 star but not emitting much in the way of radiation, beyond what

was generated by dust and debris falling into the event horizon. Data from the mapping probe indicated a conventional arrangement of planets, including three smaller rocky worlds close to the star, including an Earth-sized planet in the inhabitable zone, four gas giants further out and an assortment of rocky and icy leftover worlds in the outer fringes. As the ship got closer, the sensors were able to pick up the outer planets, not so much by reflected light but by how they passed in front of the background stars. Their distances from Cheshire were consistent with the information from the mapping probe, so the orbits of the outer planets were not disturbed by whatever it was that befell the star.

By the time the *Athena* completed its journey to Cheshire, they were no closer to determining what might have happened, beyond a possible mechanism that involved graviton pulses aimed at the centre of the star to greatly increase the pull of gravity in the core, which could cause a sudden collapse, but even the computer simulations that had been generated still implied that if the core collapsed, the outer layers should still expand outwards, blown off by a burst of radiation from the collapsing core. Science officer Grace Brigson explained, "It would take unimaginable amounts of power to cause a star like that to collapse using graviton pulses or subspace disruptions that would be immense, increasing geometrically with the volume covered by it. To do that on the volume the size of a star, so that the outer layers collapse inwards right away too, without being blown off, would be... well, pretty well incalculable. In fact, I would say it was impossible."

Thorpe did have another idea, "But what about the Arosians, and hypermatter? With sufficient hypermatter, could they do it?"

Rodall Dewuchun, the Odonan chief engineer of the *Athena*, was at his console on the bridge, and replied, "Well, perhaps, but that would be a lot of hypermatter, and the amount of negative energy outputted by that would almost equal solar output, with a negative sign in front, and we would have detected that—had we been here eight years ago." The others on the bridge understood what Dewuchun was talking about. Photons were zero-order motons, travelling at the speed of light, and those were what they had detected. Higher-order motons, negative and positive, generated by whatever technology destroyed Cheshire, would have travelled much faster and so would have long past the position that the *Athena* was at when it detected the disappearance of the zero-order motons coming from the star.

As they entered the system, Brigson reported, "The scans indicate that the inner planets are present and are in their orbits. The black hole where Cheshire used to be retains the mass of the original star, so the planets continue in their orbits, but they are dark."

"What about the potentially-inhabitable planet?" Thorpe asked.

"It's a bit larger than Earth, with a thin atmosphere, mostly trace gases, a variety of them. Eight years without a sun meant that the temperature on the surface has dropped to about minus one hundred and seventy, and that temperature is maintained by the heat radiating out of the planet from its molten core

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and so on. It might have had a more substantial atmosphere, but now most of it has frozen out, and the ground is likely covered in frozen carbon dioxide, nitrogen and possibly oxygen. The planet is not a source of non-natural subetheromagnetic radiation, and I'm not reading anything of conventional energy emissions."

Bayanhong said, "We have no idea if there was life, much less sentient life, on that planet."

"I know," Thorpe replied.

Indesakar reported, "Now entering the system, and preparing to drop out of warp."

"Take us closer to Cheshire, and scan for anything that is non-natural, especially close to the black hole."

A few seconds later, Brigson answered, "Nothing out of the ordinary there. I'm just detecting the sort of things that one would naturally find there."

"So what is probability that this is a natural event?" Thorpe asked.

"It would require the discovery of some new aspects of physics that were previously unknown to us, involving gravitonic waves and changes in the gravitational constant that so far, appear impossible naturally."

"But these things are possible non-naturally."

"In theory, but the energy requirements would be immense."

"As speculated."

Brigson remarked, "I don't see what we can learn here about what happened. In all likelihood, nobody was around to see what happened, so it could remain a mystery."

Thorpe added, "But if it was non-natural, then some sort of technology was involved and some people were involved. They could strike again."

"Eight and a half years later?"

"I can't explain it."

"Perhaps," Bayanhong suggested, "We should check out Cheshire II, as perhaps there are clues there."

Brigson retorted, "Now we're grasping at straws."

"We're here and so we might as well take a look," Thorpe remarked, "even if all we can learn is what could happen to a planet when its sun disappears. There are not that many examples of that happening while leaving the planet relatively unscathed" When nobody had any objections, the captain ordered, "Helm, set a course for Cheshire II."

"Course plotted," Indesakar said. "It's on the other side of the primary from our current position, and the space-time deformity around the black hole is making our sensors unreliable. We're not getting any clear sensor data on the second planet."

"That will soon change," Thorpe remarked. "Set the course and take us there."

"Yes, sir."

Given their close proximity to the black hole, even if it was on the small side as far as black holes went, the crew did not risk using the warp engines, so

Indesakar set a course that would take them no faster than thirty-three psol, or thirty-three percent of the speed of light. The course also took them closer to the black hole, which gave them the opportunity to study it and perhaps derive clues on how this black hole formed. The course also took them close to Cheshire I, which was a planet that was smaller than Mercury and which orbited its primary closer than Mercury orbited the sun. Brigson reported, "What is unusual is that Cheshire I shows no unusual radiation or other effects. It was like whatever turned the star into a black hole happened so quickly that no final burst of energy was released. It was like the light was simply turned off."

"Which is consistent with what we saw," Bayanhong replied.

"I know, and I still cannot conceive of any technology that could do it. If such technology existed, that would be a formidable weapon."

Henrietta Vorwoorts, the tactical officer and the fellow crewmember at the central console, asked, "Could the Arosians have developed such technology?"

"I don't know. A lot of the Arosian technology was destroyed at the end of the war. It's hard to say. I'm not exactly sure how they did this, if in fact their technology is responsible."

A couple of minutes later, the *Athena* passed by the black hole, coming to within twelve million kilometres of it. At that distance, the gravity was no more intense than the gravity of the pre-existing star. Brigson did notice the near complete absence of an accretion disk around the black hole, but she did not know if that was significant. Then Cheshire II came within sensor range. With no sunlight, the planet appeared as a dark disk against the background stars, but the initial sensor readings indicated that the surface was covered in the ices from the frozen-out atmosphere. In sunlight, it would have had a high albedo. However, the sensors picked up something much more interesting.

"Captain," the science officer reported, "sensors are picking up installations in orbit around Cheshire II."

"What kind?"

"They appear to be conventional satellites, in low and in geosynchronous orbits. Some of them are fairly large and appear to be orbital stations, with a volume large enough that they were likely occupied at one time."

"Are they active now?"

"No," Brigson reported. "I'm not reading any energy, any activity in any of them, which is not surprising since they appeared to be powered like similar satellites around Earth are powered, by solar power, of which there is none now. Clearly the planet was inhabited by an advanced race once, and no doubt, the destruction of the star also destroyed the civilization here."

Bayanhong asked, "Can you tell by the relics in orbit if this society was close to being warp-capable?"

"No, not really."

Indesakar asked, "Should we go into orbit?"

Thorpe had been thinking about this, and the fact that eight and a half years had passed since the demise of this civilization. The surface of the planet

was uninhabitable now, and the likelihood of survivors was very low. It was always possible that a small number of survivors might have existed underground, but whether they would persist eight and a half year later, especially knowing that there was no hope that their world and their civilization could recover, was another matter entirely. The captain finally said, "Although it is possible that some might have survived the destruction of the star, it is less likely that they are still around."

"Or would have the will to carry on," Bayanhong added.

"That too. Helm, take us into orbit. Brigson, scan the planet and learn what you can, about what was here originally, any clues on what happened, and so on."

"Very well," the science officer replied.

Indesakar added, "Taking us into orbit."

The viewscreen showed nothing under natural light because there was none, as the distant stars provided no usable light. The planet appeared as a black disk against the background stars. Once the *Athena* was in orbit, the crew did what it usually did, a powered orbit that allowed the sensors to map the planet and learn what it could. The map that was produced showed elevations but as far as the system could tell, there was no water, just land covered in ice of various compositions and depths. What were clearly cities were marked, and given that only eight and a half years had passed, and the planet had essentially frozen in place, with much of the infrastructure intact

As the data flowed over the secondary screens, Bayanhong remarked, "I can't really imagine what the inhabitants of this planet must have experienced. The readings show that the star here was simply collapsed into a black hole with little to no destructive effects preceding it. It was like the sun simply vanished one day, plunging the planet into darkness that would never end. The temperature would start to fall, and without the energy driver of the sun, the clouds and the weather would vanish and the sky would be clear. The temperature would drop and keep on dropping, and the people knew that there was nothing that they could do as their lives were ending and their society was dying."

Vorwoorts asked, "But who would do this, and why?"

"It's not the Arosians," Dewuchun remarked. "This was way after their time."

"If this race was pre-warp," Thorpe added, "then what kind of contact with other species did they have, and what would make another species do this to the people of Cheshire II?"

"Cheshirians?" Bayanhong asked.

"Unlikely the name that they gave themselves."

Brigson asked, "Are we going to send down any away teams, perhaps to learn what happened here, and perhaps to learn what kind of society this was?"

"I think the latter would be something assigned to a more specialized archaeology or anthropology ship."

"But we—" What Brigson wanted to say was interrupted by an alert tone

from the console, and she knew immediately what it meant. "Life signs detected."

"What?" Thorpe asked. "Helm, hold our position here."

Indesakur quickly worked the console, and said, "Powered geostationary orbit now."

Brigson entered further commands, and said, "I'm detecting about a hundred and twenty discrete lifeforms that are similar, and a number of smaller ones that are different enough that they are probably animals compared to the sentients. They are in a series of underground chambers about two hundred and fifty metres below the surface. I'm reading low levels of energy, coming from a geothermal source. Otherwise, power levels are minimal, not the kind that could be readily detected from passive sensors."

"Did they detect us, or our signals?" Thorpe asked.

"Unknown."

Bayanhong asked, "Should we contact them? This is a situation where the Prime Directive might not apply because clearly a hundred and twenty survivors are not going to form a viable culture on a planet around a dead star. Given that the star was likely destroyed by another race, they are aware of the existence of aliens."

"And they could think that we're the same race that destroyed their sun," Thorpe added.

"Yes, that's possible."

Once again, the sensor console beeped out an alert tone, with Brigson saying, "Now detecting some power activity in a couple of satellites. I believe we've been scanned."

"Are the satellites showing power any danger to us?" Thorpe asked.

"I'm not reading anything like projectile weapons on them," the science officer reported. "The power source is a small nuclear reactor, much like the power sources used on solar system probes back in the early days of exploration, when the probes to the outer solar system were too distant to use solar power. They cannot possibly generate any kind of power for directed-energy weapons to a level that could harm us. More than likely, our presence might've activated them, or perhaps our scans might have alerted them and they turned on their satellites to get a closer look at us."

Before Bayanhong could again remark on the possibility of contacting the Cheshirians, Vorwoorts suddenly said, "Incoming message, from the surface... text message... in the Preserver code."

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Captain Thorpe asked, "What does the message say?"

Vorwoorts had the computer translate the message from the Preserver code, which was easy to do since the Preserver language was designed to allow one alien language to be translated into another. Vorwoorts was pretty confident that the text in the message was accurate. She read it out, "We are the last of the

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survivors. If you are the destroyers who have come back to our world to complete its destruction, have mercy on us and let our demise be at our own pace. We meant you no harm and do not understand why you had to destroy us.”

“Wow,” Bayanhong remarked. “Imagine being this race, and watching another destroy your world and not being able to do much about it.”

Thorpe said, “Send a response. We are not the race that destroyed your sun. That is not our nature. We did, from a distance, observe the destruction of the star, and we came here to investigate. We mean you no harm.”

