

Eve of Destruction (Part Two)

Previously...

While en route back to the Federation from the Arosian Empire, the *Athena* noticed that one of the stars that it was using for navigation suddenly disappeared. The ship headed to the location of that star, which they named Cheshire, to determine what had happened to it. They discovered that instead of the star, there was a black hole where the star had been. In addition, they found a planet where once sentient life had existed, but now was down to just a hundred and twenty survivors, living underground. The crew contacted this species, whom they named the Cheshirians, and learned that an alien starship, possibly Arosian, had destroyed their sun eight and a half years earlier, for a reason unknown to them. The ship had the shape of a four-pointed star and was truly massive, over a hundred kilometres in length and carrying enough power to alter the graviton field around a star and cause it to collapse upon itself. Tracing a path through space of other stars that had been destroyed in this manner, the *Athena* left Cheshire, with one of the natives, Anak-Ipa, on board as an observer. The crew found the ship that allegedly destroyed the Cheshire sun, now abandoned, but likely captured and used by the Romulans, or their offshoot kin, the Remans. The *Athena* eventually found the red dwarf system identified by the catalogue number RX41758-10, and there was a space station, almost as massive as the ships, and with space for three of the star-destroying alien ships. One ship remained, badly damaged and inoperable, and the second ship had been found, but where was the third ship?

And now the conclusion...

The four members of the away team assembled in the transporter room, having put on the environmental suits again. Julia Bayanhong, the first officer of the *Athena*, was not a fan of the suits, but understood their necessity when

exploring space. Accompanying her was Mark DeWillis, the assistant chief engineer, and Grace Brigson, the chief science officer, and Sal Hakamura, the head of security on the starship. All four were in the environmental suits, and were equipped with tricorders and had their helmet lights and the wrist-mounted lights. DeWillis had a portable power generator and some cables, which had been manufactured earlier and designed to interface with Arosian systems. Hakamura did have a sidearm phaser with him, just in case, but the sensors had shown no lifesigns on board. Then again, this massive station, likely built by the Arosians, had been hidden until the *Athena* entered the red dwarf system, so they could take nothing for granted. More surprises could be awaiting them on the station.

Megan Wilder, the transporter chief, was behind the controls. Bayanhong asked her, "Our transporter coordinates have been determined?"

"Yes. The bridge has identified the most likely location for the control centre in the central pod on the station, based on known data on Arosian structures of this kind."

"There are no previous known Arosian structures of this kind," Bayanhong pointed out.

"Then the closest ones that we know, that ship we encountered earlier."

"Of course. I'm assuming that the station has no lights and no life support."

"You assume correctly," Wilder replied. "In addition, no gravity either."

"Magnetic boots again, wonderful," sighed the first officer.

Hakamura added, "But just think of all the environmental suit time and certification time you're logging, Julia."

"That doesn't make it any easier." The four climbed onto the transporter platform, and Bayanhong then said, "Energize."

Moments later, the four members of the away team rematerialized in a rather large chamber, and in total darkness. They did feel their magnetic boots come on and hold them to the floor, and they also turned on their helmet lights to look around. The area did seem like a control centre, with rings of consoles around them, and what looked like viewscreens on the walls all around, although nothing was functional. On the other hand, it all looked to be intact. The first officer and mission leader activated her communicator, and said, "Bayanhong to the *Athena*."

"*Athena* here," replied the ship's tactical officer, Henrietta Vorwoorts.

"Has there been any change in the status of the station with our arrival?"

"Negative, no change."

"Do keep us informed if there is any sign that the self-destruct system has been activated."

"Of course."

DeWillis, walking slowly and a bit awkwardly in the magnetic boots, approached one of the consoles and shone his light on it. The console was generally featureless, as the Arosians had touchscreen controls, with only a few fixed physical controls. He did notice the limited writing on the console, and the writ-

ing system did have some degree of familiarity to him. He reported, "This place is Arosian. Their language is on the consoles."

Bayanhong asked, "Could you get any of this activated?"

"I will try, but I'm not sure that we'll get a lot of useful information here."

"We're really just interested in the comings and goings of the star-destroying ships, and in particular the third one, and who took it."

"Which will not help us too much to find out where it went, given how long ago it was taken."

"Perhaps, but it would at least confirm that it exists and so we need to go looking for it..." the first officer said.

* * *

Anak-Ipa was on the bridge with the remaining members of the bridge crew, including the captain, Leonard Thorpe. There was some sort of tension on the bridge, as this was another Arosian installation that somehow had not fallen to the self-destruct system that the aliens had placed into all of their technology and facilities so that if the empire fell, none of the technology or facilities would fall into enemy hands. That had not happened everywhere, as no doubt, there were technological failures and perhaps in some cases, the personnel involved were not so willing to die for the paranoid beliefs that the Arosians had developed. Even so, there was always the worry that some inert Arosian technology, if activated would then act on the self-destruct signal and seemingly blow up in the faces of those who were scavenging it. Stories of that having happened did circulate among the ships and the crews, but nobody had any verified proof that it had happened. However, it was always possible that it could happen, and Thorpe knew that it could happen here.

Thorpe did ask again, "Status of the station?"

"Unchanged," replied Henrietta Vorwoorts, the tactical officer. "There still is no power being generated on the station."

Anak-Ipa sat in the chair to the left of the captain, which was usually reserved for guests on the bridge. He did ask, "You do worry about the self-destruct?"

"I do, because I have no idea how fast, when activated, it actually leads to the destruction. The impression that has come down from those who apparently witnessed it was that there was little to no warning when it went off, though at that relay station earlier, there appeared to be about five minutes of warning."

"It is still hard to believe that something as large as the Arosian Empire, with so much in the way of structures and ships and so on, would actually do what they did."

"It's hard to understand the mindset of the Arosians."

"Perhaps collectively but what about individually? How many of them wanted to die that way? I am sure that there were many examples of the people who had access to the technology doing their best to prevent the self-destruct from

working, and there would be examples of where it was installed but not operational or said to be installed when it was not.”

“True,” Thorpe admitted, “and there have been examples of Arosian technology which did not self-destruct, but the disease that destroyed them would in time get to any group without the genetic defenses, except perhaps for isolated groups that avoided contact.”

“Have you heard of such groups?”

“There have been a few.”

“But you believe that it was those Remans that used the star-destroyer ship, and not some surviving Arosians that are perhaps planning to take revenge for what happened to their people?”

“It is most likely that it was the Remans involved, as the evidence so far suggests that is what has happened. We found no evidence of any Arosian involvement.”

Anak-Ipa asked, “But what would the Remans *do* with the star-destroying ship? From what others in the crew told me, the Remans are considered second-class citizens in their stellar realm, and so their objective is to replace the ruling Romulans and not destroy their realm.”

“That seems likely, but it is not always easy to understand the alien mindset. Afterall, look at the Arosian mindset and what they did. The Remans may have a mindset that is similar, suggesting it is better to destroy their realm than to be second-class citizens, and a possible return to that status should the Romulans somehow regain control.”

“Of course...”

In what the away team assumed was the control centre of the Arosian station, DeWillis did find what he identified as an emergency power port. According to the information that had been transmitted, those power ports allowed for access to a facility without power so that key systems could be turned on and data recovered, among other things. It was that “other things” that was on the back of his mind, such as the self-destruct system. He opened the access hatch and used the helmet lights on his suit to illuminate the interior and locate the power and data ports. He did remark, “It looks like the standardized ports are here too. I should be able to connect the generator to this and the data cable as well.”

Bayanhong, also thinking about the possibility of the self-destruct system activating, did ask, “When the Remans stole the ships, would they have needed to restore power to the station to release the docking clamps?”

“I’m not certain,” the engineer replied. “It’s possible that the ships themselves could supply the power to allow the clamps to be released. That’s how it works with our space installations and docking systems. It would’ve been practical for the Arosians to have done likewise.”

“Of course.”

DeWillis plugged in the two cables, and got a good, firm fit. He checked

the equipment he had brought to make sure that it was operational, and then said, "Ready... here goes."

"Everyone," Bayanhong added, "be prepared to beam back to the *Athena* immediately."

DeWillis tapped the icon that turned on the power generator and fed that power at the necessary voltage and amperage into the Arosian system. The console that the generator was attached to came on, along with several others. They had a few tense seconds, wondering what would happen, but nothing did. Then again, what would the Arosian self-destruct system do to warn anybody in the vicinity to warn of what was to happen? Apparently, nobody knew.

Bayanhong contacted the ship, and said, "Lieutenant DeWillis has activated the power generator and some of the consoles are active. Is there any sign of a self-destruct system coming on?"

"Negative," Vorwoorts reported over the commlink. "No other power sources are active. We'll continue to monitor."

"Very well."

Brigson was by the console that DeWillis had activated. On her tri-corder, she had Arosian control codes that the Odonans had sent from the Battlesphere, along with a translation routine that would allow her to interpret the information that could come up on the display. Bayanhong asked, "Anything?"

"Not yet," the science officer replied. "I think... systems are waking up. This is trying to access the computer, butt there's no power there."

"Shouldn't our generator supply that power?"

"It should... in time, but the system has to route it there."

"Of course."

And then everything changed. The lights in the control centre came on, dazzling the away team with their dark-adapted eyes. The consoles came on, along with life support, and the rest. "Oh god, again" Bayanhong remarked, as she had to squint until her pupils adjusted. "What just happened, like the last time?"

"We reactivated the station," Brigson remarked.

Over the commlink, Vorwoorts asked, "What did you do over there? The station has suddenly come alive. The primary reactor turned on and is supplying power."

"It was not intentional," the first officer replied. "The self-destruct system?"

"No sign of anything like that."

"Do you have any idea what to look for?" Bayanhong asked the science officer.

Brigson answered, "No, but I would imagine that there would be some sort of power buildup, but I'm detecting nothing like that. Power levels are rising, but the flows are what we would consider normal."

"Meaning?"

"Whatever power is being generated is going into station systems, and

not being built up for something.”

“Very well,” Bayanhong replied. To DeWillis, she asked, “How reliable are these Arosian systems?”

“The Arosians were first-rate engineers,” the man replied, as he straightened up. “They built very robust and durable systems. Fifty years is hardly any time for their systems to degrade. The only surprise is that we somehow managed to activate the system, not that it could be activated. That was not my intention. I suspect that what happened was that some sort of control module could not do what we wanted it to do, so it activated other power systems to complete the request made to it.”

“And the self-destruct system?”

“The thing is, we don’t know if the self-destruct system activation code is stored within the system. We know that it was a distributed signal, and we know the frequency and the contents of that signal. Clearly, the system is not receiving it now, so if it is not stored in the system for later use, then there is no way for the self-destruct system to be activated. The station would still be waiting for the signal.”

“But when the signal was originally sent, why did it not activate the self-destruct system here?”

“I don’t know,” DeWillis answered. “According to the information I have, the signal was distributed, sent to hub stations, and those retransmitted it to secondary hubs, such as this station, and then the station transmitted it to the components under its control.”

“So, basically, the station would have received the signal, and then retransmitted it to what was under its control, such as the ships docked to it, including the ruined one?”

“Yes, so the station would transmit the signal, confirm that the activation has occurred, and once all the components were destroyed, it would follow and self-destruct. In other words, the station would retransmit the signal to the ships, and the *Athena* would detect that, and the ruined ship would go up first.”

“Along with the derelict that we encountered and the stolen one?”

“I’m not sure about the derelict ship since it has no power, but the stolen one, possibly.”

“So,” Bayanhong remarked, “if we could somehow force the station to transmit the destruct code, then the stolen ship would also be destroyed, and that would eliminate the danger that that ship is offering.”

“But we have no idea how to transmit that signal.”

Brigson then added, “But wait, would not the ship have to transmit a return code, to confirm that it got the self-destruct order and is acting on it?” DeWillis just nodded, so the science officer added, “And would that return signal not also identify the location of the ship?”

“Possibly, but I’m not completely certain, but... we have no idea how to do that.”

“Didn’t you just say that the frequency and the signal content is known?”

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“But it’s more complicated than that, I’m sure. We know what the destruct signal looks like, but embedded in that would be control and identification codes, which we do not know.”

“But could they be found here?”

“The retransmit codes, possibly,” DeWillis said, and he was beginning to see what the science officer was getting at, a possible way to locate the missing third ship.

While she was talking to the engineer, Brigson did have the tricorder access the computer system, using the supplied access codes and command prompts, to request certain data. She did say, “It looks like I have access, and can access the sensor logs and other details, so depending on what was recorded and how the system was inactive, I might be able to determine when the Remans came and when they took the third ship. I’m downloading files now.”

“How long?” the first officer asked.

“I don’t know... what, done... less data than I thought.”

“Oh,” Bayanhong remarked, surprised by that. She also had the feeling that there was not as much data as they had hoped. “Then we should return to the *Athena* and analyse the data.” She was still worried that the self-destruct system would spring a sudden surprise on her. Using the communications device on her environmental suit, Bayanhong contacted the ship, and said, “We got the data that we were looking for... perhaps.”

“Perhaps?” replied Thorpe from the bridge of the *Athena*.

“There’s not that much data, less than we expected. I have the feeling that we won’t get the answers that we are seeking here.”

“Understood.”

“Prepare to beam us back.”

“Okay.”

To DeWillis, she ordered, “Disconnect your equipment, as we’re preparing to return to the ship.”

The engineer asked, “We’re not going to look around here for awhile?”

“I’m always worried that we’ll somehow activate the self-destruct sequence.”

“I don’t believe that would happen, even if the signal data is stored here. The self-destruct is not acted on likely due to a computer issue, either intentional or not.”

