

INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM MAGIC

Captain Leonard Thorpe was once again back at Earth, the *Athena* docked at Spacedock with the crew ordered by Starfleet Command to follow the instant recall procedures as they returned to their assorted homes and places they were visiting while at Earth. First officer Julia Bayanhong explained in her announcement to the crew, “That means you can return to your homes here on Earth, but you are subject to instant recall for another mission and you have to be ready to respond to that recall immediately.” As for what that mission was, Thorpe had no idea. It was a particular order, and suggested that Starfleet Command was considering the *Athena* for another mission, but had not made the final decision yet. Thus, Thorpe knew, it was a waiting game.

He was still thinking of the previous mission, at Waukins, which had gone not according to plan and ended up going in an unanticipated direction.

Once more, he was at the apartment in San Francisco that Starfleet provided him. Damiko Matsubara, the one-time science officer on the *Athena* and the mother of his son Hiroshi, was staying in the apartment with him, and was there when he returned. “So you did not go on an on-going mission?” she asked.

“No,” Thorpe explained, fully aware that Matsubara, still a Starfleet officer but now working planetside, had what information Starfleet Command was deciding to release. “That was a one-time mission, as the board of inquiry over Philentrophia is still to meet.”

“When?”

“I don’t know. Admiral Holloway still has not assigned a date, and I suspect that’s because he has another possible mission for us.”

“What makes you think that? The *Athena* docked, didn’t it?”

“Yes, but the crew is on instant recall notice.”

“Oh,” Matsubara sighed, understanding what that was. There was something else on her mind, based on the mission reports that she had read. Given that Thorpe was on board, she had read the available mission reports from the *Athena*. “You know,” she started, “there’s more to the story than

what’s in the mission reports. I heard that the *Dublin* was lost, along with one of the *Defiant*-class ships, and the Ksassans lost all of their ships.”

“I know.”

“And there were reports that the android occupation army on Waukins went into berserker mode and attacked both the Ksassans and the civilian population.”

“Yeah,” Thorpe admitted. He knew that Starfleet was covering up some of what happened at Waukins, but what happened on the planet could not be covered up so readily because of all the witnesses and the civilian news reports—and the fact that Waukins was not a Federation member world. The Ksassans had created quite a large occupation force of androids in order to control the planet, given the Waukinese propensity to revolt against outside rulers. The occupation force had suppressed most of that resistance, but then when the *Dublin* arrived and the incident in space occurred, the androids suddenly went crazy and started attacking everything, even the Ksassans, who were completely helpless and quickly overwhelmed. Thorpe—and of course people across the Federation—had seen the news reports, the fast-moving, deadly androids, indiscriminately killing and destroying everything in their paths. The death toll was in the hundreds of thousands, and fires and destruction were seen in virtually every major Waukinese city. Then, suddenly, the androids froze in place and became nothing more than scrap metal and composites. The violence ended, and the few surviving Ksassans were quickly overwhelmed by the natives, ending the occupation.

“That wasn’t supposed to happen,” Matsubara remarked. “The Ksassans were supposed to control the androids. Because they were often in close company with the androids, they were among the first killed when they went berserk. That was not the Ksassans’ doomsday weapon, was it? That was something else.”

“Yes,” Thorpe replied.

“What was it?”

“Starfleet has not released that information. They embargoed it.”

“Even to fellow Starfleet officers?”

“Even to them,” Thorpe replied. “We were put under the strictest oath by Admiral Quinn not to tell what had happened at Waukins, what the full story is.”

“Damn this Starfleet secrecy,” Matsubara retorted, with anger in her voice. “So many people on Earth are getting angry at this increasing level of secrecy in Starfleet. They’re doing things that are dangerous and then hiding them from the people here on Earth. No wonder there are protests and rising anger, and people are demanding that Starfleet again be put under civilian control, of the Federation Council.”

“It already is.”

"In name only," Matsubara retorted. "You know that, and I know that."

"Unfortunately," the captain continued, and he was speaking with his rank and position now, "I'm under orders not to reveal details of what happened at Waukins. I don't like those orders, and I have confidence in you, but the strictest sanctions are on us, and we could suffer the most severe penalties if we violate that order."

"For you, loss of command?"

"And loss of commission and perhaps some memory treatments too."

"Oh," Matsubara replied, turning away. She was again thinking about what Starfleet was doing, and what really happened at Waukins. Was it possible to find out somehow, and if whatever it was was a threat to Earth? She was pretty sure that if whatever had happened at Waukins had been confined there and dealt with there, the secrecy would not be so strong, especially among Starfleet officers. Therefore, there was more to the story than what the reports had suggested. The part about the androids, which could not be hidden, was what worried her the most.

Thorpe spent the afternoon playing with Hiroshi, helping him master the fine art of walking, and encouraging him to get some words out, beyond "mama" and "dada" and "food." He liked that last word. Matsubara prepared dinner, and gave the toddler a feeding before putting him down for a nap. The two ate in silence, for the most part, with each side brooding over what was not said and what could not be said. Through the afternoon, and while preparing the meal, partly with replication and partly through actual cooking, in much the same way that her parents did it, Matsubara had been thinking about the hidden story at Waukins, and came to just one conclusion. She looked up at Thorpe, and said, "The androids, they were supposed to be under the control of the Ksassans, but they were really under the control of the Borg, weren't they?"

"That's not known," Thorpe admitted.

"But if they were under the control of the Borg, why were they killing and not assimilating?"

"We don't know."

"That's because the nature of the Borg has changed, has it?"

"Unknown."

Again, she looked at the man, and asked, "Your answers, are they honest or are you just following Admiral Quinn's orders?"

"I said 'we don't know,' not 'I can't say.'"

Before Matsubara could offer a retort to that, the comm unit in the apartment sounded that there was an incoming message. Thorpe answered it, turning it on and seeing on the screen a young blond woman in a Starfleet uniform. He did not recognize her, but was still thinking that this could be a

recall notice for the crew. She started, “Captain Leonard Thorpe?”

“Yes.”

“Admiral Holloway is requesting a meeting with you.”

“When?”

“Immediately.”

“Oh.”

“Now what,” Matsubara said softly, with just a touch of frustration in her voice.

* * *

Moments later, due to the wonders of teleportation, Captain Thorpe, back in uniform, was at the reception counter at Admiral Holloway’s office, where he was seeing the blond woman in the flesh. “You can go straight in,” she told him. “He’s expecting you.”

Thorpe went into the inner office, where Holloway was seated behind his desk. The office might have been large, with a nice view of San Francisco beyond the windows, but it was not pretentiously furnished. A desk, a couple of chairs, a couch and a replicator was about all that Holloway needed, and that was all that he had. The older man, with his characteristic full head of hair, all nicely white now, stood up momentarily, saying, “Thanks for coming on short notice.”

“I see,” Thorpe replied, as he took the offered seat. “I get the feeling that this is not about the board of inquiry.”

“No,” Holloway started. “We’ve got bigger problems right now.”

“What happened at Waukins?”

“That’s one of them, but that’s not your concern right now. There’s another mission we have for your ship, a longer mission than the one at Waukins.”

“What?” asked Thorpe. Why was he feeling nervous?

“We have lost contact with the *U.S.S. Clements*.”

Thorpe had not heard of that ship, which was not surprising. Starfleet had thousands of ships, and unless he had dealings with a particular ship, he was not expected to know much about all the other ones. “I am not aware of that ship or its mission.”