Vorwoorts replied, “The message has been translated to the Preserver code and transmitted in an analogue format, similar to what we have received.”

While they waited for a response, Bayanhong asked, “Should we go down and meet the Cheshirians?”

“I’m not sure,” Thorpe replied. “I don’t know if they would want to meet with us. They might have an understandably negative opinion of alien species. The race that did this perhaps had no contact with the Cheshirians, and so their motivation is unknown.”

“But they might have information that could help us figure out what happened here. In addition, if there is only a small number of survivors, the Federation might be able to assist them, to help them relocate. I don’t know if that small number is enough to rebuild a species.”

“Probably not,” Brigson remarked. “The genetic diversity is not there, both in the Cheshirians themselves and all the lifeforms that existed with them. Nothing survived on the planet except in that underground chamber. The biodiversity of the planet cannot be preserved there.”

“But we can’t just leave them.”

“Ultimately,” Thorpe remarked, “the decision on what to do would be up to them. We can offer assistance but they can decide freely on whether to take it or not.”

“Of course.”

Vorwoorts then said, “We’ve received another message. It asks simply, why have we come here?”

Thorpe replied, “Tell them that we are trying to find out who did this, why and how. Ask if a meeting is possible.”

Vorwoorts translated the message from the captain and transmitted it back to the planet. Those on the bridge had to wait now, as the Cheshirians likely had to decide among themselves whether or not to accept the request to meet. They were taking a risk in trusting the crew of the *Athena*, because they had no proof that the Federation officers were not the same that destroyed the sun eight and a half years ago. During the waiting time, the *Athena* officers continued with their scans of the surface, with Brigson in particular seeing how a world could suddenly freeze over without being damaged or destroyed first. As far as she could search, the Federation had not encountered a situation like this before. It was basically unknown for a star system to lose the star without some sort of massive disruption that would be reflected on the inhabited planet as

widespread destruction. That was not what she was seeing here. The world one day simply lost its sun, and so lost the heat and light that drove their planetary systems. The temperature started to fall and there was nothing that the inhabitants could do about it but go home and perish in an orderly fashion. If Brigson fine-tuned the sensors well enough, she probably could find the bodies of the Cheshirians in their homes, probably in their beds, and the most likely cause of death was simply freezing. However, she saw no need to intrude on them in that manner.

After a relatively lengthy delay, Vorwoorts reported, “Another incoming message. They are willing to meet with us, but the problem is that the entrance to their chamber has been sealed by ice and the like and it would be difficult to penetrate.”

“Rodall?” Thorpe asked.

“Our transporters would have no trouble reaching their underground chamber,” the Odonan chief engineer replied.

Thorpe continued, “Inform the locals that we have teleportation technology and can access their location, although that might unnerve them. Also, ask if they can upload their language translation matrix linking it to the Preserver language so that we can program our translation devices and allow more direct communications.”

“Understood,” Vorwoorts replied. “I’ll translate and transmit the message.”

“They really are taking a chance,” Bayanhong admitted.

“Perhaps they have nothing to lose,” added security chief Sal Hakamura. “They already know that their society and their existence is pretty well at an end, and if they could just learn who did this and why, perhaps that is the closure that they need as their end approaches.”

“Perhaps.”

Moments later, Vorwoorts reported, “We’ve received coordinates where we can beam down, and the translation matrix, with the sound values of their language, and the computer is integrating it with our data. We don’t know if the Cheshirians have this sort of translation capability, so we might have to handle both ends of it.”

“That’s nothing new,” Thorpe replied. “Go ahead and program the tri-corder to function as a translator. When ready, we’ll send down an away team of three. Their purpose will be to learn what happened here, and how the star was destroyed, and if there is any clue on who did it and why, and we can also offer the assistance of the Federation in relocating them if they so wish.”

“Understood...”

About an hour later, the away team was ready, and transporter chief Lieutenant Megan Wilder beamed them down to the underground chamber at the coordinates that they were given. The three in the away team were Bayanhong, Brigson and Hakamura, and they were wearing the standard Starfleet uniform

because the temperature in the underground chamber was surprisingly high. They had on the forcefield belts, and they were discretely armed with hand phasers. They did have their tricorders, but were hoping that the devices were not threatening.

When the three rematerialized, they found themselves standing on a metal platform with a wire-mesh floor, and behind them were thick blast doors, which Bayanhong surmised led to the surface, a route that was now filled with ice from various gases. The platform looked down over what she thought was some sort of greenhouse, with lights illuminating a number of glass enclosures that held what appeared to be plants. This was probably how the survivors sustained themselves.

And there were some of the survivors, the Cheshirians themselves, five in all. The first thing that Bayanhong and the others noticed about them was their small size. None stood more than a metre fifty and most were around a metre thirty or less. They were quite slender, and probably weighed no more than thirty-five to forty kilograms. Their skin was a pale green colour, and on the face, the eyes and nose and mouth and ears were all rather small for the scale and were unobtrusive. The visible parts of their skin were hairless. Bayanhong could not tell if there were different genders among those meeting them, or if “genders” as she understood the term even applied to this species. In her mind, the Cheshirians seemed to be children with their height and build, but Bayanhong doubted that was true.

One of the natives, who appeared without any significant feature that would distinguish him—or her—from the others stepped forward, and asked, “Are you able to understand us when we speak? Was the information that we transmitted to you useful?”

“It was,” Bayanhong said, with her words translated for the Cheshirians to hear in their own language. She assumed that they could understand those translated words. They did not seem puzzled—and that assumed she could understand their relatively static faces—so she continued, “I am Julia Bayanhong, from the starship *Athena*. We are from the United Federation of Planets.” She also introduced Brigson and Hakamura to the Cheshirians.

The native who had spoken said, “I am Anak-Ipa, the leader of this group of survivors. We ask a simple question. Why have you come to our world?”

Bayanhong replied, “We are a ship of explorers, from the United Federation of Planets, which is a considerable distance from here. When we travel between the stars, we use certain stars, brighter, stable ones like your sun once was, to help us navigate and determine our position. We noticed that one of the stars disappeared from our instruments, and in a manner we had not observed before. We made the decision to investigate what had happened. That is why we came here.”

“Our star was destroyed by another alien race. We do not know why.”

“Do you know who these aliens were?” Bayanhong asked.

“No. We did not communicate with them, and they never appeared to us.

We had heard stories from centuries earlier about a dangerous race that would destroy any civilization that discovered the means to travel faster than the speed of light, so we did not travel beyond our own planets.”

Brigson remarked, “The Arosians.”

“Undoubtedly,” the first officer replied.

Anak-Ipa asked, “The name you mention... are they the ones that destroyed our sun?”

“No,” Bayanhong replied, again speaking through the translator. “The race that you were hiding from was the Arosians, but the Arosians were destroyed many years before your sun was. There is nothing to suggest that the Arosians did this. It is possible that their technology fell into the possession of another race that might have used it against you. We do not know that.” Bayanhong had come here with two basic questions. One of them, the “who,” had been answered in a sense, but there was another, the “how.” She started, “If you do not know who destroyed your sun, do you know how they did it?”

Anak-Ipa replied, “We do not understand the physics of how they destroyed our sun, except that somehow they tampered with gravity on the scale of a star and caused a star that would not otherwise collapse into a black hole to do so, and to do so without disrupting space beyond the original surface of the star.”

“Which is why your planet survived without damage from the attack, only to freeze with the loss of the light from your sun?”

“Yes. All we really have is information on the mechanism that the alien race used.”

“Can we see that?”

“Could you identify the alien race if you saw the mechanism?”

“I don’t know.”

Anak-Ipa took the Starfleet officers to a lower level of their underground chamber. Bayanhong knew from the sensor readings that approximately a hundred and twenty Cheshirians lived in this chamber, but other than the original five, they saw no others. Perhaps the others were being kept out of view to protect them, or to prevent them from being scared by the presence of aliens. It made her wonder why these five were not scared of the away team. Perhaps they had been selected and prepared to handle any meeting with aliens.

The lower level looked to be some sort of command centre, as there were display screens and control panels and the rest. It looked like it had been built for some other purpose than the one that it had been put to. The Cheshirians who had accompanied Anak-Ipa operated the controls, and spoke in their language. Some of the words were being translated, so Bayanhong assumed the rest was jargon or names. Finally, Anak-Ipa said to the visitors, “Our instruments in space recorded images of the mechanism from many angles, and the experts were able to develop what the mechanism looked like.” What was on the screen was a fairly detailed three-dimensional rendering of something that Bayanhong had not seen before.

Brigson and Hakamura studied the image too. It was a space vehicle of

some kind, and it was approximately like a four-pointed star, or as Hakamura remarked, “a compass rose one would see on an old-style map. The shape was not solid, as the body formed the outline of the four-pointed star, with gaps in the actual points. A circular hull connected the bases of the points, and in the centre of that was the main body of the vessel, which consisted of a protrusion of tubes and spheres and cubes and a myriad of other shapes, which would do the Borg proud in terms of the convoluted design. The dominant colour of the structure was red. Along the edge of the star points, there was a glowing blue or green light. As the image rotated, the Federation officers saw that the star point hull was actually a double hull, with thick pillars between them, and those pillars seemed studded with various surfaces, emitters and the like. Underneath was a spherical pod that extended a distance below the underside of the vessel, and which had a more smooth and less detailed surface, but unlike the rest of the vessel, there appeared to be lights on it.

Bayanhong asked the science officer, “Do you recognize it? Is it Arosian?”

“I don’t know. There’s only one way to find out.”

Bayanhong knew what that was. They needed to record this image and whatever other information the Cheshirians had on this vessel and then upload it to the *Athena*, where Dewuchun could relay it back to the Odonan Empire with a request to see if information on this particular vessel was in the database on the Arosian Battlesphere, which the Odonans had. That assumed that the Odonans would release the information, and there was also the communications delay. Before she could ask permission to record this data, she was puzzled by one thing. She asked, “How large is this vessel?”

Naturally, the measuring units the Cheshirians had were meaningless to the Starfleet officers, and not even the Preserver code could handle different measuring units, although there were attempts using the Planck length and other universal constants, but they produced approximate answers only. Anak-Ipa tried another approach. He entered some commands and a small secondary object appeared, and though it was something, it was too small to be seen clearly. Anak-Ipa then enlarged that part of the image, until only a small fraction of the alien vessel could be seen, but the image that was added on was now identifiable—as the *Athena*.

“My god,” Hakamura exclaimed. “is that showing the alien ship to scale of the *Athena*?”

“It seems that way,” Bayanhong remarked.

Anak-Ipa reduced the image again so that the whole alien vessel could be seen, and that allowed Brigson to take a scan with her tricorder and compare the relative sizes of the two vessels. She knew that the *Athena* had an overall length of four hundred and thirty-three metres, and using that as the base, got a totally ridiculous figure for the alien vessel. Brigson finally said, “According to the scaling, that ship is about a hundred kilometres in size, from star point to star point.”

“A *hundred* kilometres?” Bayanhong replied.

"If what Anak-Ipa was showing us for the scaling is true, yes, it's that big."

"Could something that large actually travel at warp?"

"I don't know. It might travel the same way that the Battlesphere does, using a wormhole generator. The star points could house similar technology. It's also about three and a half kilometres in height on the star points and upto five in the central section, not including that pod below, which is about a kilometre in diameter."

"And something like that could somehow generate an altered graviton field that could cause a G1-class star to collapse upon itself?"