“Intentional?”

“Someone might’ve made a coding error, so that the identification codes that the station has does not match what’s in the signal, so the station interprets the signal as not belonging to them and so ignores it. Given the sheer number of installations that the Arosians had, which had to run into the millions, coding errors are almost to be expected. No doubt that would count for the small number of installations that survived.”

“Like this one?”

“Perhaps.”

“Still,” Bayanhong replied, “I’d feel more comfortable back on the ship.” She watched as the engineer shut off the portable power device that he had brought along, as well as disconnecting the cables. Even as he did, the station’s own power remained on and some of the facility was operational. She activated the communications device again and said, “Bayanhong to *Athena*, four to beam back.”

“Understood,” Vorwoorts replied, and moments later, the four were converted to the wave state and transmitted back to the starship.

Once back on the ship, Brigson downloaded into the ship computer the data that she had acquired from the Arosian station and attempted to analyze it. She was disappointed on what she was getting. She reported, “The data here is not very useful.”

“What do you mean?” asked the captain.

“The last Arosians on the station were aware that the self-destruct signals were being transmitted, and they were waiting for the end, basically. It doesn’t say here what they were feeling or what they were expecting, but it would be hard to understand how they would feel knowing that their entire society was ending by their own hand. That’s just not a normal way for people to feel. I understand the cultural mindset of the Arosians, about how their society was rather militaristic and organized that way, and the concept of duty and sacrifice was drilled into them from the time they were born, but still... what could’ve been on their minds?”

Vorwoorts suggested, “Do you think that there’s any chance that the personnel on the station could’ve somehow tampered with the system to make sure that the station did not respond to the self-destruct signal?”

“I guess it’s possible, but the next question would be where would these Arosians go? If their society is self-destructing, that would not leave them many options. They could be pretty well trapped on the station.”

“Any evidence that they did?”

“Not that I’m aware of. However, as near as I can tell, there’s no data beyond the time frame of the self-destruct. Whoever among the Arosians were on the station and survived seemed to have turned off the station’s record-keeping system, because there’s no data after that point.”

“So,” Thorpe asked “no data on who accessed the station or who stole the ships, and when this happened?”

“No data at all, although I cannot be totally sure that there is no automated security data that is kept somewhere else. The station remains powered and active now, however.”

“Any signs of any kind of transmissions?”

“Noting that we have detected, which is kind of unusual.”

“Why?”

Brigson answered, “I’m sure that there would have been some kind of signal transmitted to a command and control system higher up on the Arosian

hierarchy, to indicate that station systems were online and they were waiting for updates.”

Vorwoorts reported, “Nothing has been transmitted, and we do know the frequencies and the coding parameters for such Arosian transmissions. It’s almost like this station was not meant to be part of the overall connected systems, much like the Battlesphere was not connected, and some other installations as well.”

“So we can further explore the station here?”

“That seems likely. I mean, if wakening the station would’ve activated the self-destruct system, it would’ve done so by now. The whole system was designed to work quickly so that the Arosians could not change their minds.”

Captain Thorpe did authorize teams to explore the station, with each team consisting of an engineer, an officer from the science department and a security officer. Though the station had power and artificial gravity came on, life support was not fully restored and so they had to continue to wear their environmental suits. Their objectives were to look for any signs of what happened to the original Arosian crew, and to find any evidence that the Remans or any other non-Arosians had been on the station, and to locate computer cores, engineering functions or anything else. Also included was moving through the ruined ship still docked to the station, though there, no light was present and the artificial gravity was still off.

The team led by Jules Torin returned to the *Athena*, and the second-shift science officer reported to the ready room. He said to the captain and the first officer, “Nothing to report, sir. It’s like the other missions to the station. There are no bodies, no clues as to what happened to the crew and nothing much about the technology or what else was here. We did examine the empty docking ports, and they’re undamaged and as far as we can tell, they’re in their default state.”

“What does that mean?” Bayanhong asked.

“It means that the ship that was docked there left in a normal manner. The connectives were retracted and the ship left as it was designed to do, and the equipment is in the ready state for the return of the ship. The ships were not freed by destroying the docking mechanism.”

“In other words, the docking connectives were released, probably from the ships themselves.”

“Yes.”

“And there’s no evidence on who might’ve taken the ships, or win?”

“Nothing that we can determine. Now, we can assume that when the ships were taken, the station was in its inert mode without life support. That means that those who were on the station would’ve been in environmental suits, and so they left behind no DNA or other evidence on who they were. It’s also unlikely that there are any security logs that were functional and recorded any presences on the station.”

The first officer did add, “What strikes me is that the station survived the

destruction of the Arosian Empire, and those ships sat there for forty years or more, untouched and unknown.”

“Perhaps,” Thorpe replied, “because they put it in a red dwarf system, and as you know, those tend to be ignored. The assumption has been that everything Arosian was destroyed so why go looking for something that doesn’t exist and why go looking in a red dwarf system for that? Usually, surviving Arosian facilities and the like have been discovered by accident.”

“And Remans, this far from their home, accidentally discovered this?”

“It’s possible, I guess, if the first group were essentially scavengers. The only other plausible theory is that the Remans somehow encountered the survivors from the station, though that would’ve been forty years or more after the fact.”

Torin added, “Another possible angle is that perhaps the Romulans and Remans had been spending time looking for Arosian relics. Remember, during the war with the Arosians, the Romulans suffered the most, as they bore the most direct blows of the Arosian attack. They believed that they had the right to any Arosian technology that was recovered. Then the Battlesphere appeared at Tomed, and the Romulans believed by rights that it belonged to them as the spoils of war. The Odonans managed to get it simply because they had somehow acquired the access and control codes for it. Perhaps the Romulans, seeing that the Battlesphere survived, thought that more relics might exist in Arosian space, and so they went looking for them.”

“And they found this place?” asked Bayanhong.

“Perhaps, though it clearly took a long time for them to find it. It’s just a theory, though.”

A short time later, Dewuchun met with the two senior officers in the ready room, once he had returned from his assignment on the station. “The reactor is a conventional fusion reactor, backed up with some battery systems, technology not that different from ours and nothing really out of the ordinary. The battery systems were depleted, so it took the power that Mark added to the system to set the reactor started. The thing is, we examined the reactor and found that there was no way that it was designed or rigged to explode on command, if you will. Fusion reactors tend to be meta-stable, meaning that if something goes wrong, they’re more likely to shut down than to explode. Most self-destruct systems tend to rely on antimatter reactors, but this station does not have one. We also saw nothing that suggests that the reactor could in some way lead to the destruction of the station.”

“So,” Bayanhong said, “that would imply that the station was not meant to be part of the self-destruct network, much like the Battlesphere itself.”

“Possibly,” replied the Odonan chief engineer. “We have pretty well mapped out the physical components of the communications systems, receivers and transmitters and so on, but we have not located any sort of communications control systems or computer systems and the like, so we cannot find any communications logs of incoming and outgoing signals.”

“Is it possible that they do not exist?”

“It’s possible, but unlikely. What we’re hoping to find are the communications logs, and see if we can identify the self-destruct signal and if the signal was transmitted to the ships. We know that even if there was no self-destruct mechanism, the station likely still received the signal. That’s what happened with the Battlesphere. They did get the signal, but weren’t programmed to respond to it.”

“So,” Thorpe added, “the idea is to somehow figure out what that signal was, and then transmit it to locate the missing ship, even if there’s no mechanism that would actually have the self-destruct order carried out.”

“That seems likely.”

“Then if we locate the third ship, how do we deal with it?”

“I don’t know,” Dewuchun remarked.

The captain was about to ask another question when he heard his commbadge chirp. Tapping it, he said, “Thorpe here.”

“Vorwoorts, sir,” came the reply from the tactical officer. “We just got an alert from the probe we left at the location of the abandoned star-destroyer ship. It has detected the arrival of another vessel at that location.”

“Can you identify it?”

“Yes. It’s the Battlesphere.”

* * *

Captain Thorpe and First Officer Bayanhong returned to the bridge. Thorpe, facing the tactical officer, asked, “When did it appear?”

“About fifteen minutes ago,” Vorwoorts replied, “taking into account transmission time.” She tapped at her console, and transferred to the main viewscreen an image that the probe had acquired and then transmitted to the *Athena*. The image was immediately recognizable. Most Starfleet officers and others who travelled in space had heard of the Battlesphere and likely seen pictures of it, and could recognize it on sight, even if most had never actually seen it before. The Battlesphere itself was a large vessel, the core being a sphere that was about two and a half kilometres in diameter, and the hull material was a dark gray with a matte finish, so it was kind of dark, and its surface was covered in hatches and panels and protrusions and the like, and in many ways it resembled a Borg cube or sphere in surface details. However, the Battlesphere had a very noticeable extra feature. Parallel to the plane of movement, essentially around the “equator” of the sphere, was a thick ring mounted to the sphere in four locations. This contained the engines and various ports and the like. The second set of rings was perpendicular to the first set and so went over the poles of the sphere. It was thick as well and had emitters all along its edge and similar structures on each side. The perpendicular rings generated what was the defining characteristic of the Battlesphere; that it could generate its own wormhole and travel great distances very quickly.

Thorpe asked, "I assume that it appeared by wormhole."

"Probably, but the probe did not record that."

Bayanhong asked, "The question is, how did the Odonans *know* that the star-destroyer ship was there? How was it informed?"

"No transmission along those lines was sent from the *Athena*," Vorwoorts remarked.

"But Rodall did send requests of information to the Odonans, and they were likely directed at the Battlesphere and those who operated it." Facing the engineer, Bayanhong asked, "Did you transmit any information on the location of that ship?"

"No," Dewuchun replied. "However, I did have to transmit some information on the ship itself to get the necessary information back. They likely assumed that we had encountered the ship and was perhaps tracking the source of the communications, which is something that we cannot really hide."

"Is it possible that the ship managed to transmit some sort of signal that alerted the Odonans to its presence, but they ignored it because they could not independently verify its existence, at least until our requests for information were sent?"

"I don't know."

Thorpe had his own questions. "Can we hail it?"

"At this distance," Vorwoorts remarked, "communications would not be instantaneous. There would be a lag."

"What would the crew size be?"

"Unknown."

Dewuchun did have an answer, "Probably no more than a couple of hundred, since the Battlesphere is highly automated."

Bayanhong asked, "Do you think that they know where we are and what's here?"

"I don't know. I'm not fully sure that this installation is in the official list of installations that the Battlesphere would have."

Thorpe did say, "Commander Vorwoorts, send a hailing transmission to the Battlesphere, and let's see what it is doing here and its plans."

"Very well," the tactical officer replied, and she set up the communications hail and transmitted it. Due to the distance between the location of the derelict ship and the red dwarf system that the *Athena* was in, the transmission time would be up to five minutes. "Hailing message sent. Now we have to wait for a reply." More data did come through the probe, so Vorwoorts reported, "Transporter activity was detected. I think that crewmembers from the Battlesphere beamed over to the star-destroyer ship."

"Could they make that ship operational again?"

Dewuchun answered, "It's possible, but the drive crystals had been removed or destroyed by the Remans, or whoever was on board that ship, and it has no fuel. Without the crystals, the ship would be useless and the drive crystals we have access to would likely not be large enough for a ship of that size."

“But they could salvage the technology on board?”

“Possibly.”

Now all they had to do was wait for those on the Battlesphere to respond, though Thorpe was wondering if the alien craft would respond in an unexpected way, such as generating a wormhole and showing up at their current location. On the other hand, if they had crewmembers beam onto the derelict ship, then it was less likely to depart and leave them behind. Thorpe did get back to what they were attempting to do originally. “So far, there’s no indication that we can possibly send the self-destruct signal from here to locate the third ship?”

“It would be complicated,” Dewuchun remarked. “We don’t know how to do it or what the signal would contain and we have no way of knowing if the Remans on board—or whoever is on that ship—has disabled that function.”

“Assuming they know how to do it,” Thorpe replied.

“That’s true.”

Brigson spoke up, “Would the crew on the Battlesphere know the process?”

“That’s possible. We would have to ask them, and hope that they would cooperate.”

“I think that it would be in everybody’s best interest to find the third ship, to prevent it from being used against another world.”

“Although,” Bayanhong added, “there is still the question that they had that ship for upto eight and a half years, and they have not used it, or the second one, on any other stars besides the ones we had seen.”

“As far as we know,” Brigson replied. “We can’t keep tabs on every single star in the galaxy, or even this part of the galaxy.”

Then Vorwoorts spoke up, saying, “Incoming message, and I’m assuming that it’s from the Battlesphere. It’s visual.”

Thorpe ordered, “On screen when we have it.”

A few seconds later, the screen changed from showing the exterior of the Arosian station to the interior of the control deck of the Battlesphere, though the image transmitted only showed a small section of what had been described as a rather large area. Centred in the image was an Odonan woman wearing the uniform of the Odonan Space Service, and judging by the darkness of her skin, she was on the old side. She was the one who spoke, “This is Commander Alito Ngezhavara, commanding officer of the Battlesphere. We were sent out when we detected a signal transmitted by an Arosian installation that upto now we presumed had been destroyed by the Arosian self-destruct command.” Already, Thorpe and the others on the bridge were having questions, and wished that this was a more interactive communications than what was happening. “In the process, we detected a secondary signal that referred us to this location and this derelict ship.”

“You mean,” Bayanhong said, “that somehow the station here sent a signal, but *when*?”

Thorpe added, “But does that mean they know the location of the *third*

ship?”

Almost simultaneously, Brigson was asking, “How much about this place do they know?”