“It was sent to do a survey of the Arosian Empire, or what’s left of it. We have lost contact with the vessel.”

“And the *Athena* is going to look for it?”

“Yes,” Holloway replied.

“But why us? With the situation with the Borg?”

“As I stated, captain, that is not your concern—unless the two incidents are connected, and there is a non-zero probability that is the case.

However, the reason that the *Athena* is chosen is that it is the fastest ship we have available right now, and can get there before any other. That's why the mission is yours..."

"That was a very quick instant recall," Bayanhong said, as she and Captain Thorpe walked into the observation lounge behind the bridge. The view through the windows was of the rear of the ship, the lander pylon in particular prominent. Beyond that, the far wall of Spacedock, and other ships docked there, was barely visible. "I mean, I barely got a chance to get home and have a dinner date with my brother. I never even got as far as San Diego to check in on Dusty."

"Well," Thorpe replied, "all I had was an afternoon with my son."

"And this is a new mission?"

"It is, and though it is a single-purpose mission, it could be a long one."

"Single-purpose? Is that what we have become?"

"Until certain things are... resolved, unfortunately, yes."

In the observation room, the other senior officers were there, people familiar to the captain and the first officer. The personnel at the top of the hierarchy of the *Athena* had not changed. Its chief engineer was Rodall Dewuchun, who likely would be the chief engineer as long as the ship was in active service, regardless of who commanded it. The chief medical officer was Ger Psakolaps, a Kentyan who would rather be nowhere else. Grace Brigson was the chief science officer, who made the decision to stay with the *Athena* rather than the *Socrates*, thinking that her new ship would get more interesting assignments, but now she was not so sure. The tactical officer was Henrietta Vorwoorts, who perhaps more than most just wanted to get back into space and the idea that this mission was "long term" did not displease her. The security chief was Sal Hakamura, who was just glad to be back in uniform and back on board. Sanjay Indesakar was the pilot, and though his attempt to get more into the command track was dashed, all he could do was to apply himself and try again. Finally, there was the ship's resident Vulcan, T'Kor, whose mind was elsewhere right now, though those that observed her could not tell.

Thorpe took his seat, and said, "As you are well aware, we've been recalled and we're back on active duty."

"That was very quick," Vorwoorts remarked.

"I know, but you were warned that was possible, and in fact, we were put on that instant recall notice because Starfleet Command pretty well had a mission waiting for us."

"And what is that mission?" Hakamura asked.

"We're to search for a missing ship."

Brigson spoke out loud the feeling that the others had, “Really? Us?”

“That’s because the missing ship is a long way away.”

Dewuchun asked, “How far away?”

Thorpe answered, “The ship in question is the *U.S.S. Clements*. It’s a *Galaxy*-class ship that has been on a long-term exploration mission in the ruins of the Arosian Empire.”

“Oh.”

As he spoke, Thorpe noticed that there was a reaction from Brigson, who seemed surprised, or perhaps that was shock, at the news. “A problem, commander?”

“No, sir, it’s just that you mentioned the *Clements*. When the *Socrates* was put into drydock for refitting and the crew reassigned, I came to the *Athena*, and a good friend of mine, Natalie Cohen, was assigned to the *Clements*. She told me about a long-term exploration mission, but without the details. There’s that Starfleet secrecy again. Now, the *Clements* has gone missing and in the Arosian Empire too.”

“The most booby-trapped section of space, I’ve heard,” Vorwoorts answered.

“Just legends,” Thorpe replied.

“Legends that have sprung up in just fifty years.”

“True, but the point is to see what’s left of the Arosian Empire, and perhaps have contact with any survivor groups. According to the information transmitted by the *Clements* before it disappeared, it had encountered no such groups.”

Bayanhong asked, “What was its last known position?”

“The planet Hollos,” Thorpe replied. He used the controls to display an overall star map of the known section of the galaxy, zooming in a bit so that Earth and Hollos were both shown on the map. “It is approximately one thousand two hundred and fifty light years from Earth, but because we have to go between the Romulan and Klingon Empires, our travel distance will be almost fourteen hundred light years.”

Dewuchun said, “I would recommend that we use the engines in the chronometric displacement mode to cut down on the travel time.”

“But shouldn’t we be looking for this ship?” Vorwoorts asked. “In the chronometric displacement mode, our sensors and communications would be impaired.”

“We would not go right to Hollos that way, but would stop about a hundred or a hundred and fifty light years from the planet and travel the rest of the way normally, looking for any signs of the ship. Further from the planet, the odds of unexpectedly encountering the ship would be rather remote because if it left Hollos, we would have no idea where it went.”

“We will do that,” Thorpe remarked.

“What was at Hollos?” Bayanhong asked. “Was any information transmitted?”

“None. The only information that we have is that the ship arrived at that planet, and then we lost all contact with it.”

Dewuchun now spoke up, saying, “That’s an interesting name.”

“What do you mean?”

“The Arosian language is known to be related to High Kroosian. In High Kroosian, the word ‘time’ in the sense of time as a dimension and a direction is *khollo*. It is known that in Arosian, the initial *kh* sound changed to *h* in a stressed syllable. Then, the ending *s* is a suffix indicating a place.”

“A time place?” Bayanhong asked. “Could that be another time-altering artifact, like the Guardian of Forever?”

Thorpe answered, “We have no idea, assuming that Rodall’s explanation of the name is correct.”

“Would anybody on the *Clements* know that? I’m assuming there were no Odonans on board.”

“I don’t know, but logically, any ship doing long-term exploration there and perhaps encountering survivors would have no Odonans on board, *overhimpennyon* and all of that.”

“Of course, so how would they know the name?”

“The Odonans have released star charts with the names as the Arosians would have used them.”

“But *they* would have understood the significance of the name.”

“Possibly, but again, that’s assuming the name Hollos is related to the Kroosian word for ‘time’.”

During all of this discussion, Indesakar was using the controls in front of him on the conference room table to do the calculations that the captain would be expecting from him, given what had been stated so far. He spoke up, “Captain, I’ve computed a course, following the conventional routes through that space between the Klingon and Romulan empires, but flying above the closest contact points. Using the chronometric displacement drive except for the last hundred and fifty light years would result in seven and a half days of travel in that mode, and then four more in normal mode to reach the planet.”

“Then that is what we will do”“

“Captain’s log, stardate 56191.0. The Athena has been travelling in chronometric displacement mode for just over seven days, and we have had no problems as the ship has handled this flawlessly. There is a certain level of tension among us now because we are heading into an uncertain situation. We’re all familiar with what the Arosian Empire was—an extremely xenophobic race that sought to destroy any other race that learned of its

existence—and how they met their demise—they were a Kroosian offshoot group that was vulnerable to a disease endemic in another Kroosian offshoot group, the Odonans. We all know that the Arosians were notable for creating what was essentially an empire-wide self-destruct system, which is the source of the booby-trap rumours, as not all the self-destruct systems may have gone off. There have been rumours of some Arosian survivor groups, mostly on small, remote worlds, or small populations that had genetic immunity to the overhimpennyondisease. According to the information we had from the Clements, they had encountered none of these survivor groups, but we have no idea if there are any at Hollos. This does make this mission not completely risk free.”