"It's possible. I'm not sure how, but depending on what exactly we're looking it, it might be capable of generating the necessary energy."

Bayanhong had some other questions. "When this vessel entered your system, did it head for the star right away?"

"Yes," the Cheshirian leader replied.

"And when it arrived at the star, how close did it get?"

Anak-Ipa answered that question with another image, showing the distance from the star to the first two planets, and Bayanhong presumed it was to scale. The position of the alien vessel as marked indicated that it got to within four or five million kilometres of the solar surface, which seemed like a long way out, but it could have moved closer once it deployed its weapon.

Bayanhong then asked, "How long was the vessel in your system before it activated and destroyed the sun?"

"We do not know when the process started, but only when it ended." After some issue trying to sort out the relation between Federation and Cheshirian time units, it seemed to Bayanhong that the alien vessel was in the system for four and a half days before the sun collapsed into a black hole, but until the final moments, the sun was unchanging, and when it did collapse, it did so quickly enough that the entire star collapsed into the singularity, and none was blown off into space.

Brigson remarked, "I would imagine that it would take time to build up enough power, and perhaps study the star and its composition to determine how best to make the weapon work for this particular star, and it might take time to set up the graviton fields so that the entire star would be encompassed. I would not be surprised if there were secondary vessels launched off of this to basically envelop the star. I can't see any method by which the ship alone could do that, even a ship of that size."

"Perhaps." Now the first officer asked Anak-Ipa another question. "After the sun was destroyed, did the alien vessel leave immediately or did it remain?"

"It remained for another period of time, similar to the first." In other words, it stayed in the system for another four and a half days. "Then it left. At no time did it communicate with us."

"I have one more request. We need to make a recording of this information, on this ship, and transmit it back to our ship, where there are others who

can help us identify the ship and perhaps its purpose.”

“You may proceed.”

Bayanhong gestured for Brigson to scan the images with the tricorder and transmit the information back to the *Athena*.

On board the ship, Thorpe and the other bridge officers had their first look at the alien vessel. Brigson was able to transmit sufficient information that the computer on the *Athena* could recreate an accurate three-dimensional rendering. Thorpe was somewhat surprised at the size of the ship, and had the same question that Bayanhong had, “How could something so large actually travel at warp?”

Dewuchun answered, “The power demands would be incredible, but then if such a ship can generate the energy necessary to collapse a G1-class star into a black hole, the power for propulsion would almost be an afterthought.”

Thorpe asked the obvious question, “Is that Arosian?”

“I don’t know,” the chief engineer replied. “I can send a request back to the Odonan Empire and see if there is information in the database on the Battlesphere, but there’s no guarantee that they will answer, and if they do, it could take days.”

“Do it anyway.”

“Very well.”

Back on the surface, Bayanhong was still meeting with the Cheshirians, and was thinking about the other purpose for paying the aliens a visit. Facing Anak-Ipa, she asked, “When your sun was destroyed, you must have realized that your civilization was going to end too. What had been done could not be undone.”

“We know,” the Cheshirian replied. “We knew the alien vessel was in our system, and we tried to communicate with it, but there was no response. We had no idea of what its intention was, but there was panic among the people. Then the sun disappeared and the night became perpetual. The temperature began to drop. All the weather disappeared. Everything froze, and the people started to die.”

“This underground chamber, did you build it after the sun was destroyed?”

“No. It existed for many years before. It was built during the Era of Wars, when we were a more divided people and there was the chance terrible weapons could be used, weapons that could destroy us.” Bayanhong presumed he was referring to nuclear weapons. “The chambers were built for the rulers and those close to them should the terrible weapons we used. When the sun disappeared and we knew what was to happen, people came to the chambers.”

“The rulers and those close to them?”

“And their families and the scientists and those that could grow food and the like. We came here with no idea of why, but we just could not lie down on the surface and freeze to death. Maybe we wanted to find out why the aliens had targeted us like this. Maybe they would come back and we would at least learn why before our existence was extinguished.”

Bayanhong asked, "So this is the only chamber, or did the other side build one too?"

"The other sides did build them too."

"And you do not know if they were occupied or not?"

"We don't know. There's no communication system between them."

Bayanhong could understand that, since the chambers were built by opposing factions in the so-called Era of Wars, which must have been a disastrous period in Cheshirian history. She made a mental note to have the *Athena* scan for the other chambers and more possible survivors, with perhaps Anak-Ipa able to reveal the locations. However, for now, she said, "Your existence does not necessarily have to end. We are from the United Federation of Planets, and we can offer assistance. Now, there's no way to restore your sun, so this planet is now uninhabitable, but we can relocate you to another planet which would be suitable for you, so that you would not have to live out your existence underground like this. Depending on how many other survivors we can find, a viable number might exist so that your civilization might be able to restart on another planet."

"You would do that?"

"That is the nature of the Federation. I mean, my ship itself cannot do this, as that is not its purpose, but we can contact our superiors, and they would send a ship or ships with the right crews that could help you."

"That is a generous offer," Anak-Ipa replied, "but that is not my decision to make. I will mention it to the others, to those who would make this decision."

"I understand. If you know the location of the other chambers, we can scan for them and see if there are other survivors."

"I can do that."

A short time later, on the *Athena*, Indesakar completed the specialized orbit that he had plotted. Given the location of the other underground chambers on Cheshire II, the ship had moved over each one and did scans, and each case, the result was the same, no survivors. In one of the chambers, an away team led by assistant chief engineer Mark DeWillis and chief medical officer Ger Psakolaps had beamed down, to see if the chamber had been occupied or not. They had to go down in environmental suits because the air was not breathable. Shortly after they beamed down, DeWillis reported back to the ship. "There's no sign that this chamber was occupied by survivors after the sun was destroyed. All the signs indicate that this chamber has not been occupied or accessed in a hundred years. Perhaps the locals had forgotten it was here or perhaps they could not access it."

Thorpe replied, "So it seems likely that the only survivors were those in the one chamber."

"It appears that way," Psakolaps replied. "It's possible that other survivors might have attempted to survive, but after eight and a half years, they died out."

"Would those that did survive form a viable population that could expand

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and establish a new civilization on another world?”

“I don’t know. It depends on how much genetic diversity there is in their biology, and how rapid evolution operates. Those are things I don’t know.”

“Very well.”

A short time later, Dewuchun replied, “I have received a response from the Odonan Empire.”

“That was fast.”

“I think we’re closer to home than I anticipated”

“What was in the response?”

Dewuchun looked at the screen, and said, “The Battlesphere contains no information on the particular vessel, so it is possible that it is not Arosian. However, there was information on how the technology might work. The Arosians were working on star-destroying technology, but abandoned it because it seemed like overkill. It took far more resources and energy than seemed practical when there are other ways to destroy a planet. Anyway, the basic idea of the technology is that it is similar to the wormhole generator. The ship is able to develop a graviton modification field, perhaps tunneled into the star through a wormhole or something similar. By basically manipulating the graviton field through higher-order matter, the generator could either reduce the gravitational pull of the star or increases it, at least at the core. As you know, a stable star is in balance, between the outward pressure of the radiation generated by the fusion processes in the core and the inward pressure of the gravity of its mass. If the graviton field is manipulated so that the gravity at the core is increased, the mass of the star would collapse towards the centre, the gravitational force exceeding the light pressure force. Depending on the energy available and the size of the modified graviton field, the collapse could be very sudden. Conversely, reducing the graviton field would cause the outward pressure of the radiation to exceed gravity, and depending on how much energy is made available and the level of disruption, the star would basically go nova. I doubt that the alien ship would use that approach.”

“Why?”

“The resulting nova would surely overwhelm and destroy the ship, because it would happen very quickly and a ship of that mass is not going to accelerate quickly, no matter what propulsion technology it has, even a wormhole generator.”

“I see,” Thorpe answered. “So now we have a possible answer on how this was done, but no information on why.”

“Unless we find where this ship came from, we might never know.”

“Perhaps...”

* * *

Lieutenant Jules Torin, normally the second-shift science officer, arrived on the bridge. He reported, “Captain, I have completed the analysis of possible

other stars that might have disappeared.”

“Analysis?” Thorpe asked, turning to look at the younger man. “I was not aware.”

“It was something that we came up with, as I was thinking about it and Lieutenant Sanchez had this idea. Basically, the only reason that we noticed the disappearance of Cheshire was that we were using that star for navigation. However, we only use a limited number of stars for that purpose, so it is highly possible that other stars have disappeared in this manner but we were not looking for them. Thus, as we orbited the planet, we did a comprehensive sweep of the skies, both for electromagnetic radiation and subetheromagnetic radiation. We compared what we saw with what we should be seeing in both forms of radiation. What we found were that there were other stars that have disappeared.”

“How many?” asked the captain.

“Eight,” Torin answered. “They are for the most part red dwarfs and the like, and are not known for having planets that could hold life.”

“It’s like they were testing the device,” Bayanhong pointed out.

“That was our conclusion too. We also attempted to develop a timeline. From this vantage point, we were attempting to see which direction the alien vessel was moving, by seeing which stars were still visible electromagnetically but not subetheromagnetically, and which stars were not visible by other method and by knowing the distances to them. This is what we saw.” Torin used the controls on the central console to display a graphic on the bridge screen. It showed a star map, with Cheshire at the bottom, and eight other stars were numbered, with some information on them, including the most likely time that the stars were destroyed. The lieutenant explained, “The times are tentative, and we could only get more accurate information by following the course. As you can see, the estimated span of time is about two and a half years, suggesting that the alien vessel is not capable of travelling quickly. Three of the earliest disappeared stars are in close proximity to each other, and we believe that the originating point of the ship is somewhere close to that.” He tapped at the console again, and another star appeared on the screen, close in space to the three earliest disappeared stars. “That is the star system known from Arosian sources as Koreus, but I’m not sure if it is an Arosian world or not.”

“So this could be Arosian technology?” Thorpe asked.

“It’s possible.”

“But the big question is, has there been any stars disappearing since Cheshire disappeared?”

“No. We did searches, and there are no disappearing stars since Cheshire, at least among the stars that we studied, and that is pretty well everything within about five hundred light years of here. We can expand the range.”

While Thorpe was thinking about the issue, Bayanhong said, “If we can’t tell where the alien vessel went, perhaps we can head to where it might’ve come from. Perhaps they returned home.”

“I see,” the captain replied. “We really should find out what is happening

here, and who has this kind of star-destroying technology and why are they using it.”

Bayanhong beamed back down to the lone underground chamber on Cheshire II that had survivors, and met again with Anak-Ipa and several others, although it was Anak-Ipa who was doing the talking. He knew of the plan by the alien ship to scan the rest of the planet for survivors at other similar structures, and so asked, “Did you find the other survivors?”

The first officer replied, “I regret to inform you that our scans, as comprehensive as they can be, reveal no other survivors at the present time. We don’t know if there were other survivors of the initial catastrophe but who could not survive the eight and a half years since.”

“That is unfortunate,” the Cheshirian replied. “That means that we are the only survivors of our kind.”

“Yes.” After a pause, giving Anak-Ipa a chance to absorb the information that he had been given, Bayanhong continued, “The offer for the Federation to help you relocate to another planet where you can live in a more normal environment still stands.”

“Those among us who lead are still talking about it. Some believe that it would be impossible to live on another planet, and that we would die out there anyway, so it would be better to die out here on our own world. Opinions are divided. Some want a chance to live a more normal life, and others accept that as a species, our existence is essentially over. But we recognize that if we are to be relocated, we all must go and be part of it to ensure maximum genetic diversity in whatever future population results.”