Ngezhavara continued, “We decided to investigate this particular artifact first, as it was an unexpected size and it provided a function that we were not aware that the Arosians had. There is no evidence in the database or the Arosian historical record of such technology or that they had used such tactics. We will be in touch.” The message did end, and the nature of the way the Odonan woman ended it did strike some on the bridge as a little arrogant, as if the Battlesphere and its commander was taking over whatever the *Athena* was doing. Then again, that was almost the nature of communications exchanges when they could not be instantaneous or with minor lag.

Thorpe had the first question, “If when we reactivated the station—and presumably the Remans did not—it transmitted a signal, why did we not detect it?”

“I’m not sure,” Vorwoorts replied. “We can do a review of the sensor logs, as perhaps the signal sent was in a non-conventional manner.”

Dewuchun added, “They might’ve used a third-level or Dirac communications system, which is faster than subspace, but very limited in the bandwidth and what can be transmitted. It’s a variant of quantum entanglement, and limited to data only, low-bandwidth data.”

“Can we detect that?”

“Likely not because the transmitter and receiver have to be calibrated, and presumably the Battlesphere has the necessary equipment.”

Thorpe asked, “Is such a unit on this station?”

“More than likely, if it exists, but there’s a lot of machinery on board the station that we could not readily identify, although in time we could. However, the Arosians did not use that particular method of communications to send their self-destruct signal. We know that. Of course, I’m just speculating here on why we did not detect any signal that the station sent when the power came back on, but it seems plausible since the Battlesphere appeared to detect that signal far faster than a subspace signal would reach them.”

“Of course,” the captain replied. “We could always ask Commander Ngezhavara about that.”

“If she’s willing to admit that she has such technology.”

Bayanhong asked, “If they do, then would they also know the location of the third ship? They detected the derelict, probably through the same method, and went there to investigate it.”

Thorpe decided to find out. “Commander Vorwoorts, prepare the next transmission.”

“Ready,” she said.

“This is Captain Leonard Thorpe of the Federation starship *Athena*. We are at the Arosian station that you referred to, and we surmise that you have detected a signal transmitted from this station when the power was brought

online here. That also appeared to generate a signal from the derelict ship that you are now investigating. A second ship is located at the station here and has been damaged and is inoperable. The third ship that would've been docked here is missing. We suspect that a Reman group is in possession of it. They used the derelict ship to test the star-destroying weapon on board, and one of the stars that they destroyed had a class-M planet with a sentient culture on it. About a hundred and twenty survivors of that culture remain. It is our fear that the Remans might've been testing the capabilities of the ship, and now they might use at some other location for a purpose that we do not know yet. Have you detected a signal from that ship?" Thorpe stopped speaking, and gave Vorwoorts a slight nod to indicate that he had finished speaking.

A few seconds later, Vorwoorts reported, "Message sent."

"And now we wait again," sighed the first officer, as she made herself comfortable in the chair.

A little over five minutes passed from the time the message was sent to when the response came. Vorwoorts reported, "Incoming transmission."

"On screen," Thorpe ordered.

The image of Ngezhavara sitting in her chair on the command deck of the Battlesphere appeared again. She started, "We did detect a secondary signal from the ship we are now investigating, but there were no other signals detected. You state that one ship remains at the station and is in disrepair and a third ship is missing. You suspect that Remans are in possession of this ship. However, we are considering the possibility that Arosians are in possession of it."

"What Arosians?" muttered Bayanhong.

The Odonan commander continued, "It has been established that Arosian installations that should've been destroyed when the self-destruct directive was sent but were not was because those on board somehow prevented the destruction and so survived the demise of the Arosian Empire. It's possible that the crew departed on the third ship and perhaps sabotaged the comm system so that the self-destruct signal could not be received. That ship could've headed to some other location and that is what we could be investigating. It's only been fifty years, and so it is possible that if Arosians fled the station and somehow avoided the self-destruct directive, they could still be alive somewhere. That is what we are investigating. Did you find any signs of Arosian occupation of the station, or bodies, or any records on what happened to the personnel on the station?"

Bayanhong did say, "Now that's an unexpected idea."

Vorwoorts added, "Might it be possible that the Remans are not involved at all in this?"

"Well, we did find evidence of a Reman presence at the other red dwarf system we investigated," Brigson started. "Perhaps what happened was that the Arosian survivors took the third ship and headed somewhere else, and the Remans got their hands on the second ship. That could explain why they destroyed those stars eight and a half years ago and nothing has been heard from them since, once they abandoned that ship."

“Possible,” Thorpe replied. “During our time on the station, did we find any bodies or signs of occupation?”

“No bodies,” security chief Sal Hakamura reported, “but we were not looking for an extended presence of Arosians on the station after the destruction of the empire, and probably would not recognize such signs if we saw them.”

“Of course, but if the Remans do not have the third ship, then that solves the problem from our point of view. Commander Ngezhavara can search for lost Arosians if that is her mission, but that would be rather risky because of *over-himpenyon* and the rest.”

“I’m sure that she’s aware of that and would take the necessary precautions, but her search for survivors could be a long one, and there’s no proof that the Arosians did indeed take that ship and not the Remans. Without firm proof, we can’t be sure that there is no risk that the Remans might still use the star-destroying capabilities of that ship.”

“But,” Vorwoorts remarked, “if the Remans have the ship and somehow disabled the communications technology, that would imply that they have identified and somehow understand that technology.”

“Or worse, the Remans and the Arosians are collaborating.”

“Not likely,” Bayanhong replied.

“Why?” asked Hakamura.

“Would not the Battlesphere, and the Odonans in general, already have detected the signal that they detected now and brought them here?”

“Something is not right here, unless the Arosian survivors deactivated that comm system before the Odonans had full control and understanding of the Battlesphere—and that would make the collaboration between the Remans and the Arosians less likely.”

“Unless,” Vorwoorts speculated, “the Remans did not find this station, but they found the Arosian survivors instead, and the information from them led the Remans to take that second ship and destroy those stars, testing some scheme that would allow the Arosians to get back at those that caused what happened to them.”

Brigson said, “That makes me wonder if Commander Ngezhavara knows the location of the Arosian survivor group, and is approaching the matter cautiously.”

“So many questions,” sighed Bayanhong. “How willing is Ngezhavara to provide the answers?”

“Probably not to us anyway.”

Thorpe had Vorwoorts set up another communication to the Battlesphere, and when she was ready, he started, “Our primary interest is finding out who was in control of the star-destroying ship when it destroyed those stars, including one we have assigned the name Cheshire to, the star in which there was an inhabited planet with a sentient species that has been all but destroyed. We are concerned that the missing third ship could be in their hands and that they could strike again. Information that would help us track down that ship and who

is operating it would be most helpful. If you are aware of the location of an Arosian survivor group, that would be useful information too, as I would imagine it would be risky for a vessel full of Odonans to have direct contact with them.”

A few seconds after Thorpe stopped speaking, Vorwoorts remarked, “The message has been sent.”

Bayanhong asked, “What do you think would be the reaction of the Odonan commander?”

“No idea,” Thorpe replied. “I don’t know how much she knows. It’s certainly possible that she could be in the dark about this, and has made the assumption that if an Arosian installation that should’ve been destroyed but was not, that would imply that the crew sabotaged it and so members of that crew should have survived. It’s only been fifty years, and for a group like the Arosians, related to the Odonans, that is not a long period of time.”

Brigson started, “If the crew left the station and went to a planet, they probably did not travel far and certainly would not have gone to an Arosian world. We should search for class-M planets, suitable places for Arosian refugees, close to here. We have the probe data.”

“Very well,” Thorpe replied. “Go ahead and conduct a search. We probably don’t know if such planets have sentient life on them, though.”

Hakamura added, “Perhaps we should conduct further searches on the station to learn if the crew did survive and how many there might’ve been and where they could have gone.”

“Yes, go ahead and do that,” Thorpe replied, and then watched as Hakamura left the bridge.

Bayanhong did ask, “Do you think that there are Arosian survivors somewhere?”

“Well, if the station did not self-destruct, then the crew had to go somewhere. We have no idea how many there were on the station, and it’s possible that they went to multiple locations. We really don’t know.”

More than five minutes passed and they did not hear from Commander Ngezhavara, which was a little concerning, Thorpe thought. Brigson did continue her research in possible locations where the Arosian survivors could have gone, but she was not finding much. “Captain,” she finally said, “I have concluded the search for inhabitable planets closest to this system, and the fact is that this section of the galaxy is rather empty, which might explain why the Arosians put this here. The closest class-M planet is in fact Cheshire.”

“Would the survivors have gone there?” Thorpe asked.

“I’m pretty certain that they would be aware of its existence.”

The captain tapped his commbadge, and said, “Thorpe to Lieutenant Quintollez.”

“Quintollez here, sir,” came the prompt reply.

“Can you bring Anak-Ipa to the bridge?”

“Right away, sir,” the protocol officer replied.

Bayanhong had an idea of what Thorpe was going to ask, but she still

said, "I got the implication that the Cheshirians did not have any alien contact prior to the destruction of their star."

"That happened eight and a half years ago, but the Arosians visiting the system would've happened fifty years ago. Perhaps they were not able to link the events, or perhaps alien visitation to their world was something that was kept a state secret. Allegedly, that happened on Earth before the Vulcans made their impossible-to-miss first contact in the latter part of the twenty-first century."

"Of course, but the story from Burnt River has never been officially confirmed."

"I know."

Vorwoorts spoke up, saying, "The probe has just transmitted new information. The Battlesphere launched a smaller vessel that is remaining with the derelict, and the Battlesphere is departing and seems to be powering up their wormhole generator."

"Where are they heading?" Bayanhong asked.

"My guess," Thorpe answered, "is right here."

Seemingly as soon as the words came out of his mouth, the red alert klaxons came on. Vorwoorts reported, "Detecting a wormhole forming, approximately two thousand kilometres at three hundred degrees, inclination forty degrees." The viewscreen imaging system immediately adjusted the display to show that location in space. A disk of dull red appeared and then quickly expanded, and in the centre, the colours went through the spectrum to indigo, and then that seeming opening in the fabric of space spread outwards and appeared to solidify into the dark and flat gray metal exterior of the Battlesphere. The massive Arosian vessel seemingly consumed the disk of colour until it was solid and whole, with those colours apparently drawn into the perpendicular ring structure that generated the wormhole. The lights on that ring soon faded, while the engine emitters on the horizontal ring glowed brightly to slow the vessel down. Still, it passed over the *Athena* and over the Arosian station, slowing down as it did. The screen orientation remained fixed on the Battlesphere.

"That is something else," Indesakar remarked.

"A little scary if you ask me," Brigson added.

"Fortunately, the aliens on board are not hostile."

The doors to the bridge opened, and Quintollez came onto the bridge, with Anak-Ipa alongside her. The Cheshirian came down to the middle level of the bridge, and he looked around and mostly at the viewscreen, because he could tell that most of the bridge officers were looking at it too. "What is that?" he asked, as he sat down in the seat to the left of the captain.

"That is the Arosian Battlesphere," Thorpe answered.

"That's not from the same people that destroyed our world, is it?"

"No, not that. We know who did that."

Vorwoorts then said, "Captain, we're being hailed."

At least this time, Thorpe knew, there would be no lag in the communications. "Respond to it."

* * *

The image of the Battlesphere on the main viewscreen was replaced by that of the command deck of that very large vessel, and seated there, in the middle of the screen, was the dark-skinned Odonan commander, who did seemingly have this satisfied look on her face, Thorpe thought. Then again, she was commanding perhaps the most impressive vessel in the known galaxy—at least upto the discovery of those star-destroyer ships, which were even more massive than the Battlesphere. Ngezhavara started to speak, “Captain, we decided to bring the Battlesphere here, while a research crew was left behind at the derelict ship to see if they can get it operational again. The problem seems to be that it is out of fuel. Once we know how to power it, we can learn more about it.”

“So you’re claiming salvage rights?” Thorpe asked,

“By the Second Detiian Treaty, Arosian artifacts belong to us.”

Anak-Ipa now spoke up, saying, “That is the vessel that destroyed my world! By rights, it should belong to us as reparations.”

Ngezhavara responded, “Who is that with you on the bridge, captain? I do not recognize the species.”

Thorpe answered, “He is Anak-Ipa, a representative of the Cheshirians, from the world whose star was destroyed by the star-destroyer ship, which of course led to the demise of his society and the death of pretty well all of his people, with about a hundred and twenty survivors.”

“Oh,” the Odonan commander replied, seemingly softening a bit. “I am... sorry for the loss of your culture and your people.”

Anak-Ipa asked, “But you are not the people that are responsible for the destruction?”

“No. We do not know who is responsible. It is not us, nor is it the survivors from the race that built the ship. They were destroyed well before the time of the destruction of your star.”

Bayanhong spoke up, saying, “Are you sure of that, commander?”

“What do you mean?”

“Right now, we have more questions than answers.”

“So do we. Perhaps we need to meet.”

“On board the Battlesphere?”

“No, it would be best to meet on board your ship,” Ngezhavara replied, and nobody on the bridge was surprised at that, because as far as Thorpe and the others knew, no non-Odonan had been on that vessel since the Odonans gained control of it. The whole thing was classified as restricted and only individuals with the highest levels of clearance were allowed on board.

“Of course,” Thorpe said. “We’ll make arrangements for you to come on board.”

“Very well.”

Once the communications was terminated, Anak-Ipa asked, “Captain, did you have me come to the bridge to see that alien vessel and that alien com-

mander?"