Thorpe was on the bridge, looking at the viewscreen as the *Athena* continued in chronometric displacement mode. The image shown was not unlike that of conventional warp, as the infinite speed of light approximation was shown, but the stars moved faster and *weirder* in a way that he could not quite explain. He did understand what the chronometric displacement mode was about, and how it allowed travel over great distances in relatively short time frames, as long as one was not interested in what was between the start and end of the journey. Essentially, in this mode, the ship travelled at sub-light, but at so close to light speed that time dilation was having an extreme effect. Thirteen hundred years outside the ship was just seven days on board the *Athena*. At the same time, the starship was also travelling in time, basically going backwards in time in such a manner that when they emerged from this mode, they had travelled back in time thirteen hundred years minus that one week. Because the time travel component was not linear but parabolic, that made sensors and communications unreliable to useless, and accounted for the *weird* movement of the stars on the screen.

“Preparing to come out of chronometric displacement mode,” Indesakar remarked.

“Rodall?” Thorpe asked.

“The subspace linking fields are operating normally. They should ease off normally. The error in our arrival should be no more than plus or minus four and a half hours, but we are outside of the Federation navigational grid and cannot calibrate our systems related to it.”

“Well, as long as it is not years off.”

“No sir, the system works too well for that. Remember, centuries ago, this was how early Federation ships travelled long distances.”

“I know, and given some of the ships that were lost, for awhile, some of the errors were quite large.”

“Ready to decelerate,” Indesakar said.

“Do it,” Thorpe ordered.

Over the next thirty minutes, Indesakar decreased the subspace factorization, which had reduced the mass of the starship, as seen by the outside universe, to less than one ten-thousandth of its true value. That had boosted the speed to about one hundred thousandth of a part below light speed, but as the subspace factorization was reduced and the effective mass increased, the speed started to drop, and the subspace linking fields were reduced a corresponding amount. The effect was pretty smooth, with only a slight jitter in the starfield visible through the screen as the ship jumped a bit in time, backwards or forwards, it was hard to tell. Once the ship got back to around thirty psol, where time dilation effects were negligible in the short term, Dewuchun shut off the subspace linking fields.

"We've exited chronometric displacement mode," Indesakar remarked. "We're back to following Einstein."

"Rodall?" Thorpe asked.

"Engine diagnostics come up normally. The *Athena* handled that very well. Of course, we have no idea what time it *really* is, but I'm confident in that uncertainty, plus or minus four and a half hours at most."

"Status of the warp engines?"

"Bringing them on-line now. It'll take ten minutes to bring them up to operating temperature." Of course, Dewuchun knew, while the ship was in chronometric displacement mode, most of the warp engine functions were not needed, and it normally would have been time to run routine maintenance on them, but the engines needed no work. The ship had hardly used them since the Philentrophia mission. Thus, the week had been rather boring in engineering, with Dewuchun struggling to find enough work for everyone.

While they waited for the warp engines to return to operational status, Thorpe ordered, "What do sensors show?"

"No ships on long-range sensors," Brigson reported. "Nothing much at all, actually."

"This particular entry point is rather empty, even in Arosian times," Thorpe pointed out. "What about communications, non-natural subetheromagnetic signals?"

"Nothing detected," the science officer reported. "We're detecting no non-natural subetheromagnetic signals from the coordinates identified as Hollos."

"Well," Bayanhong said. "We know it's a dead world, at least in terms of Arosian survivors."

A few minutes later, Dewuchun reported, "Captain, the warp engines are now operational."

"Commander Indesakar," Thorpe ordered, "set course for Hollos, warp nine point five."

“Warp nine point five...”

Almost four days later, the *Athena* was on final approach to Hollos. The ship had slightly altered the approach course so that they were travelling the same route, more or less, that the *Clements* had taken when it approached the system. They had detected that ship’s warp signature, and it was characteristic of the warp signature of a *Galaxy*-class starship, and the rate of deterioration of that signature as a function of the distance from Hollos’ primary also confirmed that the error in time that the *Athena* had undergone because of the chronometric displacement drier was essentially insignificant. As the ship got closer to the system, the warp signature disappeared, erased by the solar wind, but for as long as the *Athena* could track it, there was no dispute that the *Clements* had headed to this system.

“Entering the Hollos system,” Indesakar reported.

Brigson added, “The star is class G1, single star, six planets, three outer gas giants, three smaller inner planets. The second is in the inhabitable zone, size is one point zero four of Earth, reads as class-M. It has no natural satellites. I’m still not reading anything in orbit. At this distance, we should be able to detect a *Galaxy*-class ship.”

“Wreckage?”

“Nothing large enough to be detectable at this distance. The system is remarkably free of other debris too, as if the Arosian self-destruct did not extend here.”

“Or else they had no real presence here,” Thorpe added. “Again, if Rodall’s interpretation of the name is correct and this is a time planet, like the one back home, it would not even be Arosian. They might have no more presence here than we have at our time planet.”

“We’ll know soon enough.”

A few minutes later, Thorpe added, “Heni, send a communications hail to the *Clements*. If there’s no response, try a computer-to-computer link.” The captain had been given the prefix codes for the *Clements*, in case its crew was dead or incapacitated, and he needed to take control of the ship.

Vorwoorts tried the two forms of the hail, but got no response either way and reported that to the captain, “No response. According to this, the *Clements* is not here or not intact.”

“Not exactly what I want to hear,” Brigson said to her companion at the central console.

“Thinking of Natalie?”

“Yeah.”

“How long have you known her?”

“Since our days at the Academy. I thought her brother, who was an ensign then, was kind of cute, kind of nice—but he did not reciprocate the

feelings. I didn't hold that against Natalie, though, especially when we were on the *Socrates* together. We dominated the ship playing bridge as a partnership."

"What was she on the *Socrates*?"

"Physics and chemistry mostly, biochemistry to some degree. I really hope that this turns out to be a missing ship and not a destroyed ship."

"Yeah, I always hope it ends that way."

Moments later, the *Athena* dropped out of warp, and there it was on the viewscreen, the planet Hollos, shown at a little less than a half phase. From what they could see, it was a typical class-M world, a mix of large continental land masses with some smaller islands, lots of ocean and the land that was mostly green with some brown at typical desert latitudes, and an ice cap over the southern pole, which had land. The northern pole was over water and there was no ice cap. Thorpe asked, "Anything on sensors?"

Brigson ran the sensor routines used when approaching an unknown planet in order to detect what was in orbit. The data coming through was unusually sparse. "Nothing in orbit, sir," she reported. "No debris either, nothing that would be even the fraction of a *Galaxy*-class ship." That was a relief in a sense, she knew, at least when it came to her friend Cohen. A few more sweeps as the ship took a spiraling course gave even further information. "No debris of any kind in orbit, not even the fragmentary residue of a ship destroyed by a warp core breach."

"All of this suggests," Bayanhong started, "that the *Clements* left the system."

"Yes," Thorpe replied, "but the question now becomes did the *Clements* leave under the control of its captain and crew?"

"Also," Brigson added, "no time distortions or temporal effects of any kind, nothing at all like what is associated with the time planet back home."

"Perhaps Hollos has nothing to do with time then."

"Perhaps."

The captain ordered, "Sanjay, spiral us in, and Grace, run the comprehensive mapping routines. Lets see what we have here."

"Understood," the two officer said in unison.

Over the final few minutes of the *Athena*'s approach to Hollos, Indesakar took the ship on a spiraling course, getting closer with each powered orbit, while moving at different inclinations to the equator. This allowed the sensors to compose a map of the planet, which was displayed on one of the secondary screens as the sensors did their work and the computer interpreted the data and created the topographic map. The sensor systems, which both Vorwoorts and Brigson were running, beeped several times as readings were flagged for further study. "That's interesting," Brigson said.