“Of course,” Bayanhong replied. “We respect that a decision of this magnitude takes time, but we are preparing to leave the planet.”

“Where are you going?”

“Further analysis by the crew revealed a possible path that the attacker took and a possible origin point. We need to investigate this and find out who did this and why.”

Anak-Ipa thought about that, and then said, “If you are going to go on such a mission, to find out who did this and why, one of us should come along with you.”

“Why?”

“Because this did happen to us, and we deserve to find out why, and understand it ourselves without it being interpreted by you or relayed to us by you.”

“Who would come along?”

“I have interacted with you, and have gotten to know you, so I would be the logical choice. The leadership would have to approve.”

The first officer replied, “And my captain would have to approve as well.” She stepped away from the Cheshirian and tapped her commbadge, saying, “Bayanhong to the *Athena*.”

"*Athena* here," came the response from Vorwoorts.

"Let me talk to the captain."

After a few beeps as the signal was transferred to Thorpe's commbadge, he said, "Thorpe here."

"Sir," Bayanhong started, "The Cheshirians have not yet come to a decision on whether to accept the Federation's offer on relocation. They are still discussing it."

"We need to be leaving the planet and following these leads."

"I know that, and I told them that too. One of them, Anak-Ipa, seeks to join us on this trip, because it was his planet that was destroyed and he and his people deserve to know why."

After a slight delay, Thorpe answered, "Very well, he can come along. You know what to do."

"Of course. Bayanhong out."

A short time later, Anak-Ipa returned and said, "The leadership agreed that I can go along with you on this mission to learn why this happened to us. When do we leave?"

"Shortly," Bayanhong started, "but before we can go, there are two things I will need from you. One is a comprehensive data set on your physiology, and the second are samples of the foods that you eat."

"Why?"

"The physiology data is necessary so that our doctors and our medical staff will know how to treat you should something happen. The food is necessary to get the patterns that our replicators can use to produce food that is useful for you. Because our biology is different from yours, our food is of no benefit for you. You need your own. With a sample of your food, we can replicate what you would find necessary to eat."

"You can replicate food? On your ship, there is no need for growing installations such as the ones here?"

"No. Our replicators work on molecular levels, replicating food molecule for molecule, so it is indistinguishable from real food." That was not strictly true, Bayanhong knew, but for a novice like Anak-Ipa, it was an adequate explanation.

"But what if the replicator system fails, how do you eat?"

"Well, our engineers are talented enough to keep them running and repair them if necessary, but in case of a failure that cannot be recovered, then we can reproduce what you have here and make food that way. That's not likely to happen, though."

"Very well. I will get what you need."

A short time later, Anak-Ipa returned with a storage device and a display screen, and it contained a fairly thorough description on how the Cheshirian physiology worked and the biological basis for it, and they had produced it in the Preserver language, and in a method that allowed the data to be "flashed" to the computer system on the *Athena*, where it could be translated and analyzed and incorporated into the ship's medical databases. The alien also had a box of vari-

ous types of fruits and vegetables and even some basic prepared foods. "Is this what you are requesting?" Anak-Ipa asked.

"Yes, that would be it, a sample of a variety of your food." Bayanhong used her tricorder to scan for anything in the food that could be dangerous, but nothing that was potentially risky was detected. "Good. We can proceed. You are ready for this?"

"This would be an adventure for me," the alien started. "Our people were on the verge of understanding how faster-than-light travel worked. We had determined the basic theory, and we even realized that there could be a way to actually produce the faster-than-light effect, although it was difficult and they did not succeed, even with an unpiloted, unoccupied test vessel. At the time, we understood that there could be aliens, species on other worlds, and we were wondering why we were among the first to discover this power of physics. Then the sun disappeared."

"I see."

"But we were not among the first to develop the method to travel faster than light."

"No, you were not among the first. Many hundreds, if not thousands, of species had discovered this already."

"Such as you and your kind?"

"And we know species that discovered this thousands of years before we did."

"Did they come to your world before you understood the physics?"

Bayanhong answered, "There are many that believe there were visits by aliens to our world before we were fully prepared for the concept, but there is no firm proof of this." After a pause, she added, "We must get going. There is a lot to do."

"I understand. How do we get to your ship? The surface of the planet is uninhabitable and inaccessible."

"We use the transporter. It's essentially a teleportation device."

"How does it work?" Anak-Ipa asked.

The atoms, the subatomic particles in your body, are a combination of wave and particle. The particle component is caused by mass, and mass is caused by the interaction of the particle with the Higgs Field."

"I understand that concept."

"If the mass is taken away, if the interaction with the Higgs Field is blocked, then the particle has no mass and behaves as a wave and moves like a wave, like light. The interactions of the particle with all the others at the molecular and quantum level is retained because those properties are independent of mass. The annular confinement beam is generated between the device and that which is being transported, and it blocks the Higgs Field interaction. The particle becomes a wave and is directed by the annular confinement beam to the other end, and when the beam is switched off, mass returns and the particle is no longer a wave."

“And this works? People are not killed by it?”

“It works and people do not die when it operates normally.”

“And it has no long-term effects on people?”

“Not that we’re aware of.”

“How many times have you used it?”

“Many hundreds of times,” Bayanhong answered.

Anak-Ipa asked, “Does it hurt? Do you feel anything?”

“You might feel a tingling sensation, especially in the extremities. For inexperienced users, it is best to stand as motionless as possible and hold your breath.” The first officer looked at the somewhat shorter alien, and asked, “Are you ready?”

“Yes,” Anak-Ipa said, with some determination in his voice.

Bayanhong tapped her commbadge and said, “Two to beam up.”

“Understood,” came the response from the bridge, and a few seconds later, the dematerialization effect overcame them.

Anak-Ipa did as instructed, standing as still as possible, and he held his breath once he heard the alien contact her ship. Of course, he knew, this could well be a trap and the people on that ship could be the same ones that turned his sun into a black hole. He had argued the point with the leadership group that if these were the same aliens who had destroyed the sun, and were back to ensure there were no survivors, why could they simply not obliterate the chamber from orbit? They had demonstrated the ability to destroy a star, so a planet would be much easier. Now, he was in the grips of an alien technology that he only vaguely understood the technological underpinnings of. Still, he stood still and held his breath, but he never really noticed that because something else happened, something that the alien woman had not mentioned. He was distracted by the way the images he was seeing with his eyes dissolved into another quite different one and how it happened so quickly. When it was done, he was standing on a platform in the transporter room on board the alien ship; He saw other people, like Bayanhong, but they had uniforms in slightly different colours. He did look at himself, and saw that his body was intact and that everything worked as it should.

“This process actually works?” Anak-Ipa asked.

“Of course it does,” Bayanhong replied. “We use it all the time. We rely on it.”

“Could my people have developed this technology?”

“In time.”

As the Cheshirian guest and the first officer stepped off the platform, Captain Thorpe stepped forward and introduced himself and the other two who were in the room, transporter chief Megan Wilder and ship counsellor and protocol officer Lucia Quintollez. It was in the latter role that Quintollez was functioning now. “Welcome on board the Federation starship *Athena*. Lieutenant Quintollez will show you to your quarters and instruct you on the rules you must follow as a guest on board this ship.”

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"I understand," Anak-Ipa replied. "I will follow the rules that you will give me."

Quintollez took the box of foods that the Cheshirian was carrying, saying, "We will scan these items into the replicator database so that you will have food to eat on this journey, which we do not know how long it will last. Also, we will need to download the medical information, just in case."

"Of course."

"Lets proceed, then."

Quintollez and Anak-Ipa left the transporter room. The captain tapped his commbadge and said, "Thorpe to the bridge."

"Bridge here," Vorwoorts replied.

"Our guest is on board. Lets get underway."

"Understood."

Two days later, the *Athena* entered a star system known only by its catalogue number, as it was a red dwarf star, and like so many similar stars in the galaxy, there was little of interest in the system. There were some small planets, composed of rock and ice, and the star would have been among the oldest in the galaxy—if it still existed as a star. Anak-Ipa was on the bridge, sitting in the seat to the left of the captain, as the *Athena* dropped out of warp. He had seen the starship, or at least most of it, on the two days since he boarded, and he was amazed at what he had seen. This, he thought, was so much larger than the chamber that he and his fellow Cheshirian survivors lived in, and this seemed like it could sustain life indefinitely. There was so much room, so many things going on, and a large crew dedicated to keep it going. And, he had learned, the ship was capable of going anywhere in the galaxy if it really wanted to, but even a ship like this was inclined to stay relatively close to home. What it could certainly do, Anak-Ipa realized, was to travel at a speed much faster than light; it could travel to other stars. Anak-Ipa knew that his own people were on the verge of doing just this sort of thing, though fearful of that race referred to as the Arosians. Perhaps they would not have been as advanced as these people were, but given time... But before they could, *they* came and took it all away from Anak-Ipa and his kind. Now he wanted to know... who were *they*?

"Dropping out of warp now," Indesakar remarked from the flight control console. As the *Athena* returned to normal space, the streaking images on the viewscreen ended and the stars settled into the background, and in the foreground was... nothing.

Brigson, at the science and sensor console, looked at the displays and the results of several scans that had been programmed into the system. "The black hole at the centre of this system is consistent in mass to the star that used to be here."

Thorpe asked, "The planets?"

"Two small worlds, half the size of Mercury, mostly ice with some rock, really big comets, actually. They're there, where they are supposed to be."

Anak-Ipa asked, "There was a star here?"

"Yes," Thorpe answered.

"And it was destroyed by the same race, using the same technology, that destroyed our sun?"

"In all likelihood, yes."

Then the Cheshirian asked, "How do you know there was a star here?"

"Centuries ago, we sent out probes designed to travel throughout the galaxy, and what they did was to gather data on the stars and the possible planets that they had. When the probes returned, we were able to produce very detailed star maps of space, especially close to our space. Those probes recorded a red dwarf star here with two planets, and now our sensors show the same two planets orbiting a black hole. To the best of our information, the planets continue in their orbits, seemingly unaffected by the fact the star was turned into a black hole."

"Did anybody live on those planets?"

"Extremely unlikely," Brigson remarked. "The probe also studied the spectral lines of the star, and determined that there were basically no higher-level elements in this system, nothing high enough on the periodic table to produce viable lifeforms. That indicated that this star was among the oldest stars in the galaxy. When it formed, the dust and gas cloud it formed out of would have had virtually no chance to be seeded with higher elements from exploding supernovas elsewhere."

"I see."

Bayanhong did ask, "Should we do a quick scan of the planets to see if there were any... signs left behind by the attackers?"

"That can't hurt. Sanjay, plot courses that would give us quick orbits of the two planets. Grace, prepare sensor routines to see if anything unexpected is present on those planets."

"Understood."

Using the warp drive to travel between the planets and one powered orbit of each, the *Athena* completed its survey of this forgotten system in about two hours. Brigson summed up the time, saying, "Absolutely nothing, captain, no signs of any sort of life on the planets, nothing unexpected and nothing left behind by the attackers."

"I suspected as much, but we had to make sure," Thorpe remarked. "Let's proceed to the next location."

To the bridge officers, this was all pretty ordinary and routine, but to Anak-Ipa, it was fascinating to watch the crew in action, working together to make this starship do what the captain wanted, and all of the technology on board to learn about what was going on outside the ship. It was rather wonderful to see and almost be a part of, he was thinking.