"No. I wanted to ask you another question. We have reason to believe that the crew of this station here somehow prevented a self-destruct mechanism from destroying it and killing them at the end of the Arosian Empire. The survivors then left the station and presumably looked for an inhabitable world where they could settle. The closest inhabitable world to this location is your planet. Now, I'm pretty sure that they did not settle there, but, to your knowledge, did they appear there? Did any government organization on your planet have contact with an alien race, approximately fifty years ago?"

Anak-Ipa replied, "As far as I know, as far as it is generally known among my people, we had no alien visitation to our world until the star-destroying ship came. Now, it is possible that there was a secret visit that only some knew about because the government did not want the people in general to know, but if that happened, I would not know."

"Would any of your fellow survivors know?"

"I don't know. If the aliens came in a vessel like that one—" He gestured towards the viewscreen, which was again displaying the Battlesphere. "—that could not be hidden."

"Of course, but it's possible that the alien visitors would've come on a much smaller ship, a scout vessel basically, and they might've had contact with your government. It's unlikely that they would've settled on your world, though, because something like that could not be hidden."

"As far as I know, nothing like that happened."

Bayanhong asked, "No rumours, no stories that circulated, despite being denied by the government, nothing like that?"

"I'm not aware of any such stories," the Cheshirian replied.

"Okay," Thorpe replied. "If there was any contact between the Arosians and the Cheshirian government fifty years ago, it was effectively kept a secret, and so ultimately had no impact on your society at the time."

Bayanhong added, "So we need to look further for a possible location where the Arosian survivors would've gone."

About fifteen minutes later, Commander Alito Ngezhavara and her executive officer, Maradad Ibewavori, beamed on board the *Athena* and were escorted to the conference lounge on deck one by Quintollez. Waiting for them were Thorpe and Bayanhong, along with Dewuchun and Anak-Ipa. Both Odonans were on the short side, even shorter than Dewuchun. Ibewavori, like Ngezhavara, had a fairly dark complexion, indicating that they were noticeably older individuals than the chief engineer.

Thorpe did stand up, and said, "Welcome on board the Federation starship *Athena*. I'm Captain Leonard Thorpe, and this is my first officer, Julia Bayanhong, and my chief engineer, Rodall Dewuchun, and the Cheshirian representative, Anak-Ipa."

Ngezhavara was not surprised at all by the presence of an Odonan on a

Federation starship, but Thorpe surmised that she knew that already. As soon as they knew that they were dealing with the *Athena*, she would have learned that. She did say, "I see that you are a long way from home. Are you also out here investigating Arosian ruins?"

"No," Thorpe replied. "We were in this region of space on an unrelated matter, which has since concluded. We were on our way back home when we noticed that one of the stars that we were using for navigation purposes simply disappeared. Stars do not simply disappear, and so we investigated. That was how we came across Anak-Ipa's world and learned what happened to it. We then determined that some other stars disappeared and we learned what kind of ship was involved, the star-destroying ship, the derelict that you encountered. We also saw evidence that the Remans are involved."

Ngezhavara remarked, "I get the impression that the action of the derelict ship was some time ago. Our own investigation indicates that the ship had been abandoned for years."

"Eight and a half years," Bayanhong replied. "That was when Cheshire was destroyed. Other stars that were destroyed came earlier, and formed a trail that basically led us to here."

"And why would the Remans do this?"

Thorpe answered, "We suspect that they were testing the star-destroying weapon, and when the ship they were on ran out of power, and they did not know how to refuel it, they returned to this station and took the third ship."

"Do you have any evidence that this sort of activity occurred on this station?"

Dewuchun now answered, "We attempted to access the computer system here, by using an external power supply and connectives adapted for Arosian systems. That prompted the station to come back online."

"Which in turn transmitted the signal that we picked up and which prompted us to conduct this mission."

"The question then is, did the signal generated from this station, which we could not detect but you apparently could, also somehow prompt the derelict to transmit a signal too?"

Ngezhavara gave a simple answer that surprised the Federation officers, "Yes." Thorpe did not say so, but that would explain why they investigated that ship first. She then asked, "Did your search of the computer records show any activity on the station, especially in the time frame of the attacks on those stars?"

"No," Dewuchun replied. "There's no data. The only data we could recover leads up to the time the self-destruct signal was transmitted."

"Which the crew on this station apparently modified or sabotaged to prevent the self-destruct from being carried out. The Battlesphere has records on this installation, but not what the purpose of the ships were, and it was one that should've been destroyed because of the technology involved. Up to now, we were under the impression that this facility and the ships attached to it were attempting to duplicate the wormhole generating technology employed in the Battle-

sphere.”

‘And you never checked that out?’ Bayanhong asked.

‘We were under the assumption that the station here had been destroyed. We were quite surprised to receive that signal from the station.’

‘And you only received a signal from the one ship?’

‘Just one.’

‘But there was more than one ship here. There were three berths.’

‘And we can see one ship here, and our sensor systems indicate it is in poor, non-operational condition.’

‘And you have no idea where the third ship is?’ Bayanhong asked.

‘No,’ Ngezhavara replied. ‘We detected no signal from it. We are assuming it exists. We would need to consult the computer on the station for that information, to confirm that it even exists. Perhaps they intended to build three, but only made two. The Battlesphere has information on the station but not on the ships themselves, as it seems possible that these ships might’ve been developed and built at the very end of the Arosian Empire’s existence.’

‘So no idea on where the third ship is or who controls it and what their plans are?’

‘None at all,’ the Odonan replied, and neither Thorpe nor Bayanhong had no reason to disbelieve or—or believe her either. ‘We should go on board the station and see what information is available.’

Dewuchun asked, ‘And the Battlesphere contains information that would help us?’

‘Of course.’

Thorpe added, ‘Whatever happens on the station, it should be a joint mission, members of your crew and mine.’

‘Of course,’ Ngezhavara repeated.

A short time later, an away team of four rematerialized inside the Arosian station. From the *Athena* came Dewuchun and another engineer, Lieutenant Erik Skolgaad, who had expertise in alien engineering systems. From the Battlesphere came its primary engineer, Jhatop Wan, and a computer specialist, Neomana Ye’oud, who was familiar with Arosian systems, as she had studied extensively on the systems on the Battlesphere, and as far as they knew, systems on this station were similar to what was on the Battlesphere. Wan had with him an Odonan tricorder, and downloaded on that was a detailed map of the station copied from the database on the Battlesphere.

Skolgaad, who had to speak through the universal translator implant because he did not speak Odonian, did say, ‘The Battlesphere contains quite a bit of information on the Arosians.’

Ye’oud answered, ‘It was essentially the command centre for the empire, and a repository for the history and technology of the Arosians.’

The group was walking towards the computer access centre, and they were able to operate in their standard uniforms because life support, including

gravity, had come fully back on. The conditions were Odonan-normal, though, so Skolgaad had on the heavier uniform jacket. They did not want to beam directly into the computer core area because they were uncertain what they would see there. The plans indicated where they could beam in, but the shielding did block most sensor beams. The shielding, of course, was designed to prevent the scanning of the memory core and an attempt to either disrupt the data stored there, or to read it.

“And somehow it survived the self-destruction of the empire?”

“That was intentional,” the Odonan woman explained. “The Battlesphere was meant to be a mobile command centre for the government of the empire in times of crisis, and a chance for the ruling elite to escape somehow should the empire collapse. There is quite a bit of data in the memory banks on the Battlesphere, so we have a pretty good idea what the Arosians were like, the extent of the empire, the history, and a lot of the technology as well. Other than in a few areas, such as the wormhole generator, they were hardly more advanced than us. Their advantage was that they had a large quantity of higher-order hypermatter at their disposal, and that was the source of their power and their strength.”

They arrived at what Wan had said was the primary entrance to the computer core, but the door did not open for them. He, with an assist from Dewuchun, disassembled a panel by the door in an attempt to bypass the locking mechanism. As they did that, Skolgaad and Ye'oud stood back, with the human continuing the conversation. He said, “I still find it hard to believe that the Arosians actually had set up their society to self-destruct if their defeat seemed certain, and that they would do it. The desire to live had to be strong in many of the people.”

“And perhaps it is,” Ye'oud replied. “Afterall, the crew of this station managed to somehow block the self-destruct. We have encountered or heard about other such survivor groups, but in many cases, the *overhimpennyon* caught up with them. That's possible with the survivors from this station as well, but we don't know.”

“But wouldn't approaching any survivors be risky?”

“We have protocols in place. There would be no direct contact with them, and we would have to inform them of the condition that they are existing under and the potential risks.”

Skolgaad asked, “Is it true that there's no cure for *overhimpennyon*?”

“There isn't, and that's almost by design. In us, modern Odonans, *overhimpennyon* is our immune system. It suppresses the original one at birth, because we have the right genes. If, for whatever reason, a fetus does not have the right genes, it dies in the womb and the birth is stillborn. In those without the right genes, *overhimpennyon* reprograms the immune system to turn on the body, and it is the immune system that does the damage, and it does it very quickly.”

“Yeah, I do remember the stories, about how the Arosians would go to bed feeling well and then never wake up, and I heard that the incubation period is

long and there are no symptoms until the end.”

“Essentially, yeah.”

“But it seems strange that a disease like that would evolve, since it seems that how it acts would not be beneficial to the disease vector itself.”

“That’s because the disease is not a naturally-evolving one, but is a created disease, a biological weapon. Clearly, it was made to eradicate the Kroosians from the galaxy. The only question that remains, and which nobody has an answer for, is whether another alien race created this disease, or we created it ourselves.”

“I had heard that story,” Skolgaad remarked. “It’s like your ancestors decided to destroy the Kroosians in a way that allowed them to survive.”

“Perhaps. What we know from Kroosian history, and which was amplified among the Arosians, as told by the data on the Battlesphere, was that the Kroosians were highly stratified. Society was divided into many levels, castes if you will, and the caste you were born in was the caste you lived your life in. That limited who your mate could be and what role you would play in society. Thus, genetic markers appeared that would identify a person as belonging to a particular caste, and so you could not escape that. The Arosians took that to an extreme. At least in Kroosian society, we had scientists and artists and craftsmen and so many others, but the Arosians had just the military garrison, so every Arosian had the genetic markers found in the military castes and none of the other ones. As far as we can tell, there was less genetic variation among the Arosians than there is among us, and we’re known as a race with one of the most limited genetic variation in the Known Galaxy.” Oddly, looking at the three Odonans, Skolgaad could see that. Other than the males having slightly deeper voices than Ye’oud and perhaps a centimetre or two in height, they were really indistinguishable from the female Odonan, and all three had very similar appearances. Ye’oud continued, “That made the Arosians especially vulnerable to *overhimpennyon*, since as an artificially-created disease, it was mostly directed at the military castes, and the Arosians all came from that. Still, there have been some reports of Arosians who were infected and survived. If the disease cannot turn the immune system against the body, then there are no symptoms.”

“I see,” the engineer replied, and he was standing there perhaps learning more than he needed to know about *overhimpennyon*.”

Then Dewuchun called out, “A little help here might be useful.”

The two engineers had been unable to override the locking mechanism, but they had somehow altered it so that the doors could be pushed open. However, Dewuchun and Wan did not have the strength to do it themselves. Skolgaad saw what the two were doing, and so asked, “You need more muscle?”

“Either that or a hydraulic spreader from the ship.”

“We can try that next.” Skolgaad and Ye’oud got into position and they added their strength to the other two, and slowly, they were able to pry the doors far enough apart that the slender and generally more diminutive Odonans could squeeze through, and though Skolgaad was fit and trim, he stood almost a metre

ninety, towering over the Odonans, and it was more difficult for him to force his way through. He eventually did get through. The computer core control room seemed to be intact. The displays were all off, but the room was lit and the atmosphere breathable, and there was no physical damage or deterioration. The core itself was a thick cylinder, covered in glossy black metal, that dominated the centre of the room, extending from the floor through the ceiling, and undoubtedly through more decks above and below. A ring of consoles and display screens surrounded the core.

Dewuchun, seeing Ye'oud approached, asked, "Can you operate this?"

"If this is a standard Arosian computer core from the Late Period, I can."

"And you have access codes?"

"High level codes."

Now Dewuchun could just stand there and watch the woman work. She had a specially-adapted tricorder with her, and it used a physical cable to patch into the system. She found the necessary access port, and plugged her device. Nothing seemed to change, but she stood there tapping in instructions on the tricorder she was holding.

"She can do it?" Dewuchun asked Wan, as the two men stood back and waited.

"She should be able to, unless this computer system is fundamentally different from the standard Arosian system."

"I just hope that she doesn't inadvertently trip the self-destruct system."

"Yeah," Wan admitted, "that's a worry, but I'm sure the system will come on before that could happen."

While they waited, Dewuchun asked the other man, "How long have you been on the Battlesphere?"

"Twelve years now."

"So you were on the Battlesphere when they were seriously considering sending it to the Gamma Quadrant to destroy the Founder's Planet during the Dominion War?"

"I was, and yes, they were considering that, and we were planning for it, although we had never taken the Battlesphere for such a distance and did not fully know if it was capable of making such a journey. There was also the fear that it would be a one-way mission. We would go there, destroy the planet somehow, and be unable to return and be destroyed by the Dominion warships in turn. Thus, it was a mission of last resort, if it looked like the Dominion was going to win the war and our continued existence was at stake."

"The irony there."

"What do you mean?"

"All of this talk about what to do if defeat and destruction seemed certain. The Arosians choose to self-destruct, and we decided that if we were going to lose, we would wipe out the Founders with our last moves."

"It's in the motto," Wan replied, "to rule no others, to be ruled by no others, especially that last part. It's in our nature, and I'm pretty sure that he

Arosians felt the same way.”