"What?" asked the captain.

“The planet is basically pristine and has no Arosians or Odonan-xenotype lifeforms. However, there’s this one point, where the remains of some truly massive structure have been detected. In fact, it’s so massive it’s visible from orbit.” As if to prove the point, the science officer displayed a simple visual image from two hundred and fifty kilometres up. Near the equator was a high-altitude plateau, and it had been flattened somewhat by artificial means, and on that was built something that was roughly elliptical and about forty kilometres along one axis and twenty-five along the other. Some parts of it extended almost three kilometres into the sky, but a lot of it had collapsed, and it was now more twisted metal and wreckage than anything else. “It’s completely inert,” the science officer added, “no power signature of any kind.”

“What could that be?” Bayanhong asked.

“I don’t know,” Brigson replied. “Now, it’s mostly wreckage.”

“Arosian?”

“Unknown.”

“How was it destroyed?”

“I’m not sure. I’m not seeing obvious battle-like damage, which the self-destructed Arosian installations should show, as it looks more like it simply deteriorated or collapsed on its own. Perhaps it was not completed and simply abandoned and left to nature.”

“Well,” Thorpe said. “That looks like the first place to take a closer look.”

Moments later, Bayanhong led an away team to the surface of Hollos. Brigson accompanied her, along with one of the engineers, Ensign Mark Twosen, one of the newer members of the crew as he was one of those who had replaced those lost in the Philentrophia mission. Two security officers, Lieutenant Claude Isadore and Ensign William Drell, the latter also a new member of the *Athena* crew, rounded out the away team. Because the air temperatures was just six degrees, and it was windy and mostly cloudy, the five were outfitted with the winterized field jackets, and they were equipped with the Odonan forcefield belts that the *Athena* had on loan.

Bayanhong, once materialization was complete, looked around at the overwhelming size of the ruins. She had seen nothing like this in her travels through space. A structure made of steel girders, designed as arches, with internal support and external bracing, reached into the sky to improbable heights. Much of the exterior of the structure was clad with metal plates, some of which were rusting. The structure appeared to have been completed on the outside, but the interior might have been a work in progress and had been abandoned. Sections of the exterior had collapsed, as had some of the arching support beams and the columns that held them up, but others re-

mained intact. All of this had been built around a central section of about one and a half kilometres in diameter that was not covered and did not have footings for the columns. There was, however, a depression located in that central location. Bayanhong found it hard to comprehend the scale of this structure, as the pattern of columns and arches that survived seemed to stretch to the horizon and beyond. On the other hand, the wind was brisk to the point that she was uncomfortable, and the air seemed to be much colder than that six degrees suggested.

Bayanhong was standing near Brigson, who already had her tricorder out. "What could this place have possibly been?" she asked.

The science officer answered, "I have no idea. I've seen nothing like this, and I can't imagine it being anything but a giant hanger."

"For a giant spaceship?"

"Or a fleet of them."

"Or perhaps the Arosians were building another of their battlespheres here."

"Perhaps," Brigson remarked, but then she knew so little about that one surviving Arosian artifact that the Odonans now possessed. She was not even sure of the size of the wormhole-generating vessel, but did wonder if it could have fitted inside this structure. "On the other hand, it's pretty clear that the structure was nowhere near completed. Brigson completed her scans of the ground that they were standing on. It was pretty flat and smooth rock, with the various bands of colour representing strata visible as patterns on the ground. "Well, it looks like the Arosians created this plateau by shearing off the top of a mountain, to create this perfectly flat plateau. The ground is fused, consistent with a high-energy source passing through."

"What did they do with the rest of the material?"

Brigson pointed to the structure all around them, saying, "They used it in that."

"How old is this?"

"Not that old, perhaps two to three hundred years."

"So the Arosians abandoned it before their empire was destroyed?"

"Possibly."

Twosen had been conducting his own scans. He had approached one of the columns, which was made of a latticework of steel beams, each about fifty centimetres in diameter, and the whole column was roughly eighty metres in diameter and reached at least one kilometre into the sky. It was sunk some distance into the ground too, using a sort of fusing technology that he could not understand. He returned to where the two senior officers were standing, and said, "I looked at the columns. They appear to be made of iron and some other compounds, but they're variable. Some of the beams show surface rust. They also appear to be laced with a crystal structure that's

suggestive of a structural integrity field.”

“Necessary for a structure this large,” Brigson added.

“And yet, it doesn’t appear to be linked to any power source, or to have a power supply roughed in. To me, it’s almost suggestive that the Arosians formed the material in a particular way and they did not vary the technique to build this. The structure is a single cast, made that way and not assembled.”

“That’s pretty large for a single casting.”

“I suspect that the Arosians did it using some sort of replicator process, continuously generating the entire column perhaps by having the replicator machinery rise against the column until it was complete. The single casting does make it stronger and more durable—but it’s not perfect as all the collapsed sections suggest. Given the rust patterns I saw, I speculate that the Arosians might’ve abandoned this project because it was too big for the materials that they were using and they couldn’t get consistent enough quality.”

“Well,” Bayanhong replied, “that doesn’t tell us what the original purpose might have been.”

“We perhaps might never know.”

“But, I’m pretty sure that the crew of the *Clements* would have seen this structure and stood at some point within it, doing the same scans and coming to the same conclusions. This doesn’t sound like a structure that would make a ship disappear.”

Brigson added, “I don’t think that we can learn anything more here. Perhaps we should check out that depression at the centre. Maybe there’s more information there.”

“Or more questions,” the first officer said, as she reached for her commbadge. “Bayanhong to the *Athena*. We’re ready to beam over to the second examination site.”

“Understood,” came the reply from Megan Wilder. “Transporting now.”

A few seconds later, Bayanhong and the other four found themselves in what looked like a crater, but it was a crater unlike any they had seen before. It was a kilometre and a half in diameter and perfectly circular, and the ground was flat inside that crater, with that just over seventy metres below the ground level of the rest of the plateau. The walls were all at a seventy-two degree angle, and perfectly smooth. Along where the walls met the crater floor, some sand and dust and other small particles had gathered over the years and seemed to adhere there, despite the wind.

Twosen had his tricorder out and was conducting scans. He saw that the ground here was like the ground they had been on earlier, a flat surface carved into a mountain and somehow fused to a smoothness with high-energy

devices, but he was getting particular readings that he examined further. At the same time, Brigson walked over to the edge of the crater, and looked up at the crater walls, which was so smooth that it was highly reflective, like it was covered in a layer of glass. She got her tricorder out, and started to scan. She too was getting peculiar readings. Bayanhong had joined the science officer at the edge of the crater, but was using her eyes to look around, and not at any instrument. She noticed that some sand had dirt and dust had gathered along the base of the walls. As she walked past, she noticed something, a part of a footprint. Given the wind and the fine debris that did blow around, she could not imagine that the footprint had been there too long, and even the time since the *Clements* had apparently been here was too long. She looked at the footprint, and then at the thread on her own boot. To her eyes anyway, the thread patterns did match. Isadore came over and asked, casually, "Stepped in something?"

"Not me," the first officer replied, "but whoever stepped there did."

Isadore looked at the footprint Bayanhong was pointing to and then did the same thing that she had done, comparing his boot thread with the pattern in the silt. "They look the same. Could it be a *Clements* crewmember?"

"I can't see who else it could've been."

"But in the time, wouldn't the wind have erased this footprint?"