The *Athena* was on its way to the next location where a star had been destroyed, and the route was taking them back towards what had been Arosian

space. In the deck two duty lounge, Anak-Ipa was with several of the bridge officers from the second shift. He had gone to the replicator, and had requested a *smaasaaka*, which to human eyes looked something like a pie, but it was square and was filled with vegetables and a seasoning sauce. It was one of the prepared foods that he had brought on board. He was still amazed that there was technology that allowed a machine to basically take atoms and combine them into molecules and then into food. The first time that he had tried this, he had looked at what came out of the replicator. It did smell like *samasaka*, and it looked like it, and when he used an eating utensil—a human fork because he had forgotten to bring along his own—to sample it, it certainly looked like the real thing. He tasted it, and it tasted like the real thing, but was it? He wondered what was *really* inside. However, this was how the crew ate on this ship. He found it hard to imagine that a ship like this would have a vast storage area with food in it, or that they had facilities to grow food like this. That was especially true because to the Cheshirian, it became clear that although the vast majority of the crew of this ship was what they called “human,” there were some other aliens on board this ship, and like Anak-Ipa, their nutritional needs were different and they had to eat their own food. Human food was not adequate for the Kentyan or the Vulcan on board.

Anak-Ipa took his tray with the *samaaska* and a glass of water over to where the second-shift officers were sitting, and asked, “Can I join you here?”

“Sure,” replied Jules Torin.

As he ate, Anak-Ipa started to talk. The officers listened to him since he was a guest on the ship, and they really did not know that much about him and his kind. Similarly, Anak-Ipa was not that familiar with the crew of the *Athena*. However, he was getting a sense about the region of space that they were approaching. He said, “I have seen that almost all of the people on this starship are from one species, but there are some people on board who are not like you.”

“That’s true,” Torin remarked.

Lieutenant Lorne Hathson was the tactical officer on the second shift. He said, “There’s T’Kor. She’s Vulcan. There’s Ger Psakolaps. He’s Kentyan. There’s Rodall Dewuchun. He’s Odonan. There’s Ryn Rexhabas. She’s Betazoid.”

“Why are there not more like that? I understand that all of these people are members of your Federation of Planets.”

“Not exactly. Odonans, like Rodall Dewuchun, are not part of the Federation. However the reason that there are not more like them is that it can be difficult for those who are not from Earth.”

“Why?”

“Because the planets that they come from are different. For T’Kor, the ship is always too cold, because her world is a warm world. For Rodall, the ship is always too warm, because his world is a colder one. The length of the day is different, and the composition of the air is different. This makes them less efficient. Those who do come from other worlds are prepared to endure these differences because they find value in serving on the ship, but to do this for large

numbers of different species would be more difficult because then there would be even more variations in suitable environmental conditions.”

Torin added, “There is also the fact that the *Athena* is a ship designed and built at Earth. The other species have their own ships and designs, though they do the work for the Federation, just like our ship does. It has the design history, for its shape and its computers and the layouts and the rest that go back through our history. The ships of the other species are the same, as they carry their history and culture into space.”

Anak-Ipa asked, “So if we had achieved this level of technology, we too would have unique ships that were a reflection of us?”

“More than likely.”

As he ate his *samasaka*, Anak-Ipa continued, “But now we are heading to a region of space that you believe is dangerous.”

“Actually,” Hathson replied, “it was a dangerous region of space. There was the Arosian Empire, and when it existed, it was dangerous, but it no longer exists. Had they continued to exist, it was possible that as soon as your people developed the ability to travel between the stars, you would have encountered them and they would have destroyed you.”

“But we were destroyed. We were aware of this race, whom we now know as the Arosians, but we were told that their empire was destroyed before our sun was.”

“Yes. Their empire and most of the population was destroyed in the war, but that ended fifty years ago. It’s possible that their technology might have been involved in destroying your star, but the Arosians were not manning it, or it is extremely unlikely that it was any remnants of them.”

Now Anak-Ipa got to the question on his mind. “*Why* would the Arosians have destroyed us if we had developed interstellar travel capability?”

“That was their nature,” Torin explained. “To understand that, we have to start from the beginning. Tens of thousands of years ago, there was a race called the Kroosians. They sought out certain resources that they believed only they should have access to.”

“What kind of resources?”

“In particular, *tam-ulk-yr*, a type of hypermatter used in starship propulsion. They believed that only they should have access to it. Now, tens of thousands of years ago, a supply of this resource was found on a planet called Kazmarine. That planet was located too far away from Kroosian space for the Kroosians to use it at the time, so they put a military garrison on it. Basically, they formed a colony. Then the Kroosian Empire was destroyed, and that left the military garrison isolated and abandoned. They became the Arosians, and over time, they expanded on that planet and then to other planets in the empire. Their orders on protecting the resource basically got corrupted into a sort of religion. A key component of the orders, and how they were corrupted, was that nobody was to know of the existence of the Arosians. If any other species found out about their existence, they had to be destroyed. Thus, the Arosians destroyed

any species that found out about them.”

“How could such a species continue? Would they not turn on each other if they had violence in their minds?”

“I’m not sure, but the related species to the Arosians are known for being culturally cohesive and seemingly have a biologically-engrained ability to work together and not commit violence among their own kind.”

“But in time, would the Arosians not meet a species that could not be so easily destroyed?”

“Yes,” Torin answered, “and that’s exactly what happened. They ran into a species, or more accurately, a large number of connected species, and that was too large for them to defeat.”

“The Federation?” Anak-Ipa asked.

“That and a series of other large space-going realms in the same general area.”

The Cheshirian was still a bit puzzled, based on what he had heard about the Federation and the Arosians, there was a slight contraction there. “Does that mean,” he started, speaking tentatively, “that *you* destroyed the Arosians, your people?”

“No,” Torin started. “Ultimately, the Arosians destroyed themselves. You see, the orders that military garrison originally had also included the order to destroy the garrison and the resource that they were protecting if that was the last possible alternative to prevent the resource from falling into another’s hand. That too was corrupted, and the Arosians had built into their society and their technology a kind of empire-wide self-destruct system. If it appeared imminent that the Arosians would be defeated and could not destroy a species that had learned of their existence, they would destroy themselves by their own hand. That’s what they did.”

“But that still sounds like the Federation and those other realms were battling the Arosians and making them face defeat.”

“Although there were battles,” Hathson started, “the war was actually going against us. The Romulans, in particular, were facing dire consequences. Ultimately, it was a disease that defeated them.”

“A disease?” Anak-Ipa asked.

“Yes. Remember the Kroosians, the group that the Arosians came from?” The Cheshirian gestured that he did remember that. “Remember that shortly after the military garrison was sent to Kazmarine, the Kroosians were destroyed. They were destroyed by a deadly disease, a biologically-constructed disease that spread quickly and had a very high mortality rate.”

“That is... usually not what happens. Diseases with high mortality rates do not cause massive numbers of deaths because if it kills those that it affects at a high rate, it cannot spread fast enough.”

“True for natural diseases, but remember, this one was created and designed to work in this manner. Naturally, of course, a disease like this, even one designed to be lethal, will not kill everyone. A small percentage of the

Kroosians survived the biological war that destroyed their society. The survivors established themselves on a new planet and began all over, creating over a period of thousands of years a whole new civilization. This new group is the Odonans.”

“So... Rodall is descended from the Kroosians... and is related to the Arosians?”

“Yes.”

“So... his kind would’ve destroyed my people if they encountered us?”

“No,” Hathson quickly replied. “Remember, the Kroosians were destroyed and the new civilization that arose was completely and fundamentally different in their temperament and culture. But the important thing was that the disease, called *overhimpennyon*, still exists, and exists in the Odonans. It does not affect them, of course, and in fact has become vital to them, augmenting their immune system. Without the *overhimpennyon* in their system, they would find it hard to survive.”

Anak-Ipa was beginning to figure this out, as he said, “So the Arosians attacked the Federation, or those... Romulans, and the Odonans recognized them as genetic relatives, and to avoid the Federation being destroyed, they passed their disease to them.”

Torin picked up the story, “Not exactly. What happened was that in the initial stages of the war, the Arosians came upon some Odonans, serving on other ships, like Rodall serves on the *Athena*. Naturally, they were very interested in aliens, non-Arosians, that were very biologically similar to them. The captured Odonans were taken back to Kazmarine. Now, the *overhimpennyon* organism was within the Odonans, and it spread to the Arosians, who had no defense against the disease and no knowledge that it even existed. Once the Arosians realized where it was coming from, it was starting to rampage through their population, and by then it was too late. The self-destruct part of their orders was invoked.”

“Surely the disease would not kill all of them.”

“No, but the self-destruct part did to some extent, but yes, there are pockets of survivors out there, and bits and pieces of their technology, which could be falling into the hands of hostile aliens.”

“Like whatever it was that destroyed the sun of my people?”

“It’s possible that was Arosian technology. That’s why we need to find out what happened, track it down and determine who was doing this and why.”

“I see,” Anak-Ipa remarked, as he finished his meal.

* * *

“Captain’s log, stardate 56460.2. We are approaching the last of the destroyed star systems, and as in the previous four examples, we do not expect to find any clues here on who did this, or how they did it. The previous star systems had been generally red dwarf systems without planets that had life on them, or any kind of non-natural presence. Red dwarf systems are usually so uninteresting that a vast majority of them have never been visited by a starship. They are

so numerous and so uninteresting that there is no reason to ever visit one."

"Entering the red dwarf system or what used to be the red dwarf system RX40919-34," announced Indesakur from the flight control console. "Preparing to drop out of warp."

Bayanhong stifled a yawn and said, "You've seen one red dwarf system, you've seen them all."

"But we should all explore at least one in our lifetimes," Thorpe remarked.

"If you find value in wasting time, sure."

Brigson, at the science and sensor console, was doing the usual scans. "The black hole at the centre of the system is consistent in mass to the red dwarf star here, class M4, about twenty percent of the mass of the sun. There are six planets here... and this is interesting."

"What?" asked Thorpe.

"One planet is point nine six of Earth's diameter, located one hundred and eleven million kilometres from the star, within the inhabitable zone."

"An inhabitable planet in a red dwarf system?"

"That's not to say that life did evolve there."

"Nevertheless," Thorpe replied, "set course for that planet, just in case."

Of course, as the *Athena* got close to the planet, they could not see it in natural light, as it appeared as nothing more than a black disk blocking out the stars in the background. Brigson did report, "The planet is a rocky world, as this red dwarf star is relatively recent. It orbited about a hundred million kilometres from the star, and with an orbital period of about five hundred days. Based on the composition of the surface ices, the atmosphere was predominantly nitrogen and carbon dioxide. There is some oxygen too. However, there's no sign of any—" A beeping tone interrupted the science officer's words. "Sensors have picked up a structure on the surface. It's clearly non-natural, but inert."

"What is it?" Thorpe asked.

"I'm not sure," Brigson replied, but she did run some scans on it and soon had a three-dimensional rendering that she displayed on the main screen. It consisted of a disk that was elevated off of the ground by four stout pillars, the disk being about eighty metres in diameter and with very few surface features except on top, where a multitude of antennas and similar structures was found.

Dewuchun did recognize what it was, saying, "That's an Arosian monitoring relay station. Along their borders, they had small monitoring satellites which relayed information to relay stations like this one, usually hidden in red dwarf systems because nobody ever looks in them."

Bayanhong asked, "Wouldn't such relay stations be part of their society-wide self-destruct mechanism?"

"Yes, but it is always possible that for whatever reason, it failed at this location."