“Still, the technology on the Battlesphere must be amazing.”

“It is, and even after fifty years, we do not fully understand the wormhole generator, and nobody wants to take it apart to see how it works in case we can’t put it back together again. Thus, we might find some useful information here, since it seems that the Arosians, to operate these truly massive ships—the largest I have ever seen or even heard about—needed that technology to move them. Perhaps they had solved some of the problems and we can get that information now.”

“You know, someday, I would welcome the chance to go on the Battlesphere and look around.”

Wan answered, “That’s not likely to happen anytime soon. Access to the Battlesphere is strictly limited, even among the Odonans, even among starship engineers with your long experience.”

“And because I’m currently an exchange officer on a Federation starship?”

“Not likely,” Wan said, looking ahead and watching Ye’oud work. Skolgaad was also in the room, examining the alien machinery but probably not learning very much by look and touch alone. He was keeping his engineering tricorder off and clipped to the equipment belt now. “Your loyalty is not in question and we have no quarrel with the Federation. The *Athena* has an admirable record, as you can do things with your Odonan warp core that most other ships cannot do. Still, access to the Battlesphere is strictly limited and only those who will be working on it are allowed access. There are no tours.”

“What is the crew size?”

“Four hundred and fourty.”

“So there is a lot of room.”

“Lots and lots of empty space that stays empty. On the other hand, it rarely goes on missions. Four times a year we take it out to test the wormhole generator and make sure it is in operational condition, but this is the first real mission for it in a long time.”

Then the computer screens came on, and graphics and information appeared on those screens. “I’m in,” Ye’oud said, sounding a little excited. “I got access.”

“And hopefully, without tripping the self-destruct.”

Dewuchun approached the screens. The writing on them looked vaguely familiar, which was not a surprise. The current Odonien alphabet was based on the alphabet of Old Kroosian, with only a few slight modifications and a couple of additional characters. The Arosians used the same alphabet and so the letters for the most part looked the same, even if the Arosians had digitized them slightly differently than the Odonans had. On the other hand, Odonien was derived from a small, obscure dialect, while the Arosian language was a more direct descendant of Old Kroosian. Though the Arosian language was well-understood now, Dewuchun could not read it. The letters were for the most part familiar, but the words

were not.

Ye'oud could read the language, and was soon sitting down on a chair that somehow looked virtually without any sign of wear or age, and which supported her weight. She entered commands, and that caused the displays to change. Wan approached, and asked, "Anything?"

"I'm attempting to access sensor and communications logs. I can get into the data before the time that the self-destruct signal was sent, but not afterwards."

Dewuchun said, "We had already gotten some of that."

"I know, but I'm getting into the archives... there... there it is."

"What?" asked Wan.

On the large display screen above the console that Ye'oud was operating, a graphic of the station appeared, and it was pretty detailed, with lots of labelling in a language that Dewuchun could not read. In addition to the station, the graphic showed three of the huge star-destroying ships docked to the station, and though the station was not exactly small, it looked diminutive compared to the ships docked to it. Even Dewuchun could see that. "There were three ships?"

"Yes," Ye'oud replied. "The Arosians did build three of those star-destroyer ships, and that was the purpose of the ships. They were designed to destroy the stars about which planets occupied by a sentient race orbited."

"Genocide on a massive scale," Dewuchun remarked.

"Indeed. It was an extension of the Arosian military orders to remain hidden, and to destroy anybody that learned of their existence. For the most part, they left alone races that did not have interstellar travel abilities, and in this region of space, large stellar realms did not develop, besides the Arosians' own. However, this project started because the Arosians were becoming aware of... this." Another image appeared on the screen, and the others looking at it recognized it as a map of a section of the galaxy, and there were a number of symbols clustered together. Ye'oud explained, "The Arosians were starting to see this, a large collection of non-natural sources of subetheromagnetic radiation, and to them, there was only one explanation for this, sentient species with interstellar flight capabilities. What's more, they saw this pattern as a collection of societies that were connected—and they were right. These are non-natural subetheromagnetic radiation sources from us Odonans, the Federation, the Klingons, the Romulans, the Cardassians, the Ksassans, the Korpeians, and all the rest. They feared that if they encountered this group, they might not be able to remain hidden and unknown to others, so they came up with this idea—I'm presuming—to create star-destroying ships that would seek out those sources and destroy them, pre-emptively."

"Oh," Wan said softly, thinking of the consequences.

"But they never got it started. The ships were operational, but the star-destroying weapon was untested. That's the information that goes up to the time of the self-destruct signal. I got nothing, no communications from Kazmarine about the status of the star-destroyers once the war started."

“By then, it might’ve been too late.”

“Probably.”

Dewuchun asked, “What about the third ship? Could that still be out there, with Arosians manning it... with retribution on their minds?”

“Unknown.” Ye’oud entered more commands, and then said, “I’m getting error logs now, and this is from after the end of the Arosian Empire. They indicate faults with the docking mechanisms of the ships, all three of them.”

“That might be consistent with those on board using mechanisms on the ships themselves to release the ships and let them operate independently.”

“So the Arosians fleeing the station fifty years ago did not take any of the ships, but they abandoned the station and the ships?”

“Apparently so. The dating here is faulty because the dating on these logs is based on signals from the Arosian navigational grid, which after the demise of the empire did not exist, but I’m thinking it occurred after the destruction.”

“Eight and a half or more years ago when the Remans came across this station.”

“*How* did they find this place?” Wan answered.

“We don’t know. It’s possible they found the Arosian survivors first,” Dewuchun replied. “We need to know where they went.”

Ye’oud continued checking logs and information, and then said, “I think I got something. I think this is a visual record from the station commander office. It’s within a couple of days before the self-destruction.”

On the display screen appeared what looked like an office of some sort, with someone sitting behind a desk, only the top of his—or her—head showing, and standing in front of the desk were a number of Arosians, dressed in various styles of clothing that suggested that they were not in any kind of uniform. The Arosians looked very much like the Odonans, but they were slightly taller and slightly heftier than the typical Odonans. However, the long black hair and the *san* on the skin and the *phyzza* on their faces were there—and just like the Odonans, it was hard to tell the men from the women. There was some sort of conversation going on, with those in front of the desk talking to the person behind it. The language that they were speaking was unknown to Dewuchun, and his translator had not been programmed to handle it.

Ye’oud did understand the language, and was providing a partial translation. She said, “They’re talking to the mission planner, or government liaison or whatever, it’s hard to tell. They’re saying that they are worried about the self-destruct system, and the leader there is saying there’s no plan to use it, that the situation is under control, but the others are talking about this sudden disease... and how it is biological warfare... and the star-destroyer ships are not ready. Some want to return to their homeworlds to be with their families. Others mention something called Janna. I’m not sure what that is... it might be a place.”

“Where the people on the station went to?”

“Maybe. The engineers are saying that they can block the self-destruct

signal... need the leader's access codes to make the changes... the leader seems to agree. There is panic, and fear. They're saying that they don't want to die."

Skolgaad, also standing nearby, replied, "That seems to be a normal reaction."

"Yes, but they're worried about that disease too. They are becoming aware of the high casualty rate of this disease, and so they want to go to Janna and hide there."

"Where's Janna?" asked Wan.

"I don't know." Ye'oud stopped the video log from playing, as she was finding it disturbing. She was seeing in the faces of those Arosians real fear and panic, as they knew that the government basically had its hand on a switch that would suddenly end their lives and existence forever, and the Arosians, as part of the military mindset, knew it was there. She found it hard to comprehend what those people might have been thinking, and even how she would feel if her own people had a similar mindset to destroy themselves by their own hand if they could no longer remain hidden. Instead of thinking about that, she started to search for references to "Janna," but the information was limited. "I'm getting the feeling that Janna is an unofficial name, and so not associated with an established location. The way it is used here, it seems to be some sort of resort location, perhaps a planet where they could go to get away from the station, to spend time on a planet somewhere."

"Then it cannot be too far from here," Wan remarked.

"Perhaps."

"Search for travel records from and to the station, and perhaps that could determine the location of this Janna."

"Okay."

Skolgaad, watching and overhearing this, said to Dewuchun, "So now there are two questions here, where is this Janna and the Arosian survivors, and where is the third ship?"

Dewuchun said, "And I'm getting the feeling that we might not get the answer to either question..."

* * *

Dewuchun found that the shielding around the computer core and the control centre interfered with his commbadge, although a more powerful system could probably get through. He squeezed through the partially-open door and walked a distance down the corridor. He tapped the commbadge and said "Dewuchun to *Athena*."

It was the captain that answered, "*Athena* here. What have you learned?"

"Not much. We can't access the records from the time that the self-destruct signal was sent, and the computer expert from the Battlesphere is not confident enough to attempt to access that data without tripping the self-destruct."

However, we have seen records that suggest that the crew here somehow prevented the self-destruct system from operating and then fled to a planet or place called Janna. They did not take the third ship, however. That was taken by whomever came onto the station more recently.”

“Understood.”

“Contact the Battlesphere and see if they have any information on Janna. That’s where the survivors could be.”

Several minutes later, Thorpe contacted the engineer again, and said, “The Battlesphere has no information on that name. It could be a nickname or a casual name. It’s probably not nearby, though, if it is a planet, since we already know that the closest class-M planet is—or was—Cheshire.”

“Maybe it’s another space station or something.”

“Which probably would’ve been destroyed by the self-destruct system.”

“So it’s some unofficial place, probably not on a class-M planet, and so off the record and why nobody has stumbled on it yet.”

“Perhaps,” Thorpe replied.

“I’ll see if I can find more information on where the survivors went, which might be more in the interest of the Battlesphere crew, but it tells us nothing about the third ship.”

“Understood.”

Dewuchun returned to the control centre, and found Ye’oud hunched over the controls, starting at a screen full of small text. Wan and Skolgaad stood nearby and were watching. Dewuchun asked, “What is she doing?”

Wan answered, “She’s attempting to isolate the self-destruct command and prevent its activation while accessing data that comes after it. She thinks that it can be done because the original crew had done it. Did the Battlesphere have any information on Janna?”

“No, but the assumption is that it’s an unofficial location.”

“Because an official one would’ve been destroyed. I was thinking that it would be an installation on a planet, and pretty well the only installation and small. That would be destroyed but the planet would not be, and the survivors would have to somehow survive likely without their technology.”

“Which would be difficult,” Dewuchun said.

“I’d imagine so. The planet would not be Arosian, and without their technology, they could not have useful food and the like. There are lots of possibilities, of course.”

“Of course.”

Then Ye’oud looked up and said, “I think I got it.”

“You *think*?” Wan asked, as he approached where she was seated.

“I found a way to get around the self-destruct code. It’s a high-priority code, so not everything is available, but I got a record of travel between this station and other locations.” The display screen changed, and it showed a star map, indicating trips from and to the station, including the last stop before arriving at the station, or the first stop after leaving. The number of trips was

indicated by the thickness of the lines and also a number, and the locations were given by codes rather than names. "If those are known locations, the codes should be on the Battlesphere, and a code that is not could be Janna. I can't download the data, so I can't get a manifest of dates, but we can record this visually and transmit it to the Battlesphere."

Dewuchun asked, "Can you access any sort of security logs or anything after the self-destruct signal was sent?"

"Around what dates?"

"Eight and a half to ten years ago. The Remans, if it was them, were here no closer than eight and a half years ago."

Ye'oud spent a few moments attempting to access the data, and then she finally said, "There's something here, but I have the feeling that accessing it will trip the self-destruct signal. It's all connected and it's code I cannot alter."

"Damn," Dewuchun remarked. "If we trip the self-destruct mechanism, how much time do we have?"

"No idea. It could be instantaneous or there could be a delay," Ye'oud replied. "It's also possible that the tampering the original crew did could still prevent it from happening."

"But can we take the chance?"

"It don't think that's my call."

"Mine either," Dewuchun replied, speaking softly. He even wondered if it was Captain Thorpe's call.

On board the *Athena*, Thorpe had been informed about the developments on the Arosian station, and how to access the information that was needed to determine the possible fate of the third ship without activating the self-destruct signal. They had also received the information that had been uncovered, mostly the map showing the origins and destinations of ships coming to and leaving the station. That had been forwarded to the Battlesphere, while Thorpe was thinking about the latter. He did say, "If there's a delay in the self-destruct system, from activation to destruction, then that would give them time to get the necessary data and to get away from there."

Bayanhong answered, "But how much time?"

Brigson added, "I'm still surprised that the Battlesphere does not have that information, or they have not told us."

Vorwoorts then said, "Captain, the Battlesphere is hailing us."

"On screen," Thorpe issued.

A few seconds later, the image of Commander Ngezhevara replaced that of the Arosian station, and the Odonan commander was in her familiar spot on the command deck of the Battlesphere. "Captain," she started, "We analyzed the data transmitted to us visually, and every connection, even one with just one trip, checks out as known Arosian installations, all of which were tagged as having the self-destruct process. We are working on the assumption that they were all destroyed. Unfortunately, the data as presented does not include the full jour-

neys of ships leaving or arriving at the station, just the first or last legs of their journey, so we cannot discount that this alleged Janna is further out and not the first stop of any ship leaving the station.”

“But one would think that it would be the first stop for at least one journey.”

“It’s also possible that the ship heading to Janna would have done so unofficially, and not filed a flight plan. Unfortunately, we don’t have access to the complete data set, as that would include the date codes, and codes after the signal was received would be most useful.”

“Yes, about that. Do you have any information on how much time there is between the self-destruct signal being activated and when it actually goes into effect and destroys something?”