"It should, but I don't know."

Brigson now approached, saying, "There's something peculiar about the wall of this crater. It doesn't read as completely natural, like the ground above. There's an energy component here I don't understand."

"Holographic?"

"If it is, it's more advanced technology than we have, since if it is, the holograph mimics not just the surface appearance and touch, fooling our senses, but also mimics the molecular and atomic structure of the material it is representing. That is orders of magnitude more advanced."

Bayanhong asked, "Did the Arosians have such technology?"

"I don't know."

"If it is holographic, where's the power source?"

"Perhaps underneath."

"But why would the Arosians build this structure, and then abandon it halfway through and leave this power source and holographic generator—if that is what it is—operational?"

Twosen had wandered over, and overheard part of the conversation. He said, "I think I have an explanation."

"What?"

"Ever heard of Project Two?"

Both Bayanhong and Brigson had, as the former said, "The Odonans'

project to replicate hypermatter?”

“Yes, that. In theory, it could be done, but it takes resources and materials that are very hard to find, and the process is complicated and not without risk. However, the theory also indicates what kind of byproduct effects could be detected in the surrounding area. I’m reading some of that here. It did not occur to me at first, but then when I considered the vast scale of this place, I was reminded of Project Two. Hypermatter replication requires infrastructure on a vast scale. The Odonans did it in space, while the Arosians might have done it here.”

“Or tried to. This place doesn’t look complete.”

“No, I think they did it. This is what it looks like after the process is done. It can damage the surrounding infrastructure. The process was completed and the hypermatter removed.”

“Then why the holographic floor and crater walls?”

“Perhaps to hide the machinery, so that they could use it again.”

Bayanhong and Brigson exchanged glances, and it was the science officer that said, “Would the crew of the *Clements* had come to this same conclusion about this place?”

“I don’t know.”

* * *

Rodall Dewuchun had heard the suggestion from Twosen that Hollos might have been the site of the Arosian equivalent of Project Two, and he had reviewed the data that the engineer had collected. It certainly seemed possible, as there were clear signs of the byproducts and aftereffects of the replication procedure. The information was based on theory, since anyone who understood subetheromagnetism could understand the process to replicate hypermatter from dilithium and higher, but the engineering was very difficult and few had attempted it. The Odonans had attempted it once before, Project One, and failed, and somehow, through means not fully understood yet, they had succeeded with Project Two. If the Arosians had the technology to do it, and if that technology was here, that could be a concern. What other race could come across this planet and find this technology? However, there was no firm proof yet that the technology existed. It may have been underground, or removed by the Arosians. If the *Clements* had gone in search of that... Dewuchun found it hard to believe that if the other ship had reported what they had found and what they were doing, that Starfleet Command would withhold that information from them—or send a ship with an Odonan on board to search for the *Clements*.

There was still one problem with this scenario, and in the conference lounge behind the bridge, where the senior officers were meeting, this was

brought up. Brigson reported, "There's no evidence that the crew of the *Clements* found a way in, or even that there's something there to even enter."

"And," Dewuchun spoke up, "it's hard to believe that there could be a holographic emitter than can not only mimic the look and feel of a rock floor, but its atomic structure as well. The machinery to do it would be immense and the power demands just to hide *that* machine would be high. Where are they getting the power from?"

Thorpe asked, "Is there any known examples of holographic technology to that level of detail?"

"No, sir," Brigson added. "I did a search. There's no record of any such technology, and there's no record that the Arosians took holographic technology to that level."

"Is it even theoretically possible?"

"Sometimes, I get the feeling anything is theoretically possible, but I could not see the practical advantage of such technology."

"Is there a way to get around it, to shut it off or whatever?"

"None that I can see," Brigson replied, looking up at the captain. "We have no information on where the machinery is located, where the power source is or even what we're looking for."

"Now," the captain started, "it's highly possible that the senior officers on the *Clements* have learned the same thing that we have learned, and they sat in their own conference lounge and discussed this, and perhaps discussed how to penetrate the structure. Whatever they did might have contributed to their disappearance."

"But what could they possibly have done?" asked Dewuchun. "Any attempt that led to the destruction of the ship would surely have left debris, an energy signature, or *something*."

"Perhaps," Vorwoorts speculated, "the technology here is not really the equivalent of the Odonans' Project Two, but of their hypergates. The central section would be where ships would approach, and the surrounding structure would have been... something. This gate still functions, but no others do, so the *Clements* would have dematerialized and then never reappeared."

"The only weakness with that idea would be that there should be other similar structures on other planets because it makes no sense to build just one hypergate, and to the best of my knowledge, no such structures have been found elsewhere."

"Unless," the tactical officer added, "this one doesn't operate in space, but in time. Rodall had said that the name of the planet suggested 'time' in the old Kroosian language, and perhaps this is the time artifact."

"Except that it's pretty clear that the Arosians built the structure, and not that long ago."

Brigson remarked, “The Arosians built the structure, but there’s no evidence they built that central crater and the alleged holographic technology. That might have been there for quite some time, and might have been built by someone else.”

“Lots of speculation,” Thorpe continued, as he looked over the other officers, “but no clear-cut ideas of what the *Clements* might have done. I find it very difficult that Captain Rice would risk his entire ship by exposing it to an unknown time-travel artifact.”

“If that’s what he did,” Brigson replied.

“What?”

“He might have tried something, and somehow, the technology might have taken the entire ship, even if that was not the captain’s intent.”

“I see,” Thorpe replied. He did feel a little nervous, since it was certainly possible that Captain Edmund Rice of the *Clements* had been careful and considered all the possibilities with the action that he took, and whatever he did led to what was assumed to be a disaster. If the *Clements* had been taken to a different time, they could be working to undo that and could return at any time, and yet, at the same time, there was no proof that the scenario his officers were spinning was even in any way a valid one. He had to think that Rice and his officers were doing the same thing that he was doing right now, except that their objectives were different. Rice’s objective was to identify the purpose of this artifact, and Thorpe’s purpose was to find what happened to Rice, his crew and the *Clements*. Thorpe did say, “If there is a time-travel event here, would there not be chronoton particles or evidence of their presence here?”

“Possibly,” Brigson detected. “We have evidence that suggests hypermatter replication might’ve been done here.”

“Recently?”

“We can’t date it. We don’t have enough of a database of these effects to date them.”

“But in your opinion?”

Brigson thought about it for a moment, and then said, “Sorry, sir, but there’s no evidence to support any hypothesis. I could say anything and there would be evidence to support it, because we speak from a position of ignorance.”

“Rodall, your people would have information on this, on hypermatter replication?”

“Possibly, but much of it would be classified, and even if they would release information—or perhaps work on information that we have provided—given our distance, communications would take awhile.”

Bayanhong did have one thing on her mind, and so asked, “Is it possible that chronoton particles could mimic the effect of hypermatter replica-

tion?”

Brigson answered, “It’s possible’ only if large amounts of hypermatter were involved in the process that generated the chronoton particles. Hypermatter is not a necessary requirement for their generation, except perhaps to generate the energy necessary for the process.”

“So,” Thorpe started, “the time machine hidden here uses hypermatter in some manner to generate the power necessary for the time-travel effect.”

“It would have to be enormous, and active now and through any time that the machine is operational.”

“Well, it could well be active if this alleged holographic shield is still active.”

Bayanhong said, “That still doesn’t solve the problem. Can we access this machinery, this technology? I don’t have any ideas? Does anybody?”