"So, did the alien vessel that destroyed the Cheshire star destroy this

one, without realizing that there was a structure on the surface?"

"I don't know," Dewuchun asked.

Vorwoorts asked, "Would these relay stations also monitor space around them?"

"Possibly."

"And would they continue to function fifty years later?"

"That I don't know."

Nevertheless, the captain decided that an away team was needed. He had Hakamura, Brigson and Dewuchun beam down, and with the planet without a sun to keep its atmosphere from freezing, they had to wear environmental suits, which was not something that Brigson particularly cared to do.

The away team beamed into a central location where there was enough space for them and their equipment, which consisted of portable lights and generators, to beam in. The lights, mounted on poles, came on automatically when the rematerialization was complete. What they illuminated were banks of equipment, a confusing combination of metal boxes and beams and pipes and conduits and bundles of wires, stacked upon each other and reaching to the ceiling. Above them was a network of arches and beams, mounting the antennas and other structures on the roof, and a lot of those conduits and bundles of wires, each as thick as a person's leg, fed into those structures on the roof. Near where the three appeared was a smaller structure, and it was here that the control systems were located.

"What powered this?" Brigson asked.

Dewuchun answered, "A geothermal tap, most likely through the support struts."

"Can we power this up again?"

"I don't know."

Hakamura added, "I'm not sure that's a good idea, because the self-destruct system might turn on. It's possible that this structure had a power failure and had never acted on the destruct signal."

"And I doubt it would receive it now," Dewuchun replied. "It's not broadcasting anymore."

"But it may be in a memory bank and could activate if power is provided."

Walking in the alien structure was not difficult because they were on a planet with near-normal gravity and the structure was built of materials that retained their properties in the deep cold, at least until they got to the control centre. There, using their helmet-mounted and wrist-mounted lights, they found that the plastics and the campsite materials involved in the form of the control consoles and screens and the like had deteriorated and were so fragile that most of them had started to disintegrate. On the other hand, it looked like the disintegration of the equipment in this room had an assist.

Hakamura said, "It looks like somewhat shot up this place." There were clear signs of the use of the directed-energy weapons, the blast patterns on the walls, the charred bits of debris scattered on the floor and other surfaces and

vapourized components.

“Why?” Brigson added.

“More importantly, when,” Dewuchun added. “Was this an exchange of weapon’s fire from the Arosian War, or later?”

“I think that’s impossible to tell,” the science officer replied. “It’s impossible to date weapons fire in most cases.” She had her tricorder out and was sweeping it around. Dewuchun was doing likewise, while Hakamura was examining the damage that the weapons had done, while wondering why whoever did open fire had targeted this place. After a few minutes, Brigson said, “I’m not detecting any bodies or anything like that, or organic material, or something that is not consistent with the materials in this room, or... wait. I have something.”

“What?” Hakamura asked.

Brigson went across the room. The door they had entered by was open, but across the room, the other door was closed. Near the handle was a blast mark and underneath it, some spots in a dark green colour. She shone the wrist-mounted lights on it, as Hakamura took a look. “What is it?”

“Blood.”

“Dark green, almost like Vulcan blood, or perhaps a local species that has copper-based blood.”

Brigson did another scan, and replied, “No, it does scan as Vulcan... no, more than likely, Romulan.”

“What were the Romulans doing out here?”

“Probably the same thing that the Federation is doing, exploring through the remains of the Arosian Empire, looking for salvageable technology. This is the biggest salvage site in the galaxy.”

“What were they looking for?” Hakamura asked.

“Anything and everything.”

“When was this blood dropped here?”

“It’s hard to tell. I’m going to have the ship beam down a sample kit. This needs to be analyzed in a lab.”

A short time later, Thorpe was in the biomedical lab with Brigson and Psakolaps. The science officer had used the sample kit and a cutting laser to remove a segment of the wall containing the blood sample, and it was brought back to the ship and studied in the lab, using a variety of equipment to learn what they could about the sample. Thorpe now asked, “What have you learned?”

Brigson looked up from the displays and said, “It’s Romulan, more specifically Reman, from the second Romulan homeworld, an offshoot group that is less commonly encountered than those from Romulus. In particular, it’s the blood of a Reman male in his thirties and forties. Given the deterioration of the sample and the environmental change in the planet, I would estimate that the blood was dropped there ten to twelve years ago.”

“So before the star was destroyed?”

“Yes, our best guess is that the Remans were there one to two years

before the star was destroyed.”

“So it’s unrelated to the destruction of the star?”

“Unless the Remans found this place first, and something about it led them to where the star-destroying vessels were located.”

“Koreus?” asked the captain.

“Unlikely, because that planet has been explored. If that was a base for hundred-kilometre-sized starships, I’m sure that we would know about it.”

“I see,” Thorpe replied. “If they found the location of that ship based on information at this station, could we?”

“That’s hard to say, because the Remans might have intentionally damaged the facility so that no one else could access any information here,” Brigson replied.

“But that implies that the Remans came back after the fact. Actually, we know that they did because they did destroy the star here, but if they wanted to destroy the relay station and prevent others from learning what they had, why not destroy it from orbit?”

“That’s not always the Romulan way. It’s possible that the blood might’ve been dropped on the Remans’ first visit to the planet and then they returned and destroyed the consoles on the return trip. We can’t reliably date such things as their weapons fire.”

“Of course.”

Dewuchun and a second engineer, Lieutenant Erik Skolgaad, dressed in environmental suits, beamed back down to the relay station and entered the control room. They came with power generators and the cables had attachments that were designed to fit into the connectors that the Arosians had used, information that the Odonans from the Battlesphere had relayed back to the *Athena*. With that information, they were able to replicate the necessary power and data cables, and adjust their power generators to output what the equipment was designed to handle. Dewuchun, using his tricorder, was able to locate where the power connectors were, so he and the other engineer got to work removing the covers and accessing the connectors.

Skolgaad asked, “If we can provide power to these consoles, what do we hope to learn? The consoles themselves appear to be inoperable.”

“But they’re only consoles,” Dewuchun answered. “They are not the centre of the system. The computer core, as far as we can tell, is intact. The station runs on geothermal power, and that’s still there, and the station was operational as recently as fifty years ago. One thing we have seen is that Arosian technology was built to last.”

“Unless they intentionally blow it up.”

“There’s that.”

“And there’s no chance that this will start its self-destruct sequence when we apply power to it?”

“I don’t believe that’s likely to happen because there’s no signal instruct-

ing the system to do so. Clearly, something had gone wrong and the station never received the original signal, and now there's no signal for it to receive. In addition, of course, the self-destruct sequence is not instantaneous. We would have time to beam out."

"Of course."

The two got the panel cover off, and then used various tools to unlatch the equipment from its recessed location. Skolgaad pulled it out halfway, so that they could access it more easily, while Dewuchun scanned the module and made sure that it was not damaged and that the various cables behind it remained integral and operational. Everything came up normally, suggesting again to Dewuchun how robust and how durable Arosian engineering was. They were really pretty good at these things, he knew.

With the module in a more accessible position, Dewuchun got down and plugged in the two power leads and the data cable as well, getting secure connections, as if the Arosians themselves had built the attachments. Dewuchun had with him a data tablet, basically a larger version of a padd, and he called up some control functions on that. The code also came from the Battlesphere, and would allow them to restart the facility, if it could be. "Erik, are you ready?"

"Yes," the younger engineer replied.

"Activate the generator."

Skolgaad, moving stiffly in the environmental suit because he had little practical training in it, faced the generator and confirmed the setting. He then activated the system, and allowed the power to feed into the cables. Dewuchun could see that, and he instructed a start-up sequence for the station. It took a couple of tries before the tablet could connect to the computer, but when it did, he was able to send the command sequence to start up the station operations. It was certainly possible that he would see a number of faults as the system could not restart. However, he was not seeing as many faults as he was anticipating.

"Is it working?" Skolgaad asked.

"It's possible. The geothermal system could take time to come online, though. I'm seeing if the power generator here is enough to access the computer, and perhaps download some log files."

Then the lights in the control room, and even throughout the station came on, as the geothermal power generator became active. The brightness of the lights startled the two, who were used to working in the semidarkness of the portable lights. Power flowed into the consoles, and of course, that produced showers of sparks and some smoke, and the consoles failed and produced more alerts on the tablet that Dewuchun was using.

Skolgaad remarked, "How would we know if the self-destruct system was activated?"

"That would show up on the console," Dewuchun replied. The other engineer looked over the Odonan's shoulders, but he could not read the Odonien text that was on the screen. "Nothing is showing I'm attempting to access the computer and download what I can, mostly the logs of what was detected and

what was transmitted.”

“Can you do that?”

“I hope so.” Then, just as he said those words, different alert signals appeared on the tablet. “Oh no,” the engineer said. “The self-destruct sequence has been set.”

“I knew it.” Skolgaad retorted. “How long?”

“About five minutes.”

“We should beam back to the ship.”

“We got time. I’m in to the computer and downloading, getting data.”

“Hurry.”

“There’s lots of data here.”

Skolgaad was rather nervous, and was surprised that Dewuchun could be so calm. He was so tempted to call for emergency beam-out, but knew he could not do so without the approval of the chief engineer. All he could do was wonder how accurate was Dewuchun’s estimate of the time left before everything blew up all around them, and he wondered how accurately he could count down in his mind from five minutes. When he got to one, he was beaming out. All he could do now was pace around and wait and take the occasional glance at Dewuchun, who was holding the tablet, and tapping at icons on the screen. How could he be so calm?

Finally, Dewuchun stood up, and said, “Switch off the power. I believe that we got all we’re going to get from this.” Skolgaad switched off the generator, but the lights stayed on because the facility was running on its own power now. Dewuchun disconnected the power and data cables and switched off the tablet, and said, “I have the transmission logs from the last hundred years here.”

“And the self-destruct device?” Skolgaad asked.

“I don’t believe it’s going to work. It has somehow malfunctioned.”

“Still.”

“I know.” Dewuchun activated the commbadge and said, “Dewuchun to *Athena*. We’re done here. Two to beam up with our equipment.”

Back on the ship, Skolgaad could not help but to monitor the ship sensors for when the relay station on the surface would explode, but five minutes passed once they were back on the ship, and nothing happened. Ten minutes, and then fifteen had passed, and still nothing had happened. In fact, the sensors on the ship revealed that the geothermal power generator had shut down, or failed, and once again the station fell into darkness.

As Dewuchun told a meeting of the senior officers in the observation lounge behind the bridge, “The data that we recovered from the planet surface was somewhat less than I was hoping. I was not completely sure of what I got, but it turns out that all of that data was log files giving where the transmissions were sent to, and not what was sent.”

“Can we get anything useful from that information?” asked Bayanhong.

“Possibly.” Dewuchun activated some controls on the table, activating the viewscreen in the room. It showed a star map. He explained, “What the data

shows is where the information was sent to. Each data packet was tagged with coordinates, indicating which reception point was to receive the data packet and handle it. The log files record the coordinates and the transmission times. The result is this... the thickness of the lines indicates the percentage of all packs that went to each location.” On the screen was a star map, and several of the thicker lines went to specific locations, and a large number of thin lines went in many directions towards what had been Arosian space. One very thick line went a relatively short distance.

Bayanhong asked the natural question, “That thick line, does that go to Koreus?”

“No,” the engineer replied. “That’s this line here.” He pointed to the second-thickest of the lines. “The thick line, the largest number of transmissions, went to this location here.”

“What’s there?” asked Thorpe.