“Unfortunately, no. Factors that might go into it would be how the actual destruction is carried out, as it could take time to arm or prime or set up whatever is the actual means of destruction. There could also be a delay in that the station would send out the subsidiary signals to dependent installations like ships, and wait for a return signal.”

“So it would send out a signal to the ships, the third ship in particular?”

“More than likely,” Ngezhevara replied. “The Arosian self-destruct protocols were set up over centuries, millennia perhaps, and so the technology and programming and more would change over time. However, once it sends the subsidiary signal, it would not wait indefinitely for the return signal. At some point, it would go ahead with the action.”

“But that would give them time on the station?” Thorpe asked.

“Possibly, but I can’t say, beyond the fact that the station was among the last built by the Arosians, so its technology would be the most up-to-date and known.”

“Understood.”

Bayanhong asked, “Is there any way to set up a system that would access the system remotely, so that we can get the information without risking crew-members?”

“I’m not fully sure about that. It would take time to set and test something that.”

“I see,” the first officer replied.

Dewuchun returned to the control centre, with Wan coming up to meet him. “What did the data reveal?”

“All the locations given on that graphic,” the *Athena* engineer replied, “are known Arosian locations and likely all destroyed. What was needed was the full data set with full flight manifests and date codes, so that they could be coordinated with the self-destruct. Presumably among the last ships out of here would be the one taking the crew to this Janna. First of all, how large was the crew?”

“A couple of hundred, presumably, once the ships were built. The ships

might've had their own crews."

"And what ships, other than the star-destroyers, were docked here?"

"I don't know."

Dewuchun added, "Also, according to Commander Ngezhevara, the destruction of the station would not begin immediately, as it would first have to transmit the subsidiary signal to the ships and wait for a response. Now, that would either help us locate the third ship, or there could be a delay if the third ship does not respond immediately, but perhaps not an indefinite delay. Once the self-destruct signal is allowed to do its thing, could Neomana get the full data, what we need?"

"Presumably."

"How long?"

"That depends on how much data there is, presumably just a few *iyoyin*."

"So that's the call," Dewuchun remarked.

"Whose call is it to make?"

"I don't know. Is it Captain Thorpe or Commander Ngezhevara?"

Wan answered, "I don't know."

The same debate was occurring on the bridge of the *Athena*. Thorpe said, "Ngezhavara and the crew of the Battlesphere want to know if there are any survivors and where this Janna is, and we want to know if the Remans have the third ship and where it is and what are their plans."

"The issue," Bayanhong replied, "is that the destruction of the sun at Cheshire and the red dwarf stars occurred upto eight and a half years ago. What has happened in the meantime? Where is that third ship? Did it leave the station?"

Brigson said, "The implication is that they took it shortly after abandoning the second ship. Because they have no means to refuel the ships—although why, I don't know—they are planning to use the third ship sparingly, perhaps only for what their final aim is."

"And what is that?"

"We don't know, but if the self-destruct sequence is activated, then that could reveal the location of the third ship, and also destroy it. That would solve our problem."

"But the risk is," Thorpe continued, "that letting them trip the self-destruct system could allow them full access to the data, and there could be a delay as the station confirms that the dependent ships have the signal, but that assumes that Commander Ngezhavara is right. What if she is not, and the self-destruct goes off immediately? That puts the away team at risk,"

"What to do?" asked Bayanhong.

"Find a method to access the data remotely."

"What if Commander Ngezhavara gives the order for her crewmembers to go ahead and access the data and ignore the possible risk? I know that Odonan commanders are usually not that risky, but she might be confident in the infor-

mation that she has.”

“But why is the location of any survivors that important to her?”

“I don’t know.”

On the station, Ye’oud continued to access the Arosian computer system carefully, worried that some action could cause the self-destruct signal to be sent and the destruction could follow, eventually or immediately, as there was no way of knowing. She did find that the computer system that the Arosians had was difficult to navigate and the way it was organized did not make a lot of sense, at least until she was thinking that the self-destruct system and the coding was designed to prevent unauthorized access should the station be abandoned. Looking at that, she was thinking of a possible work-around. “I think I’m onto something,” she finally said.

“What?” asked Wan.

“I have a routine here that would cause a data dump should the self-destruct signal be activated, but it would only work if there was an approved location for the data to be transmitted to.”

“And what would be better than the Battlesphere itself?”

“Is there any chance that the self-destruct signal would also transfer to the Battlesphere?” asked Dewuchun.

“It doesn’t matter. The Battlesphere is intentionally designed to be outside of the self-destruct system. It was supposed to be the last refuge for the leadership and all of that. There’s no mechanism on board that would respond to the signal. The Arosians never put in such a system and we certainly did not.”

“So the self-destruct would not occur until the download is complete?”

“Seems reasonable since otherwise, the download would be disrupted.”

“And that would give us enough time to get back to our ships?”

“I believe so. All we have to do is get outside of this room,” Ye’oud said, glancing in the direction of the pried-open door, which was not all that far away. “Then our ships can beam us off.”

“Okay,” Dewuchun said, “I’ll pass that information back to the captain.”

Moments later, Thorpe had Ngezhavara on the screen, as they had received the latest message from the chief engineer of the *Athena*. “Can the Battlesphere be set up to receive that data?”

“I believe so,” the Odonan commander replied. “I have the crew seeing if they can set that up now. I believe it’s possible since the Battlesphere was designed for something like this.” She glanced to her right, and appeared to be communicating with someone who was not visible on the screen, and she had turned the mute on. A few seconds later, she faced the image pickup sensor again and with the mute off, said, “Yes, captain, that can be done. We have the comm protocols for this station in our databanks, and can open a data link to the station and download all available information. The process should begin automatically once the self-destruct system has been activated.”

“How long would that take?”

“That depends on the data transfer rate and how much data there is and what can be transferred. On top of that is the delay in the secondary signal transmission. I believe that even under the worst case scenario, the four on the station should have enough time to leave where they are and get within transporter range.”

“I see,” Thorpe replied, but he was not fully convinced. In the back of his mind was the idea that something could go wrong, because usually it did. Something like this rarely went exactly to plan.

“We should do this,” Ngezhavara finally said, when the hesitation from the human captain took too long. “We can debate this forever and be no closer to a resolution.”

“I know.”

“I’ll transmit the protocol codes to your ship, and you can relay them to your officer.”

Even before Thorpe could accept the offer, Vorwoorts reported, “The data has been received.”

“Relay them to Rodall’s tricorder.”

A few seconds later, the tactical officer replied, “Transfer is complete. Rodall has the information.”

Bayanhong asked, “So we’re going to do this? You have confidence that Ngezhavara is right?”

“I see no reason why she would mislead us, because two of her crew are there too, and there is information that she wants. We also recognize that even after eight and a half years, the third ship is out there and remains a threat. If we can locate it...”

“The Battlesphere is a much better choice for going after it.”

“I know.” Sitting back in the chair, Thorpe finally said, “Okay, we’ll go ahead and do it.” He tapped his commbadge and said, “Captain to Lieutenant Wilder.”

“Wilder here,” came the prompt response from the transporter chief.

“Be in position to immediately beam the away team off of the station when they get into range and are accessible. We’re going ahead with the scheme to get around the self-destruct system and download the data.”

“Understood. I’ve noted where they went and the route they will take, and know where I can get a lock on them. I’ll be ready. Wilder out.”

Thorpe looked ahead at the viewscreen. Ngezhavara had ended the link at her end, so he was looking at the massive Arosian station again, and somewhere on that station were two members of his crew, including his chief engineer. He said, “Helm, be prepared to move away from the station once we have the away team back on board. We have no idea how widespread the self-destruct system is or how far from the station the effects can be felt. There’s no need to get damaged by it.”

“Understood,” Indesakar replied. “Escape course locked in. I’m assum-

ing the Battlesphere is planning likewise.”

“More than likely. Commander Vorwoorts, signal to Rodall that he is cleared to proceed, to take that information he has to set up a data transmission to the Battlesphere and then to get the hell out of there.”

“Understood...”

Dewuchun returned to the computer control room with the tricorder, saying to Ye’oud, “The Battlesphere has given us communications protocols that when the self-destruct system is activated will instruct the system to download all available data to the Battlesphere. That will give us enough time to get out from here and get to where we can beam out. That, along with the transmission of the subsidiary signals, should give us the time we need.”

Looking at the *Athena* engineer, Ye’oud asked, “You are sure?”

“There is always a little uncertainty in anything like this, but do you have two basic pieces of information?”

“What?”

“The amount of data that can be transmitted and the transmission rate?”

Ye’oud did enter some commands, and she knew what the data transmission rates are. She finally did say, “I’d say we have at least twelve *iyoyyn* to get out from here and to transporter range.”

“That’s more than enough,” Dewuchun knew. A single *iyoyyn* was the Odonan unit corresponding to a minute, and was just over eighty seconds long, so twelve of them were a little more than fifteen minutes. That was plenty of time. Of course, he did feel a little nervous about this, because there was always the chance that their calculations were off and the unexpected could happen, but there was also a large chance that this could succeed.

Ye’oud asked, “These protocols, are they specific for this station to the Battlesphere?”

“According to the information I was given, yes.”

“Okay... and the commanding officers have cleared this?”

“Captain Thorpe has, and I presume since Commander Ngezhevara gave that information to the *Athena*, she is in approval too.”

“Okay. Lets hope this is not the biggest mistake of our lives—or the last mistake.” Ye’oud was a little tentative to do this, but she had spent some time on the Battlesphere and had learned much about its systems. She was pretty sure that the transmission rates and data sizes were correct and that the Battlesphere had the ability to download this data because it had been designed to survive the self-destruction of the Arosian Empire and perhaps even preserve as much data as possible. She knew that this data had not been previously transmitted because once they learned that the station existed, she searched the database for any transmissions from the station, and there were none. She did glance at Wan and Dewuchun, and of course there was a little unease in their faces, but she could not really read the expression on the human. She was not too familiar with them. She finally entered a command to access log data, and that generated a prompt

about the self-destruct signal. A high-level access code was required to bypass it, and she had it, and entered it, but she also knew that the code was correct but it would also be ignored. The screens in front of her changed, and that indicated that the self-destruct system had been activated, but was temporarily paused. The subsidiary signals were sent, and a data download was initiated. The screens changed rapidly, but she saw no indication on how long those processes would take. Nevertheless, she felt her heart start to race because the station could blast itself into tiny fragments at any moment. "It's done," she suddenly said, "the self-destruct system has been—"

A loud "thud" sound stopped her words, and all four looked in the direction of the sound, the door that they had pried open to gain access to this control centre. It was now closed. Wan said, "How did that happen?"

"I don't know," Ye'oud replied, as she turned back to the control panel. Now that the self-destruct had been activated, she had full access and so attempted to find the controls to override the door locks.

Dewuchun had another idea. "We pried it open once before," he said, "and we can do it again." He and Wan went to the door and took off the covers to access the mechanism.

On the *Athena*, Vorwoorts reported, "Sensors have just detected a transmission from the station, and it is consistent with the subsidiary signals to other ships."

"So the self-destruct has been activated?" Bayanhong replied.

"Most likely."

The captain tapped his commbadge and said, "Thorpe to Wilder, do you have them?"

"Negative," came the reply from the transporter chief. "They are not in scanning range yet."

The tactical console sounded an alert tone, which drew the attention to the bridge crew to it. Vorwoorts said, "The docked ship." The viewscreen shifted to where the first of the star-destroyer ships was docked, and they could see explosions ripple along the length of the four-pointed star-shaped vessel, eventually pulling apart the upper and lower components, which in turn dissolved in red and white fury, the debris expanding outwards, with some slamming into the station. "Shields up automatically," Vorwoorts reported, as the shock wave and the debris spread outwards, severely damaging the station in the docking area. Thorpe and the others did know that the four on the station were a distance away from the docking port and the station, except in the immediate area, looked to have escaped any significant damage. When the shock wave reached the *Athena*, the ship barely shook.

Bayanhong did say, "I hope Commander Ngezhevara has nobody on the derelict ship."

"Hopefully," Thorpe replied, "she notified them ahead of what we're doing here. Heni, do we still have access to the probe there?"

“Yes, it’s still transmitting, and we’ll know if the derelict is destroyed and when, subject to the usual transmission lag, of course.”

“If that ship is destroyed, then it’s possible that the third ship will be destroyed too.”

Bayanhong had other matters on her mind, as she asked, “But where are our people on the station?”

On the station, Wan and Dewuchun were having no success in opening the door. They had taken off the access covers and were using the same techniques to release the door locks that they had done the last time, and though it looked like they had been released, they could not open the door. Ye’oud was attempting to override the door locks, but without success, and she was also trying to get schematics of the station to find another way out, or perhaps to shut off whatever shielding was blocking communications and sensors. She did say, “We got the response signal from the first ship.” Then the station shook somewhat, as if an earthquake had rolled through.

“What was that?” Skolgaad asked, a touch of panic in his voice.

Ye’oud answered, “The docked ship just self-destructed, and the detonation of something that large did shake the station.” On the other hand, the power held.

Wan asked, “How much of the data has been transmitted?”

“There’s no progress meter.”

“Let us know when we get the signal from the second ship.” He turned back to the door, and said to Dewuchun, “It’s too bad that we didn’t bring any weapons with us.”

“We never saw the need,” the other man replied.

Skolgaad added, “Is there not another way out?”

Wan answered, “I think that they sealed all the exits.”

“Why?”

“To trap the crew. The Arosians were not meant to survive this, even if they wanted to.” Once more, Wan looked at the door and the components that they had already removed and attempted to alter, and he knew about six of those twelve *iyoyyn* had already passed. He was thinking that they probably had some more time left because the station would wait at least until the second response signal, from the derelict ship, was received, but he was not sure about that. “Maybe we have to physically take this door apart.”