Nobody did.

Later, Thorpe was in the Acropolis lounge, sitting at the senior officer’s table, finishing his meal. The lounge had its usual number of occupants, members of the crew just off-shift and having a meal and a little social contact. Thorpe had sensed a little tension in the crew. About the worst fear of a starship in an exploration mission was that something unexpected and catastrophic could happen, or something with that appearance. Whenever one ship was sent out to search for another, that was the fear on the back of the minds of virtually everyone; if it happened to the first ship, it could happen to the second one too, especially if the first one disappeared without leaving any kind of warning or clue to what was about to happen. It was one thing if that unexpected thing occurred completely outside of the control of the crew, but it was quite another if that unexpected and catastrophic thing was a consequence of something the ship did. That was what Thorpe was thinking about as he had his meal.

Bayanhong came over with her tray, and some kind of stew—perhaps something Mongolian—and a salad and water and garlic bread, something she had taken a liking to. “Mind if I join you?” she asked.

“Not at all,” Thorpe replied.

The first officer had a few bites of her meal, and then said, “Thinking about the *Clements* and what happened to it?”

“Of course.”

“Your greatest fear is duplicating the mistake that Captain Rice made?”

“That would be the greatest fear of any captain that would be in this situation. I have tried to think about it from Rice’s point of view, since he would not know what we know. What does he know? The only thing of

interest on this planet is that artifact. That footprint you found is convincing evidence that his crew was here. Would they know about hypermatter replication effects? Would they deduce the presence of chronoton particles?”

“Assuming that these effects are caused by chronoton particles, and that his actions did not generate them.”

“If they did, then the effect could be declining with time.”

“We should check that,” Bayanhong replied. “However, I was thinking, and discussing with some others, about one other question. What brought the *Clements* here? Why did he stop here? The planet doesn’t appear to have anything but that artifact. Did he have some other information?”

“I’ve reviewed the information that he did send back to Starfleet. Whatever personal logs he made, explaining his decision, were either not transmitted back to Starfleet or not made available to me.”

“I see.” Then Bayanhong had another question, and so asked, “Sir, do you have personal logs that you have made, perhaps to explain your decisions?”

“Sometimes, perhaps not as much as I did in the past, but here... I just might end up doing it again.” After a few seconds, Thorpe added, “So has the crew managed to brainstorm anything that could help us, perhaps learn more?”

“Nothing that I’m aware of.”

“That was what I was afraid of.”

“The problem is that anything we could think of would always have one condition in the back of our minds.”

And Thorpe said, “Is this what Captain Rice and the *Clements* did?”

“Exactly,” Bayanhong replied. “On top of that, we likely have *less* information than the crew of that ship had. Afterall, something in their explorations brought them here. We just don’t know what.”

“And even that piece of information we don’t know. They may have come here with the same amount of information that we had, or more. They might have stumbled across that half-complete structure that we had, and sought to explore it. They did... something, and I’m pretty sure that the consequences were not what he intended.”

“Then we know a little *more* than he did, because we know what the consequences could be.”

The next morning, there was another meeting of the senior officers in the conference lounge. Vorwoorts, who had been first on the bridge and got the reports from the third-shift officers, summarized what she had been told, which was very little. “There were no new developments overnight, nothing on sensors, no unexpected developments, no changes in the alien structure on

the surface. From orbit, we can't reliably scan the chronoton particles and the other detected phenomena to see if there is decay in that."

"As I figured," Thorpe replied, as he nursed his cup of coffee.

Dewuchun did speak up, saying, "I did, afterall, send some of the data back home to the Odonan Empire, to see if there were similarities to the Project Two effects in the data. I got the response back a short time ago, and those who examined the data said it was not a match, and not the likely result of a hypermatter replication process. They did not entirely dismiss the time-travel concept, and like we had speculated, a time-travel event using hypermatter to produce the effect could produce the results we detected, but they can't be sure. However, the data was suggestive of a hypermatter system that could generate and manipulate large amounts of power, perhaps even a subspace solar shunt."

"Like at Charamand?"

"More precisely like at the planet in the Small Magellanic Cloud."

"So this could be another of those intergalactic transporters, and the *Clements* could be in another galaxy? That would explain why that ship disappeared without getting word out or leaving any debris behind. It can't be the same system, though."

"Likely not," Dewuchun remarked, "because Captain Rice would have been aware of our mission at Charamand and what happened in the Small Magellanic Cloud, and so would know how to return. It's possible that the hypermatter here is involved in a subspace solar shunt, drawing off massive amounts of energy from the system star... for something. It could be an extreme long-range transporter—except that based on what we know about the Arosians, that was not something they would have experimented with—or it could be some kind of temporal device. To the best of my knowledge, the device at Charamand did not produce any chronoton particles."

"I believe that is correct," Brigson spoke up.

Now Vorwoorts started, "If there is a subspace shunt, couldn't we disrupt it somehow?"

"If we had omega particles, sure," Bayanhong retorted. "Remember, when we disrupted it in the Small Magellanic Cloud, we kind of destroyed the planet."

"But there would have to be something in the sun."

"And that would be beyond our ability to access."

"But with subspace transporters?"

"Doable," Dewuchun said, "assuming that there is life support within that structure."

"But how could anything survive within a star?" Indesakar asked.

"Hypermatter and lots of it. That is what gathers up the energy that it feeds it into the shunt. The concept is doable except for one detail, setting

it up in the first place. I don’t know about your people, but mine have developed solar probes that would work on this principle so that they could penetrate far into a star to gather data on the solar interior, but inevitably, they do fail.”

“But,” Bayanhong started, “if this device is present in the star, then it must continuously output this power, but it would not be used by the device on the planet. Where does the extra go?”

“It’s possible that it could be simply radiated into subspace and dispersed, or radiated by other means. Admittedly, we should’ve been able to detect that, or both, but then we didn’t really look.”

Thorpe asked, “Could we disrupt the power flow? Would it be possible to destroy it?”

“I wouldn’t recommend that, captain. It’s not our technology. We wouldn’t understand the ramifications of that. At best, if we can access the control centre, we could either learn more or perhaps suspend power flows and that would help us learn more about what is happening here.”

“But would that be Arosian?” Vorwoorts asked.

“I doubt it, but they might’ve been there.”

Indesakar asked, “Could this be what the *Clements* had done?”

“Unlikely,” the engineer replied. “They would not have had subspace transporters, and regular transporters could not access this.”

“Assuming that it exists.”

“There’s that.”

Thorpe did ponder the suggestion, realizing that at best, a closer look at the star in this system to see if there was the other end of a subspace shunt embedded in the star, would yield results and an approach, but likely would not result in what had befallen the *Clements* from striking the *Athena*. “Very well,” the captain ordered. “We’ll take a closer look”

“Well, look at that,” Brigson said, as she displayed the sensor reading on the main screen. The *Athena* was about two and a half million kilometres from the star in the Hollos system, and that was about as close as they could get with the shields able to protect the ship from the radiation and the heat. Anything closer for any sustained period could overwhelm the shields and heat up the hull. “I can’t believe something can survive inside a star like that.”

The sensors had detected a sphere about twenty kilometres in diameter located about a hundred thousand kilometres under the visible surface of the star. It was in the centre of what was likely a permanent sunspot, which had a more swirling pattern than typical, and reminded Thorpe of a tropical cyclone with the artifact at the centre marking the eye of the storm. Spectral analysis suggested that the object was glowing with the intensity of the solar

surface, and so was quite bright. As far as they could tell, the artifact was reradiating the surplus energy instead of sending it into the shunt. Once they had found it, they used subetheromagnetic radiation to more fully probe and map out the structure.