“Nothing known. It’s a red dwarf system, forty-two light years beyond Koreus.”

“So,” speculated the captain, “the Remans might’ve been able to see this same data, and they decided to head there and see what was there?”

“That’s still possible.”

“Does the star still exist, though?” Vorwoorts asked.

Brigson did a quick check, accessing the sensors through a control panel layout built into the table, and she answered, “Visually, it’s still there, but given its distance, that tells us nothing. A subetheromagnetic scan indicates that location is still a source of the type of subetheromagnetic radiation that stars give off, so I would say that the odds are good the star still exists.”

“So,” Thorpe started, “if this relay station transmitted frequently to another location, not previously known, then there could be a reason for that. The Remans headed there.”

“And if they found star-destroying technology there, why did they come back here? What was the purpose of them even being out here?”

Dewuchun cautioned, “It’s also possible that the destination of all of those transmissions, being another red dwarf star, could just be another relay station. It could also have been destroyed by the Arosians’ self-destruct system.”

“Still, this is something that we need to look at. We’ll head to that star and see what’s there.” Thorpe tapped his commbadge, and said, “Lieutenant Ochi, Commander Dewuchun is going to transfer to you some stellar coordinates. Set course for that destination, best speed.”

“Understood,” replied Sandra Ochi, the second-shift flight control officer.

Once again, Anak-Ipa found himself in the deck-two duty lounge, and he was sharing a meal with the second-shift officers. He had been thinking about what the crew of this starship had offered to him and the last of his people, and he wondered what it would mean, or involve. “Our planet is dead,” he started, facing the officers, “and our star is dead and it can never come back. Your people

have offered to take us to another planet.”

“Yes,” Torin replied. “That’s usually what that would mean. I am assuming that you do not want to live out your existence in that underground chamber.”

“No,” Anak-Ipa replied. “We survive there because we hope to continue our existence, but it would be difficult. We would dream of living on the surface, under the sun, in a world filled with people, and most of all, we dream of doing it on our own planet.”

“But that’s an impossible dream.”

“I know... so what exactly would happen if we agree to be relocated by your people?”

“A ship with a specially trained crew would come to your planet. They would probably attempt to learn as much as possible about you, about your history, and what you could save from your planet. I’m sure that you have a repository of the history and culture of your planet in some format.”

“I believe that is true.”

“They would want you to bring that. They also would want to learn as much as possible about your biology and about everything that you had managed to save, whatever plant life or seeds you retained, what animals you retained, that sort of thing.”

“Very few animals survived, mostly small ones and mostly vermin. The more useful animals and the most wanted ones vanished when the sun did.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Torin explained. “The scientists will attempt to determine a planet that most closely matches the conditions you had on Cheshire, in terms of gravity, atmosphere, solar radiation and all of that.”

“But it would not be an entire planet, would it?”

“Not at first. It would more than likely be a colony world, but you would have a continent to yourselves. As your numbers increase, you might have the option of terraforming and moving to another world that would be your own. What is important is that you do not exist in isolation to your environment. For you to exist on this ship, for example, you are reliant on technology to produce the food you need, since our food is useless to you, and yours is useless to us. It is more desirable for you to live in a location surrounded by your own biology, your own plants and your own animals, such as they are. That’s why the seeds and the plants you have are very important. It will help you recreate the world you lost as closely as possible. You’ll get help, of course, but you will have to do a lot of the work on your own, simply because you know yourselves better than anyone.”

“And why do your people do this?” Anak-Ipa asked.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” Hathson answered. “There is value in every culture, and we would hate to see any of them die.”

Ochi added, “Well, maybe the Borg. Maybe it would be nice to see them die out.”

“They’re not really a culture. They’re more of a machine, a computer program that has become corrupted and needs to be terminated.”

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“What is the Borg?” Anak-Ipa asked, as he finished his meal.

“Nothing that your people have to worry about because right now you have bigger problems,” Torin remarked. “However, as Lorne said, helping your people is the right thing to do. We hate to see you live as you do if that is not the way you want to live, and we hate to see you die out, and take your knowledge and culture with you.”

“And if you do this for us, and we are pleased with the effort, what is the cost?”

“There’s no cost. It’s what we do...”

* * *

The captain was in his quarters, doing little more than relaxing, when he heard his commbadge chirp. “Thorpe here,” he said, after tapping it.

“Torin, sir,” came the voice of the second shift science and sensor officer. “Long range sensors have picked up something in space that might be of interest.”

“What?”

“Preliminary data indicates that it is or might be similar to what it was that destroyed Cheshire.”

“Understood. If you have not done so already, alter course to approach the object.”

“We’ll do...”

A short time later, Thorpe and Bayanhong were back on the bridge, though the second-shift officers remained at their positions. Ochi reported, “Coming out of warp now.” The stars settled into the background as the ship returned to normal space and operations, with Ochi continuing to decelerate the *Athena* using the subspace factorization to effectively increase the mass of the ship while retaining its momentum, which had the practical effect of slowing down the ship.

Torin, using the long-range sensors, gathered data on the object that they had detected, and that allowed the computers to generate a detailed rendered image. He reported, “It does appear to be the same kind of vessel that attacked Cheshire, based on the information that we received from the Cheshirians.”

“Hopefully it is the same vessel,” Bayanhong remarked. “I can’t imagine them building more than one.”

Thorpe asked, “What do the sensors show about the current status of the vessel?”

“It’s essentially dead in space, drifting and without power, and space cold. There’s no energy coming from it. I’m guessing there are no life signs on board it.”

As Ochi brought the *Athena* closer to the alien ship, they could get an appreciation of its size. The vessel was adrift far from any star, so it was in darkness, though the sensors could generate an image on the viewscreen that

would show it under some light. They knew what they had seen from those recordings from Cheshire, but seeing it for themselves, they got an appreciation of the size of the ship, shaped roughly like a four-pointed star with two components of the “star” part, along with a central ring and the pods in the middle and the engine modules all around.. The ship was a hundred kilometres in diameter, a number that seemed unimaginable to those on the bridge.

“That has to be the largest spaceship that I know has been put into space,” Hathson remarked. “The only thing comparable is that ‘planet killer’ ship or whatever from a couple of decades ago. That was about thirty-two kilometres long. This is three times larger.”

“Scan for life forms,” Thorpe ordered.

Torin was already working on that, and reported the obvious, “There are none.”

“Is this the vessel that destroyed the sun at Cheshire?”

“Unknown. It or a similar vessel is responsible. We would have no way of knowing unless we can get on board and check the records, if possible.”

“Is it Arosian?”

“It’s possible, but again, there are no external markings, nothing in the Arosian writing system on the hull.”

“Scan for higher-order hypermatter. A ship like that could not run on dilithium.”

A few seconds later, Torin answered, “No hypermatter detected. I can identify what looks like the engines, and they appear to be without hypermatter.”

“It was looted?”

“That’s possible.”

Bayanhong turned to the captain and said, “We will have to go over and take a look.”

“I know. Lieutenant Torin, can you identify the bridge or control centre?”

“Not exactly, but I believe it is in that control globe-like structure at the bottom of the ship.”

“I know it looks small compared to the ship, but it is also pretty large.”

“Given that there’s no power on board, it’s hard to really identify such things as the bridge on an unknown ship...”

An away team of four had to again get into environmental suits, this time with magnetic boots because there was no gravity where they were going. Bayanhong was joined by Brigson and Dewuchun, and security officer Lieutenant Edward Chan, who got the assignment because he was at the top of the duty roster list. Once suited and given their instructions, Bayanhong looked at Lieutenant Wilder behind the transporter controls, and asked, “Do you have a location to beam us to?”

“The bridge has forwarded coordinates, ma’am,” the engineer replied.

“Then energize.”

The four rematerialized in a relatively large open space at the bottom for

the dome-like structure on the ship. Bayanhong felt her boots activate and hold her down on the metal deck. That would prevent her from drifting off of the floor in the absence of gravity, but it sure made walking unpleasant. They also arrived in conditions of total darkness, so their helmet lights came on automatically, though Bayanhong was prepared to turn on the wrist-mounted lights as well, but before she could, it was as if the ship itself had come to life. "What the..." she started to mutter.

This was noticed on the *Athena* too. As soon as Megan reported that the away team was on the alien vessel, it seemed to come alive. Running lights appeared and power levels surged. The ship automatically went to yellow alert and the shields were raised. "What's happening?" Thorpe asked.

Vorwoorts, at the central console, answered, "The star-destroyer ship has activated power, life support, gravity, those sorts of things are coming online."

"How, why?"

"The arrival of the way team was likely detected."

"Are they in danger?"

"I don't know."

The captain tapped his commbadge and said, "Thorpe to Bayanhong."

"Bayanhong here," came the prompt reply. "Our arrival here seems to have woken the ship up."

"We noticed that. You did nothing?"

"Beyond our arrival, no. Maybe the presence of somebody on the ship caused it to wake up."

"Which would imply that some system, some power source, was running, and we did not detect that."

"I can't explain it, sir. Should we return?"

Thorpe did think about it for a moment, and then said, "Unless you can sense that you're in some sort of danger, then no, you can proceed. We'll monitor things from this end. Thorpe out."

"Life support is coming on," Dewuchun reported, as he had his tricorder out. "It will be a little while before the temperature gets to a normal level."

"But at least there is gravity," Bayanhong replied. "I always hate magnetic boots."

"Why?" asked Brigson, as she had her tricorder out and was taking readings. "Walking in them helps build up leg muscles."

"I got sufficient muscles in my legs," the first officer replied.

"Anyway," the science officer continued, "I think I know where the bridge or control centre is. I'm assuming that a flow of energy in what looks like data conduits heading to a particular location could be either the bridge or the computer core. I'm guessing the bridge."

"Where?"

"Ten levels up."

“And we have no way of operating the lifts, do we?”

“I doubt it.”

Bayanhong added, “Maybe having the return of gravity was not such a great thing.”

They did find the stairwell that ran through the more than forty levels in the spherical pod, but they only had to climb through ten to reach the command deck. Prior to arriving on this deck, they had seen that the ship was undamaged and pristine, but that changed on the command deck. There, they found large holes in the wall, especially where the entrance to the command deck was located. Within that room, they found more damage, with consoles opened up and parts and debris scattered all over the place. They also found evidence that some of the damage had been repaired and modified, perhaps a result of intruders trying to hack into the systems and somehow control this ship. Did they succeed? Some of the consoles at the front of the deck, those units close to the rather large wrap-around screen that encompassed three quarters of the circumference of the circular deck, appeared to have had repair attempts made on them..

“What happened here?” asked Chan.

“I suspect,” Dewuchun started, “that the intruders did this to somehow gain control of the ship.”

“Oh, they hot-wired a starship?”

“They did what?”

“Oh,” the security officer sighed, “it’s an old-Earth expression meaning that somebody was able to make operational something that they were not supposed to, like an old-fashioned automobile.”

“I’m not sure of the reference,” the Odonan engineer replied, “but the implication is that the intruders were able to access and modify the controls so that they could operate it. That would not have been an easy task.”

Bayanhong asked, “Is this the ship that destroyed the sun at Cheshire and the others?”

“I don’t know,” Dewuchun answered. “We can think that whoever built this built just one, but we don’t know for sure.” He did approach the intact consoles at the front of the room and sat down behind one, which with his environmental suit was not easy. The console was active, but it was displaying the controls and the readouts in Arosian. He had his tricorder and instructed it to translate the displays into something that he could read.