Dewuchun remarked, “I doubt anybody here would have the strength for that.”

“But if we could just punch a hole in this, through these access ports, and even get a comm signal thought that.”

“We can try, but this is metal, and even forcefield-enhanced strength could not break through that. We need something... is there anything in this place?”

Skolgaad, feeling that rising fear in him, that the station could explode

all around him at any minute, said, in a slightly panicky voice, "I'll look around and see what I can find."

Minutes passed, and on the bridge of the *Athena*, Thorpe was getting worried. He had no need to bother Wilder, because he knew the minute the away team was back on board, she would inform him. Now, she had to be ready to beam them back as soon as they were on the sensors. Vorwoorts then said, "Captain, the telemetry from the probe at the location of the derelict ship has stopped. This is the last thing it transmitted." She displayed the final image from the probe, which showed a series of explosions rippling along the massive length of the ship, tearing it apart and hurling increasingly-disintegrating debris outwards at high speeds, and there was enough of those debris and the shock wave that the probe was overwhelmed and destroyed. Vorwoorts added, "According to the data we received, the Odonan ship that had been there had moved well away, likely far enough that it is not in danger." More beeping and alerts got her attention, so she said, "Detecting the second response signal."

"And not the third one yet," Bayanhong added.

"I'm not expecting that. If the third ship is nearby and we just don't know it, that's a surprise."

Hakamura spoke up, saying, "Captain, permission to lead an away team onto the station. It's possible that something might have happened to Rodall and the others, and they could be trapped. Since it seems apparent that the station is waiting for the third response signal, we might have some time."

"It's risky," Thorpe replied.

"I know, but we can't just leave them behind."

Thorpe knew that too, that they had to try *something*, but he really did not want to risk any further members of the crew. He was worried about the third signal, since it was possible that the station would never receive it, or it would take time, depending on where the third ship was. He doubted that the station would wait indefinitely for the signal, but would complete the self-destruct sequence after some period of time. What was that period of time? Even those on the Battlesphere did not know the answer to that. "Very well," the captain finally said. "Take a team over, with rescue gear, but if we detect the third response signal, or get some indication that the self-destruct is about to begin, we're pulling you out, understand?"

"Yes," Hakamura replied, and then he quickly left the bridge.

"Heni, contact that Battlesphere, and have them let us know when the download from the station is complete."

Hakamura, along with Ensigns Edward Chan and Lieutenant Claude Isadore, beamed onto the Arosian station at the same coordinates that the original away team had gone to. Chan was the medical technician and had the emergency medical gear, while Hakamura had a heavy-duty cutting phaser, and Isadore was carrying a compression generator, which was, in essence, a portable

tractor beam generator and could be used to spread debris and lift and move heavy objects. It was a fairly heavy device and so was on a self-propelled anti-gravity cart. All three knew that this mission was risky, because the station was primed to self-destruct, and if it happened, there would be little warning that it was happening. Hakamura felt that the computer core was a vital part of the Arosian technology, and so whatever destructive method the Arosians used, this was one location that they would definitely make sure would be destroyed. They would have no warning when the explosions started.

“Okay,” Hakamura said, “lets make this quick.”

“Hopefully,” Chan replied. “What happened to them?”

“Hard to say. They could be trapped, and perhaps something incapacitated them.”

“Even though they all have the forcefield belts?” Chan knew that Skolgaad had one of the belts, and Dewuchun would have his, and he was pretty sure the two Odonans from the Battlesphere would have them.

“Anything is possible. Lets go.”

They headed down the corridor to the entrance to the computer core, unsure of what they would find or what they could do. One thing that Hakamura and the others did notice was that there was no overt sign that the self-destruct system had been set, no change in the lighting, no alert tones or anything. It was as if it was not happening. Maybe that was again so that the crew on the station did not have any idea of what was about to happen to them. After a short walk, the three arrived at the entrance to the computer control centre, and they found the door closed. They saw that access panels on the wall beside the door had been opened and accessed, perhaps done to open the door originally.

“Ensign Chan,” Hakamura ordered, “scan the door and get its composition. I doubt the door will open for us and we might have to cut through it.”

“Scanning,” the younger man replied.

The security chief heard his commbadge chirp, so he tapped it and said, “Hakamura here.”

“Vorwoorts,” came the reply. “The Battlesphere has informed us that the data transmission from the station has been completed.”

Hakamura knew what that meant, the only thing preventing the destruction of this station was that it was waiting for the third response signal. He replied, “Understood. From where we are, it looks like they are trapped in the computer control room, as the door is closed and perhaps locked.”

“Okay, but hurry. We have no idea how long the station will wait before it decides that it’s not going to get the third signal.”

“Of course.”

Chan then said, “I’m not getting clear scans because there are fields within the walls and so on obscuring the tricorder, but as far as I can tell, the door and surrounding areas are mostly lead and titanium and other heavy alloys.”

“So we’ll simply cut through it,” Hakamura said, as he unholstered the cutting laser and started it.

Eve of Destruction (Part Two)

Inside that computer control room, Ye'oud remarked, "The download is complete. The only thing holding back the self-destruct is waiting for the third response signal."

"That ship could be anywhere in the galaxy," Dewuchun replied. "The station won't wait indefinitely."

"And the only question is how long it will wait. Any progress?"

"No," Wan answered.

"Do you think that Commander Ngezhavara will send a rescue team?"

"I don't know. Would she risk additional personnel?"

"Captain Thorpe might," Dewuchun replied, "although it is risky. He might get volunteers to come."

"So we wait here... and hope?"

"We hope, or maybe we can break through the door yet."

Skolgaad returned, and said, "I couldn't find anything, no tools, nothing loose at all. The other exits are all sealed too."

Wan asked Ye'oud, "And nothing on the computer about unlocking the door, or perhaps shutting off the interference fields?"

"Nothing."

Without warning, sparks started to fly from the openings that Wan and Dewuchun had made at the access panels, and those sparks started to shoot out in all directions. The four backed away from the door, and felt a rising sense of panic. It was beginning, they were sure. This was the end, their final moments, the last of their lives, trapped in this Arosian structure hundreds, if not thousands, of light years from home. Dewuchun looked around, expecting to see sparks flying from all directions, and then the walls would glow red hot, white-hot even, as the explosive force rapidly built up.

But it did not happen. Instead, the sparks stayed at the sealed door, until the metal in the door started to dissolve. A beam was cutting through, and then with one final shower of sparks, the mechanism holding the door closed gave way and the door started to slide open. Dewuchun and the others could see through the smoke that officers in Federation uniforms were pushing the door open. Soon, he could see that it was Isadore and Hakamura doing the pushing, as Isadore decided that he did not need the compression generator afterall.

Once the door was opened sufficiently, Hakamura looked in, and said, "Rodall, Erik, are you alright?"

"We're fine," the Odonan engineer replied.

"Good. Lets get out of here. The station could blow at any moment."

"Agreed..."

* * *

But the Arosian station did not explode, did not self-destruct and did not do anything at all.

The *Athena* had moved a safe distance from the station, and now Thorpe

and the others on the bridge were watching and waiting, but nothing happened. Minutes passed, and then hours, and the station remained intact. Dewuchun saw that too, and was thinking that the sense of panic he felt, and the fear that his end was coming and that he would never see his wife and daughter again, now seemed so ridiculous. It was like they were in no danger at all.

“What happened?” Bayanhong asked,

“I don’t know,” Dewuchun replied. “Maybe the station is prepared to wait a long time for that third response signal, or perhaps the original crew might’ve tampered with the self-destruct system enough so that it would never go off. It’s hard to say.”

Thorpe replied, “But it’s still risky to go on board. On the other hand, there’s no need to go on board anymore.”

Vorwoorts spoke up, saying, “Captain, the Battlesphere is hailing us.”

“On screen.” Seconds later, the view of space was replaced with the look of the Battlesphere control deck, and sitting in the middle was Ngezharava. “What can I do for you, commander?”

“Captain,” the older Odonan woman started, “we have analyzed the data that we downloaded from the station, and we have not been able to identify the location of Janna. The data logs indicate that the last ships to depart from the station, all before the overall self-destruct signal was received from Kazmarine, headed to known Arosian worlds, and none to this mysterious Janna.”

“So no clue as to where the crew went?”

“None,” Ngezhavara replied. “However, the logs do indicate that the Remans did come to the station several times, and attempted to access the computer systems here, with limited success. They did take the second and third ships, the second one about nine years ago, and the third one about eight and a half years ago. We have detected no response signal from the third ship, which suggests three possibilities, that the ship is out of range, that it has been destroyed previously, or has been altered so that it would not respond to the signal. We have no idea what the most likely possibility is, because of the passage of time and how the Remans have kept that ship essentially hidden all of this time.”

“I see, so it is possibly out there?” Thorpe remarked.

“That’s possible. We just don’t know. However, there’s one other thing. I would recommend that we destroy the station. The self-destruct system is still set, and it could go at any time, and anybody who finds it and goes on board is taking a chance.”

“You have the means to destroy it?”

“We have nucleon disruptors on board.”

“Oh,” Thorpe sighed, knowing that weapon would work, as it was a weapon that basically disrupted the strong nuclear force that held atomic nuclei together, and if that force was disrupted, the nuclei would blow apart with a lot of destructive energy.

“This was what the Arosians intended and which was the fate of pretty well every other Arosian installation out there. It’s the wisest thing to do. Leav-

ing facilities such as this out here, abandoned and vulnerable, is not a good thing.”

“Very well.”

“In addition, we plan to go to Cheshire next.”

That concerned Thorpe, so he asked, “Why?”

“It’s the closest inhabitable planet to this station, so if the crew wanted to go to some place that was not Arosian and not primed to self-destruct, that could be their first choice.”

“The Cheshirian we have on board has no knowledge of alien visitation to the planet and has never heard of Arosians going there.”

“Perhaps,” Ngezhavara replied. “However, he is one of a small number of survivors. It is possible that some government on the planet might’ve had contact with the Arosians, and perhaps offered them sanctuary or something. Of course, that would mean that they are all dead now—and seeing the aftereffects of the star-destroyer weapon could be valuable too, given the third ship is still out there... possibly. However, our search for Janna starts there.”

“And our search for the third ship begins too.”

“One more thing, captain. If you wish, you can ‘hitch a ride’ with us—did I use that expression correctly?”

“What do you mean?”

“Come with us through the wormhole that we create, so you can return to Cheshire and bring your Cheshirian guest home.”

“That’s possible?”

“It is,” the Odonan replied.

“Very well,” he said, tentatively.

Shortly thereafter, with the *Athena* at a safe range, the Battlesphere got into the position and deployed its most powerful weapon. When the nucleon disruptors were activated, they saw nothing from the Arosian vessel, no beams or points of light or anything. What they did see was a series of explosions starting in the centre of the station and rippling outwards until the heat and light seemingly consumed it all, an expanding shock wave of debris, which were pulverized to almost microscopic fragments and which dissipated into space. By the time it reached the *Athena*, it was not even strong enough to rock the ship.

“And so this mission ends,” Bayanhong remarked.

“It does,” Thorpe replied.

Anak-Ipa was on the bridge as well, sitting in the seat to the left of the captain. He asked, “So I’m going home now?”

“Yes, we’re returning to Cheshire. We have learned who destroyed your star and by extension your civilization, and we know how they did it. We don’t know why they did it, beyond it being a test for whatever their ultimate purpose is.”

“I heard that you will be travelling with the Battlesphere, and it’s going to my homework too?”

“It is.”

“But none of their kind, or the Arosians, which are like their kind, ever came to my planet.”

“I know, but the commander of the Battlesphere wants to find out what happened to them, and the search starts there. I can’t stop her from going there.”

“Of course,” Anak-Ipa said, punctuated with a soft sound that Thorpe thought was the Cheshirian equivalent of a sigh. “At least I am heading home, such as it is.”

Vorwoorts spoke up, “Captain, we’re receiving instructions from the Battlesphere, where we should be in relation to it when it activates its wormhole generator. The commander recommends we raise our shields.”

“Then do so,” Thorpe replied. “Heni, relay the instructions to the helm, and Sanjay, get us into position.”

Bayanhong, sitting to the right of the captain, said, “This should be interesting.”

Moments later, the Battlesphere dominated the viewscreen image as the *Athena* got to within seventy metres of the huge, alien vessel. They could see the engine ring predominantly, so Brigson adjusted the viewscreen magnification so that they had a wide-angle view, almost a fish-eye lens view, showing most of the Battlesphere, even if the image of it was distorted a little. The emitters in the vertically-mounted rings were starting to glow as well, and the distortion of light they caused seemed to spread outwards and obscure the stars. “Here we go,” Brigson reported from the science station. “Sensors are going wild.”

Indesakur added, “We’re fixed with respect to the Battlesphere, now losing navigation.”

“We’re in the wormhole,” Vorwoorts finally said, and they could see that, the waving colours and effects that surrounded them, and which so reminded the bridge officers of trips through the Bajoran wormhole, which for them had been a long time ago. Anak-Ipa seemed a little concerned about what he was seeing, because he had not experienced such things before, but he did notice that the Starfleet officers on the bridge were not concerned.

The Cheshirian asked, “How long does this take?”

“I don’t know,” Thorpe replied, “probably just a couple of minutes.”

“How far could they go with this ability?”

Thorpe had heard about the Odonans’ plan during the Dominion War to cross to the Gamma Quadrant and attack the Founders’ homeworld, a plan that was never carried out because the war ended before they could. He answered, “Across the galaxy.”