"Incredible," Bayanhong remarked, "the ability to build something and put it in a star. What keeps it in place?"

"Unknown," Brigson remarked, "but it could be anchored in subspace. I suspect the sunspot is what is generated by the interference, but it is moving with the star. It matches its rotation.

Several minutes later, the sensors had mapped out the artifact. It was a sphere with two long spears, each about twenty kilometres long. One pointed to the surface, and the other pointed to the centre. Those were either involved with the shunt itself or the anchoring. The main body of the sphere was covered with hypermatter, diboron and dicarbon primarily, and additional layers were built underneath. The layers were protected by some sort of forcefield or other energy field, and that caused the extremely energetic particles to interact with the fields, causing reactions on the other side that produced both negative and positive energy, the positive energy used in the shunt and the negative energy used to keep the structure cool and to allow it to survive. Layers of material, hypermatter and conventional matter, filled the interior of the sphere, and at the very centre was a sphere of about a hundred metres that appeared to be inhabitable.

"Appears?" Thorpe asked.

"We can determine two things," the science officer remarked, "temperatures are tolerable and there is space. What we can't determine is whether or not there is breathable air there."

"Can the subspace transporter reach that far, and through that much matter?"

"Yes," Dewuchun remarked.

"Even with the shunt active?"

"There should be no shunt activity in the centre, where the control centre is."

Once again, Thorpe had to ponder what they were doing and what they were hoping to accomplish. Their mission was to find the *Clements* without ending up suffering the same fate, and if this could help them to that end, then the potential risks would be worth it. They could also learn more about some very different alien technology. "Okay, we'll go and take a look"

A short time later, one subspace transport chamber appeared in the central sphere of the alien artifact. Dewuchun, Brigson and Bayanhong made the trip, along with Ensign Raye Swinster, a diminutive engineer who operated the controls of the transport chamber. There was a sense of tension

in the four once the transport procedure was initiated, since they could not really tell what lie on the other side, and if the sensors on the *Athena* were incorrect in their readings, or if there was something that they had not anticipated, then disaster could still result, at least for them. Swinster exchanged a glance with Dewuchun, who was giving her the unstated order. She tapped the last icon on the control panel—and they all held their breaths. An instant later, they were a hundred thousand kilometres inside a star, which made the total blackness that they encountered, though not entirely unanticipated, a little ironic. They were also not overwhelmed by heat.

“Incredible,” Brigson remarked. “We’re inside a star. That is one thing I never thought I would experience in Starfleet.”

“Just goes to show,” Bayanhong said, “anything is possible.”

Swinster ran the sensors on the transport chamber, and quickly reported what they detected. “The atmosphere is not breathable. It consists of nitrogen and inert gases, neon and argon in particular. There’s no oxygen, nor carbon dioxide. Pressure is ninety-six kilopascals, temperature is twenty-seven degrees and gravity is one point two two of Earth.”

“So we weigh a little more. We have breathing apparatus.”

The four of them had worn oxygen tanks and masks, just in case the atmosphere was not breathable, and they had put them on before getting into the chamber because space within it was limited. Now, the four slipped on the masks and secured them, and also put on the goggles to cover their eyes and ears. They switched on the lights on those goggles and the wrist-mounted lights as well. Swinster did likewise, even though she was going to stay with the chamber. Once they were ready, she used the controls to remove the chamber atmosphere and replace it with the atmosphere outside. They did feel a little warmer. Then she switched off the countervailing fields.

Dewuchun, Brigson and Bayanhong stepped out of the chamber, and swung their lights around. The chamber had emerged in the largest open space they had detected, and what they saw looked like a circular room with a domed ceiling, and corridors that led out every ninety degrees. The floor and the ceiling were made of unadorned metal, and fused with the same sort of crystal material that they had detected in the metal structure on *Hollos*. Brigson found that curious. She had her tricorder out, and did some quick scans. “This way. There’s activity in this direction.”

The four made their way slowly down the corridor, aware that the light they had gave them limited visibility. Bayanhong used her tricorder to scan the way ahead so that there would be no surprises. She was thinking that it would be ironic indeed if they found any sign that someone from the *Clements* had been there ahead of them—and then that was exactly what they found.

“A body,” Brigson suddenly said.

“What?” Bayanhong retorted.

“Human.”

They arrived at the end of the corridor, which opened into a smaller round, domed room, not unlike the one that the transport chamber had emerged in. The room had what looked like a bank of controls on one wall, and in the centre, a column that reached halfway to the ceiling, and it had a door that was not unlike that on a turbolift. The door was closed, and collapsed in front of it was a human male, in a Starfleet uniform. The rank pins identified him as a lieutenant. Bayanhong did turn him over, and saw that he was apparently uninjured and his clothing was intact. Brigson did a quick scan and said what was obvious, “Cause of death is asphyxiation. There’s no oxygen in here.”

“But how did he get here? Who is he?” the first officer asked.

“If we get him back to the *Athena*, we should be able to identify him. He has a tricorder.” Brigson got that, but when she tried to turn it on, it did not work. Perhaps its power cells had run down.

Dewuchun said, “As for how he got there, this is essentially the same thing as what we had just stepped off of, a subspace transport chamber, though this one is fixed in place.”

“Arosian?”

“I’m not sure’ but the labeling is Arosian.” Dewuchun had his wrist lights play over some labeling on the controls. The writing was vaguely recognizable as Odonan in some ways, since High Kroosian used an older form of the Odonan alphabet, though over time, the modern Odonan alphabet had evolved a bit and the Arosian version had too, in other directions. However, the engineer used his tricorder and translated the Arosian text. “It indicates how to use this device.”

“Then why couldn’t he have done that?” Bayanhong said, gesturing to the body. “They’re exploring Arosian space. His tricorder would have the ability to scan and translate this text.”

“I don’t know. It’s possible that it might not work.” Still, Dewuchun found the button that opened the door, so he pushed it and somewhat to his surprise, the door opened. Inside were a couple of controls, and they had new labels applied over the old, suggesting that the Arosians had found this technology and had not built it themselves. The controls were rather simple, designed to give a sensor reading, and to operate the device, control life support and operate the door. “I suspect that this transporter operates between two fixed locations only. It’s unlikely he would’ve entered it at this end. He probably entered it at the other end, and emerged here, not knowing what to expect.”

“And where is the other end?”

“It could literally be anywhere,” Dewuchun said. “This officer

might’ve entered the system at the other end, and that could be in another star system. That could be what brought the *Clements* here.”

“And if they came here, and found this structure, they would have no way to get inside like we have.”

“Yeah.”

Bayanhong said, “And this could take us to the other end?”

“I believe so... but who wants to find out?”

“Clearly,” Brigson said, “his tricorder could hold the key. It’s possible that the battery ran down but hopefully the data is intact. We need to get this—and him—back to the *Athena*.”

Doctor Ger Psakolaps informed Captain Thorpe, as he came into sickbay, “His name was Ian Rambling, rank of lieutenant, a science and engineering officer on the *Clements*, specializing in alien technology, Arosian in particular.” That Psakolaps could identify him so readily was not unexpected, since the body was intact. Every Starfleet officer had his DNA recorded and kept on file, and among the information that the *Athena* had been given was the DNA profiles of all the members of the *Clements* crew, in case they ran into this very situation of finding a body.