Meanwhile, Chan was looking around the room, studying the debris and the devices and displays in the room. He did find one that he found interesting, and showed it to Bayanhong. It showed three of the four-pointed star-shaped starships, and the graphic did bear a strong resemblance to the actual ship, and it showed them attached at the vertices of a triangle, which looked like it might represent a space station of some sort. This was superimposed over a red disk, with some Arosian text above and below. “Commander, check this out.”

“What?” Bayanhong asked, as she walked over.

“Ship symbol, three of them according to this, attached to a station.”

There was text above and below. Though Chan did realize that the writing system of the Arosians was pretty similar to that of the Odonans, since they used the same alphabet as a base, he could not translate the text he was seeing. "I'm not sure what the words say."

Bayanhong's tricorder did have a translation function, so she scanned in the text and had the device translate it. The top line said "Stellar shutdown prototype fleet," but the second line, the one underneath the graphic, did not translate. She suspected that it was a proper name, giving the location of the station, but the name the Arosians used would not be the name that the Federation was using.

"What does it say?"

"I believe that this ship is a prototype, designed to destroy stars and perhaps fulfill the Arosian mission statement of not allowing themselves to be discovered. The bottom line is the Arosian name for the location of this base."

"Would the red disk symbolize a red dwarf?"

"That's possible." Bayanhong walked over to where the engineer was seated, and asked, "Any progress accessing any kind of log?"

"Not really." Dewuchun remarked. "These controls are not conventional Arosian controls. They are configured and labelled differently, and I really cannot make sense of it."

"It's possible that the red dwarf star that we were heading to may in fact be the location where this ship came from."

"How'd you determine that?"

"A graphic."

"Well, the Arosians were keen on symbols and graphics and the like to illustrate their ships and the purposes of them." While he was speaking, Dewuchun did manage to get something to work. A list of numbers appeared on one of the displays on the panel.

"What's that?" Bayanhong answered.

"I'm not sure."

Still, the first officer was recording what she could from the screen, and then she translated the information. "It's a bunch of numbers," she said, but surmised that Dewuchun knew that. The Arosians used similar numerical symbols to what the Odonans used. "What do they signify?"

"My best guess is that these represent where the ship went, using the Arosian navigational grid. A ship this large would not work with a conventional warp drive, but would use the chronometric displacement drive, slower but more practical, or even a wormhole generator. I suspect that these coordinates represent the start and end point of journeys using one of those methods of propulsion."

"And I assume that we know enough of the Arosian navigational grid that we can plot locations according to it and we can line up the locations with our own star maps?"

"Of course."

"Even if the navigational grid is no longer working. I'm assuming that it

was destroyed when the Arosian Empire was destroyed.”

“Indeed, commander, but the Arosians did what we do when cannot detect our own grid. We then drop back to navigating by the stars, using their positions to extrapolate where we would be if we did not have the grid signals to go by. I’m sure that the Arosians had something similar, and that would still work even years later when the grid ceased to exist.”

“Of course.”

Brigson came over, and reported, “I have found evidence of Romulan DNA or at least that of the Reman offshoot race, but it was too little for any accurate dating, beyond suggesting eight to ten years.”

“That is at least the right time frame for what happened to those stars.”

“So the Remans were targeting stars for whatever reason?”

“Possibly.”

“And why did they suddenly stop and abandon the ship?”

Dewuchun had the answer for that, and said, “They ran out of fuel and had no way of refueling the vessel. I also got the coordinates saved and have transmitted them back to the *Athena*.”

On board the starship, Vorwoorts received the information and using the known data on the Arosian navigational grid, she was able to plot the locations where the star-destroyer ship started and ended its journeys using the chronometric displacement drive, and the resulting errors in time alignment. The answer that she got was the one that they had suspected. “It’s confirmed, captain. This is the ship that destroyed the star at Cheshire and the others. Rodall accessed a navigational grid log and since we know how that grid worked, I was able to align their locations with our own, and they match the destroyed stars.”

“So the search ends here?” Thorpe asked.

“Apparently so.”

A short time later, Anak-Ipa was on the bridge, and he was looking at the viewscreen and the light-enhanced image of the huge Arosian starship. He did recognize the shape, but he was now seeing it in a clearer format. “That’s the ship?” he asked, tentatively. “That’s the ship that destroyed my world by destroying our sun?”

“Yes, that’s the ship.”

“Did they abandon it, and if so, why?”

“They did,” Thorpe answered. “It apparently ran out of fuel and those who were operating it had no way to refuel it, so they had to abandon it.”

“And what alien race did that?”

“We suspect that it was a group called the Remans, who are an offshoot race of another race, the Romulans. The Romulans suffered the worst at the hands of the Arosians during the war, and they were on the verge of being destroyed when the empire collapsed with the disease. Thus, the Romulans felt entitled to being able to take control of Arosian technology that they find.”

“Even so, why would they attack other worlds and other stars?”

“That we don’t know.”

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“And where are they now?”

“We also don’t know that. It has been too many years and the trail has certainly grown cold.”

Anak-Ipa gave the captain this look, and said, “Your words translated into my language make no sense, but I am sensing that too much time has passed and it has become impossible to track where they went.”

“That’s correct.”

The Cheshirian looked at the ship some more, and then asked, “What happens to that ship now?”

“We’ve sent a message back to the Federation and they will send a salvage fleet to do what they can with it.” Thorpe said that, hoping that the Cheshirians were not expecting to take possession of the ship because it had done so much damage to them. Of course, the fact that the Cheshirians numbered around a hundred and twenty survivors suggested that they were not able to do much with the ship even if they could take possession of it.

Vorwoorts then added, “Captain, the away team is back on board. Commander Bayanhong has said that there was an implication that there might be more than one of these ships at the red dwarf system we were originally heading to.”

“Great,” sighed Thorpe. “We’ll resume course, but have engineering leave a probe behind that would monitor space around the Arosian ship, and be able to contact us through subspace should any other ship be detected approaching it.”

“Resume course?” Indesakar asked.

“Yes, resume course once the probe has been deployed...”

After two days of travel, the *Athena* approached the star system known only by a catalogue designation, RX41758-10, as red dwarf systems were so numerous and so uninteresting that only a tiny number of them, usually ones close to inhabited systems, had more of a name than a star catalogue designation. This system had just the designation, and no doubt the intent was that nobody would bother to approach such a system and see what was hidden there—assuming anything was.

“Approaching RX41758-10,” reported Indesakar from the flight control console. On the screen, they could see a single star, shining brighter than the rest but showing a slight red tint.

“Scanning the system,” Brigson reported, “four small planets, none larger than Mercury, and none further from the star than Mars is from our sun. There are assorted asteroids and small bodies too.”

“But a facility for producing starships that are a hundred kilometres in diameter, or even another of those ships?”

“I should be able to scan for something like that,” the science officer replied, “but I’m not picking up anything on the sensors. Now, those records we saw indicated that a great deal of subspace communications went through here, but I’m not detecting that either.” She ran some more scans, and added, “Not

detecting any energy signatures from within the system, at least signatures that are non-natural.”

Bayanhong, turning to face the captain, said, “We could be acting on faulty information. We’re following what’s essentially a graphic, a decoration.”

“But something convinced the Remans to come here. I don’t believe that they would’ve stumbled upon a ship like that quite by accident. Lets go in and take a look.”

“Very well.”

“Indesakar, proceed to take us in.”

“Understood, captain.”

The *Athena* continued inwards, with Indesakar assuming that they would get close enough to the star so that the flux per unit area matched what was at Earth, which was the most likely location for any space facility the Aro-sians might have built—or the debris from that installation.

A beeping sound drew the attention of Brigson to her console, and she noticed a number of changes on the display. “That’s interesting,” she started. “Now I’m picking up structures in space, a large one.”

“How did they just appear?” Thorpe asked.

Vorwoorts ran some analysis on the sensor readings, and reported, “The best I can figure out is that there is a systemwide cloaking device working here.”

“System-wide? Wouldn’t that be a massive power drain?”

“It’s not thorough. I doubt that it would block light. It appears to operate by interfering with sensor beams, so we can’t detect what is on the other side. It might work on small sensor probes away from the system, and activates only when it detects a ship approaching.”

Moments later, Indesakar guided the *Athena* out of warp, and slowed the ship down as it approached what those on the bridge was thinking was the largest space installation that they had ever seen. The main body of the facility was triangular in shape, and each side of the triangle was about eighty kilometres in length, though the centre was mostly open space. On one of the corners were two tall towers, extending ten kilometres in each direction, and the nature of the towers indicated that they were subspace communication relay structures. Of course, the thing that those on the bridge noticed was that there was one of the huge star-destroyer ships attached to the triangular space station. The sensors indicated that the other two points of the triangle were equipped to accommodate the same kind of ship, or something equally large.

“Power signature?” Thorpe asked.

“Space cold, no power readings,” Brigson replied.

“Then what’s powering the cloaking field?”

“That could be a separate structure.” The science officer ran some more scans, and reported, “The ship docked at the station is heavily damaged internally, and some of the advanced components, such as the drive crystals, have been removed. My best guess is that it’s inoperable.”

“The more important question,” started Bayanhong, “is what happened to

the third ship? One ship is here and we found the second ship but where's the third? Was it taken by the Remans, or did someone else take it earlier—assuming that they actually built a third ship?"

Vorwoorts added, "My guess is that something brought the Remans here. They found the ships intact, but not necessarily operational. They damaged one trying to get it to work, and then they took the second one and figured out how to make it work and they tested it on those other systems, including the Cheshire system. However, they abandoned it when it ran out of fuel and they had no means to refuel it. They returned and took the third ship."

"But to where?" Bayanhong asked.

"The Romulus-Remus system?"

"Surely something that large would not go unnoticed by the Federation and our intelligence agencies."

"Because they detected it," Thorpe remarked, as he continued to look at the image on the screen, "that doesn't mean that they would inform us. Another question is that this happened eight years ago. The other systems were destroyed that long ago and presumably the ship ran out of fuel and was abandoned at the same time. They returned here and took the third one, and to the best of our knowledge, they never used it."

"Perhaps they are worried about it running out of fuel with no way to refuel it, and they took it back home to study it and perhaps reverse-engineer it."

"Or perhaps they're holding on to it for some other purpose."

"Even after eight years?"

"Romulans, and Remans too, are known for their patience. If it takes years before they want to use an asset like the star-destroyer ship for maximum effect, they will wait."

"And whose star would they destroy?"

"That I would not know."

Brigson did add, "That assumes that the Remans in fact took the third ship, and it had not been previously taken. We have no idea of who took the third ship or when. Perhaps we can go onto the station and find out more information on what happened."

"Still, the implication is that one of those ships is missing, and if the Remans took it, where is it and what are they planning to do with it? Given what those ships can do, it would be in everybody's best interest to find it."

"That could be difficult," Bayanhong remarked.

"I know," Thorpe answered. "But what else can we do?"

Brigson did ask, "Are we going to go on board and look around?" She asked that question, realizing that if the captain approved the mission, she would find herself in an environmental suit again. She was not a fan of those.

Thorpe asked, "Do you think you could find anything useful on board, to confirm if the Remans took the ship or it was already missing?"

"That's hard to say."

"A better alternative would be to destroy the remaining ship and the

station. For some reason, the Arosian self-destruct system did not seem to work here, so it might be up to us to finish the job here, and then try to find the missing ship.

“We really should go on board and take a look around,” Bayanhong said.

“Very well, we’ll do that, and *then* will destroy the station and the remaining ship...”

T O B E C O N T I N U E D