“Against such technology, we are helpless.”

“Fortunately, it is in the hands of those who have no desire to harm us or you or abuse the technology,” Thorpe replied. To himself, he added, “for now,” because he knew that third ship was possibly still out there. It might have been destroyed by the self-destruct command because the other two ships had been, but he did not know that for sure. He was wondering if the Battlesphere got any confirmation on the status of the third ship, where it was or if it was destroyed or

not, would the Federation—would he—be informed?

Then the lights on the vertical ring of the Battlesphere started to fade, and as they did, the distortions they were seeing were starting to dissipate as well, and then they ended. Once again, they could see the stars. Vorwoorts reported, “We are entering the Cheshire system.”

“That was quick,” Bayanhong replied.

“Perhaps we could hitch a ride all the way back home with the Battlesphere,” Vorwoorts suggested.

“I’m not sure if Commander Ngezhevara would approve of that,” Thorpe replied. “They probably don’t want to reveal where the Battlesphere is normally kept.”

“Of course.”

Thorpe added, “Helm, take us away from the Battlesphere and take us to Cheshire, the planet.”

“Understood.”

The *Athena* headed to the planet, with the Battlesphere lagging simply because its engines were not powerful enough to accelerate it quickly. Nevertheless, the still-functioning satellites in orbit around the dark and frozen world still detected the arrival of the *Athena*, and something else that they had not seen before. Thorpe spoke up, “Heni, hail the planet.”

The tactical officer worked quickly on the console, and said, “They’re responding, visual signal.”

“On screen.”

The image of the planet, which was only visible because the computer-generated image rendered it as a dimly visible gray disk, was replaced with some sort of Cheshirian communications or operations centre, and another of the green-skinned aliens was visible on the screen. He recognized who was contacting him, and so said, “The Federation starship has returned. Anak-Ipa is with you?”

“I am here,” the Cheshirian on the bridge replied.

Thorpe quickly added, “No doubt, your sensors have detected a rather large vessel that has entered your system alongside us.”

“Yes,” the native said, “we have detected that, and we are concerned by it. We have not seen that before.”

“Do not fear it. It is crewed by people allied with us and they mean no harm. They have a different technology for travelling in space, and we rode along with them to return Anak-Ipa to you. They have come here because they are searching for survivors who may have come to your planet fifty years ago.”

“We know of no such thing.”

“I know, but they want to check for themselves.”

“How would they do that?”

Actually, Thorpe had no idea what Commander Ngezhevara and her crew were planning to do, but he said, “They will scan for what they suspect are signs that the survivors might’ve come here, although we know now that if they did, they did not stay or they did not survive. It is possible that officials in your

government might've had dealings with the survivors, but that information might have been kept as a secret and never filtered down to you."

"We hope that you are correct. Anak-Ipa, do you share that opinion?"

"I do," the Cheshirian replied. "I saw nothing hostile or dangerous in the people on the other vessel, and they did nothing that I would believe would be hostile or dangerous."

With an alien shrug, the man on the screen replied, "I would have to accept your words, because we would have no means to prevent the alien vessel from doing anything that it wanted to. Then again, this is a dead world and we are a dead culture, with just a hundred and twenty of us left."

Thorpe then asked, "Have you made a decision on accepting the Federation's offer to be resettled on another planet, so that your culture may continue?"

"No final decision has been made. We are awaiting the return of Anak-Ipa."

"We'll bring him home to you..."

A short time later, Bayanhong, again dressed in the cold-weather version of the Starfleet uniform, along with Anak-Ipa, beamed down to the location on the planet that they had beamed out of when they were last here. They made their way into the underground complex that housed the last remaining Cheshirians. Two of them greeted the two who had beamed down. "Anak-Ipa," one of them said, "once word of your return reached them, the council convened and are waiting to hear from you."

"Very well," Anak-Ipa replied.

Bayanhong, speaking through the translation device, asked, "I would like to be there when Anak-Ipa speaks to the council."

"Of course. They will make their decision and you can relay that to your people."

"Understood."

The "council" turned out to be four older Cheshirians, the overall leader being a man named Mang-Opu, who was apparently the original commanding officer of this underground complex before the system star was destroyed. With him was a female Cheshirian, Onu-Shup, and two others, who were what the locals called "technical aides" in that they provided necessary information. The council room was a simple room with simple walls, one viewscreen that was off, and a table with six chairs around it, all made of metal in a very simple and functional design. It was the most basic and most austere council chamber that Bayanhong had ever seen.

Mang-Opu spoke first, "Anak-Ipa, we await your report. Did you find who destroyed our star and why they did it?"

Aank-Ipa spoke, saying, "The crew of the *Athena* was not able to exactly determine who was responsible, but they believe that we were not targeted because of who we are, but were simply innocent victims of the alien scheme. The species they call the Remans stole from an extinct culture powerful spacecraft,

with the ability to destroy stars. Our sun was not the only one they destroyed, as they destroyed several others. It was as if they were testing the ships that they had found. The starship crew eventually located the source of the alien ships, a station that survived the destruction of the originating culture. The ship used to attack our sun was also found, abandoned and adrift, and another ship, damaged and unusable, was also found. A third ship is missing, but it is no threat to us but may still be out there.”

“And why is it no threat to us?” Onu-Shup asked.

“Because we are a destroyed world and were merely a test. The ship may also have been destroyed, because a method was used to destroy the station and the other two ships, and that method should have destroyed the missing ship, though we are not sure.”

Bayanhong did speak up, saying, “The Remans are a race in our section of the galaxy, and they have no presence here except they were perhaps scavenging items from the extinct culture here. The threat that they pose with the third ship, if it is still intact, is in our section of the galaxy, and not yours.”

“We hope you are right,” Mang-Opu replied. “We, of course, will wait for the full report from Anak-Ipa of his journey on your starship and what he experienced. We thank you that you returned him to our world and that you did endeavor to find out who did this to our planet and why. We are worried that your answers were not precise enough, but we also realize that given the time that has passed, finding those answers might not be easy.”

Now Bayanhong got to the question that was on her mind. “Are you willing to be relocated to another planet so that you can live a more normal existence and attempt to rebuild and restart your society?”

“No final decision has been made on that,” Mang-Opu replied. “We were still seeking more information.”

Before Bayanhong could ask what that information was, one of the technical aides spoke up, looking up from some device sitting on the table in front of him. “Mang-Opu,” he started, “I just received information that the second alien vessel, the big and unknown one, that had entered orbit around the planet, is now departing.”

“I see...”

On the bridge of the *Athena*, Thorpe and the others were again looking at Commander Ngezhevara as she sat on the command deck of the Battlesphere. “Captain,” she started, “we have completed our analysis of this planet, and we have deemed that away teams are not practical. The planet is a frozen wasteland and would be difficult to explore. However, our sensor sweeps could not identify a single signature of anything remotely Arosian on this planet. If this was the Janna that the Arosian crew escaped to, they did not stay here long, and of course, if they had, they would not have survived the destruction of the system star. We also analyzed that, and find that the technology that allowed that was quite impressive—and frightening too. The ability to collapse a star into a black

hole is perhaps the ultimate weapon. Nevertheless, our business here is done, and we will be heading out. Our search for Janna, if my superiors agree to it, will continue.”

“I understand,” Thorpe replied. He really could not ask if they could “hitch a ride” back home on the Battlesphere, because he was not sure they were heading home. “We will have to continue to search for the third star-destroyer ship. If you receive information on it, such as its location or its status, I hope that you will keep us informed.”

“I will see what I can do, captain. Good day.”

“Good day,” Thorpe said, and then the image of the Odonan commander vanished from the viewscreen. Instead, the screen showed the Battlesphere breaking orbit around Cheshire and heading out into space.

Mang-Opu, facing the other Cheshirians and the lone human in the small room, started to speak. “We have discussed this, not just now but ever since our sun became a black hole, and now we hear about other worlds and other races, and we hear of the Federation, and their offer to resettle us. That is a difficult decision to make, but we have now made it, and we believe it is the right decision.”

Bayanhong asked, “What is the decision that you have made?”

“We will stay here on our homeworld.”

That was somewhat surprising, the first officer thought, but not unprecedented. Just like a person who is dying and feels that he has no worthwhile time left and accepts his death, a society can think the same way, that it is beyond saving and so should gracefully greet its end. Nevertheless, she did ask, “May I ask why you reached that decision?”

“We do not feel that we are a viable society any longer. There are just a hundred and twenty of us left, and that is not enough genetic diversity to recreate our race, and in addition, the biodiversity of our world is very limited, less than one one-thousandth of what it was before our sun was destroyed. That is not enough to recreate our society. We would naturally be resettled on an inhabitable planet, which would already have a biology of its own, and that biology would not be able to sustain us and would need to be replaced by our own. If a non-inhabited world was terraformed for us, that would take time and we would have to continue to living like this, and our numbers would gradually diminish and again, if a hundred and twenty is not enough to recreate us, then even fewer certainly could not.”

“You have given this considerable thought.”

“We have discussed little else since you arrived,” Mang-Opu replied, “and since Anak-Ipa left to journey on your vessel. We have come to a consensus on this matter. We accept now that our society has come to an end. All societies do, at some point, and no doubt in your travels in space, you have encountered that.” Bayanhong certainly had, starting with the Arosians, who perhaps were the largest society she had known that came to an end. “We are at peace with our

decision. We have the answers to the final questions that we seek.”

“And all of your people agree to this?”

“They know that they cannot go on, that they cannot have children and that they cannot produce future generations. Those who want to leave know that too, that they would exist on other worlds as curiosities. Here, we are our own people, and we will live and do what we must on this world until the last of us dies. That is our decision.”

Bayanhong could think of many objections, and a part of her wanted to bring those out in the open, but she also realized that the Cheshirians had the full right to make their own decisions and she and the rest of the Federation had no right to pressure them to change their minds or convince them that their choices were wrong. Every society had the right to chart its own way, even if that course led to its end. “I understand,” she finally said, “and I will convey your decision to my superiors, and we will respect it.”

“We thank you for that,” Mang-Opu said, as he looked over the others in the room. “We thank you for taking Anak-Ipa on the journey to learn who destroyed us and why. Those were the answers that we sought, and even though they are incomplete, we understand we may never learn more.”

“I see. I have one request to make.”

“What?”

“From this point on, would you wish to remain isolated, or would you accept that perhaps another Federation ship could visit here, not to convince you to change your mind, but to simply visit, to do as we would call it back home, check up on you, provide emergency assistance if necessary, issues such as that.”

“Perhaps, but we do not wish to be curiosities.”

“You would not be,” Bayanhong quickly said. “Those that would visit this world are highly trained in dealing with situations such as this and would treat you and your people with the upmost respect. Such visits would be very rare and might not even occur at all.”

“I understand. We would have to deal with such visits on the basis of each one, should any happen.”

“Of course.”

Onu-Shup got up from her seat and walked to a corner of the room, where there were some shelves and what looked like books, and other devices of unknown purpose. She removed one of the objects from the shelves, a silver box about the size of a large hardcover book that Bayanhong could remember from her youth. She placed this in front of Bayanhong, and explained, “This is our gift to you. We know that the time of our existence is coming to an end, but we do not wish to be forgotten. What is inside this container are data solids containing the history of our world, the culture in terms of music and art and literature, and our science and our beliefs. It’s in a format that we believe you can understand and transfer to your own databases. When we are gone, this is what will remain of our existence. Take this back to your people, your scholars, so that we would not be forgotten.”

"This is a generous gift," Bayanhong replied, as she accepted the box. "I am sure that there are scholars and researchers among my people that will appreciate what is contained within this, and your people will be remembered."

Mang-Opu stood up, and said, "Then our meeting is concluded. Commander, it was good to have met you, and to have encountered your people. It is pleasant to know that there are good people in the galaxy. Remember us as we remember you."

"We will do so."

"Anak-Ipa, can you lead the commander to the location where her teleportation technology can work?"

"Of course," replied the younger Cheshirian.

The two left the room and headed to the location where Bayanhong had beamed in. As they walked, with Bayanhong carrying the case, Anak-Ipa started, "I would like to thank you for the wonderful opportunity I had being on your starship, to meet its crew and see the abilities of the ship, and to see that other ship and that other species of beings. It could well be the highlight of my life."

She was in relative privacy with the one Cheshirian who had been recently off-world, so she asked, "Do you agree with the decision of your leaders to remain here, on this planet, and live out your days here?"

"I do," the native said, without hesitation. "I would've been surprised if they had reached any other decision."

"Why?"

"For the reasons that Mang-Opu said, that in the long term, our society would not be viable because we lack biodiversity among all life on this world and genetic diversity among us. The society that we would recreate would be totally different from the one that we lost. I heard that has occurred even among the species that you know. I accept the decision that was made."

"I understand."

Anak-Ipa added, "What I did find surprising was that you did not argue for the opposite point of view, argue for us to continue on another world and all of that."

Bayanhong explained, "The Federation believes each society has the right to set its own course, and it is not our place to interfere with that right or to tell you what to do. We can offer alternatives, as we have done, and it is your right to decide how your society should proceed. You made that decision, and we will respect it."

"I believe you will, too, because of what I had seen when I was on the *Athena*."

"We will."

They were at the location where Bayanhong and Anak-Ipa had beamed down, and now the native stepped away. "It was good to have met you and known you, Commander Bayanhong."

The first officer replied, "And it was good to have met and known you, Anak-Ipa." She watched as the Cheshirian walked away slowly, and then tapped

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her commbadge. “Bayanhong to *Athena*, one to beam up...”