“How did he die?”

“Hypoxemic anoxia,” Psakolaps replied. “Basically, he was in an environment in which there was no oxygen to breathe. Otherwise, he was in good health, uninjured, clearly on duty when he stepped out of that chamber and into a room with no oxygen. It’s still a wonder why he could not return.”

“Lets hope there are not more bodies to find.”

“Lets hope.”

The captain heard his commbadge chirp, so he tapped it, and said, “Thorpe here.”

“Brigson, sir,” she started, “we’ve downloaded the data in the tricorder we found on the body.”

“He’s been identified as Lieutenant Rambling.”

“We have the contents of Lieutenant Rambling’s tricorder.”

“Does it show how he got to that chamber in the subspace shunt?”

“Not directly, but interpreting the data, it appears that the chamber at the other end is on Hollos.”

“And we could not detect that?”

“Perhaps we can’t. As far as I could tell, based on the data here, the apparent holographic field we found on that structure, the central crater anyway, was not present when the *Clements* appeared. There is something underneath, quite a lot of structure, and our deceased officer and others beamed into it. Somehow, they lost contact with the ship, and the man... Lieutenant Rambling came through that chamber, which apparently is a

subspace transporter between here and there.”

“Without knowing what he was getting into?”

“He did. The tricorder does show the conditions. The thing is, there’s evidence he made the trip twice. He went to the chamber once, returned, and came again.”

“How did he breathe?”

“The tricorder does not reveal that, but I suspect that he held his breath. My best guess on what happened is this. Their presence in the structure might’ve tripped some process that activated that field and prevented them from beaming out. They probably searched for a way to do it, and came across this. Perhaps he thought he could come here and shut off the power and allow them to escape. It did not work, though. I don’t think he could hold his breath long enough.”

“That doesn’t explain what happened to the *Clements*.”

“Unfortunately.”

“Very well...”

* * *

Captain Thorpe realized that there was only one thing that he could do; make the same trip that those crewmembers of the *Clements* had done, but in reverse. He would have to send some officers through the alien subspace transporter from the solar shunt back to Hollos and learn what the crew of the *Clements* had learned, but without the outcome. Again, he had to wonder how this could have led to the demise or disappearance of the other starship, and he wondered what existed in what was now a hidden facility on the planet. Thorpe faced his senior officers, and said, “We’ll do the obvious. We’ll have to send a team through the alien subspace transporter back to Hollos, and attempt to learn what exists there, and how that impacted on the disappearance or loss of the *Clements*.”

“This is not without risk,” Bayanhong added.

“I know that, but Starfleet won’t accept an answer that we did not succeed in the mission because we did not want to take the chance. This mission is a reconnaissance mission to start. The team will go through the alien subspace transporter from the star back to the planet. They’re to observe what’s there, but touch nothing. It appears that the subspace shunt control centre is a safe way to escape whatever is present at the planet, but that was an option not available to the *Clements*. Lieutenant Rambling made the trip twice, to see if he could shut off the system from this end, so I suspect that we can travel through it safely. The presence of the lieutenant seems to imply that what happened to the *Clements* happened afterwards.”

“Or,” Brigson started, “whatever happened to the *Clements* caused

those officers to be trapped there.”

“That still implies that using the alien subspace transporter is not the cause.”

Bayanhong then spoke up, “But it does imply that we could find more bodies at the Hollos end.”

“Or survivors,” Vorwoorts remarked.

Thorpe asked, “Is that possible?”

“Not probable,” Dewuchun remarked, “but not impossible, depending on what technology is at the planet’s end. The *Clements* officers were likely knowledgeable enough of Arosian technology to make it work for them if it was present and functional. We have no idea.”

“So there could be survivors,” the tactical officer repeated.

“All the more reason to attempt this,” Thorpe continued. “If there are survivors, then they would need to be rescued, and they could shed more light on what happened here. The *Athena* will be staying here by the star, because it has the support system for our subspace transporters, and the lander will return to Hollos to monitor the situation there, in case there is a change and we can directly access the alien facility. Vorwoorts, you’re commanding that.”

“Yes, sir,” the tactical officer said, with a little reluctance. They all understood the potential risk that the lander faced, as it might experience the same thing that the *Clements* did. Nevertheless, Thorpe knew, he needed a presence at the planet when he had officers there.

“Bayanhong, you’ll led the mission, and Hakamura will accompany you. Two engineers will be going along, including Dewuchun—an Odonan entering an Arosian environment might be an advantage for us—and Ensign Twosen, who’s the resident expert on alien technology. Finally, Lieutenant Chan will go along, as the med tech, in case there are survivors.”

“Captain,” Brigson started, “shouldn’t I be going?”

“Not this time. Remember, this is a recon mission only. Bayanhong commands it, the engineers are there to evaluate systems, and Hakamura and Chan are security, the latter the med tech. Our subspace transporter has room for six, including the operator, when geared up for this mission. Depending on what we find, there could be subsequent missions with different personnel.”

“I see,” the science officer replied, but Thorpe could sense that she really did not agree with that decision. There was not much she could do about it, though.

Bayanhong asked, “When do we go?”

“As soon as possible.”

Once again, Ensign Swinster was the one assigned to operate the subspace transport chamber as it would beam over from the *Athena* to the

subspace shunt control centre inside the star. She suspected she was the one who got this assignment because of her small stature. She saw the other six people who were going on this assignment, as they had their phasers and tricorders and Chan had the medkit, as well as the breathing apparatus, which she also had. She knew that the Odonans designed these chambers to accommodate eight people, but Odonans were generally smaller than humans and eight could fit. Six humans and one Odonan made for a tight fit, which made Swinster wonder one thing, “Why didn’t the Odonans build these things *larger*? Is there a fundamental reason why not?” Fortunately, they would only be inside it for a few seconds.

Bayanhong said, “Everybody ready? Everybody’s gear checks out?” She checked the wrist-mounted control panel for her gear, and the others did likewise and confirmed their readiness. She tapped her commbadge and said, “Bayanhong to the bridge.”

“Bridge here,” came the response from Thorpe.

“We’re ready to go here. Is the lander in position at Hollos?”

“Yes,” Thorpe replied. “Proceed at your discretion, commander.”

“Very well, Bayanhong out.” She tapped the commbadge again to shut it off, and then nodded at the others. It was time to go. They squeezed into the transport chamber, and then had to adjust their positions and how they stood when Swinster said that she could not turn on the countervail fields. Finally, she got a green light—the Odonan equivalent anyway—and activated the fields.

“We’re ready,” the engineer said.

“Proceed.”

Swinster tapped the icons that activated the transport sequence, which had already been programmed into the system. Through the countervail fields, they saw that the subspace transport staging area on the *Athena* was simply replaced by darkness. They felt nothing of the procedure. “We have arrived,” Swinster reported. “The situation is identical to the last time.”

“Okay,” Bayanhong said, “breathing apparatus on.” She put on the goggles and the mask and turned on the apparatus, and saw the readiness light on her wrist-mounted display. She got glances from the others that they too had their devices working, so she said, “Ensign, cycle the air and shut off the field.” Systems built into the base of the chamber removed the atmosphere and replaced it with the atmosphere of the location that they had beamed into. The original atmosphere was stored and would be restored once they were ready to return to the ship. Once that was done, she shut off the field. “Let’s proceed.” The six who were going got off the platform and headed towards the control centre where they had found the body. As per standard operating procedure, the chamber operator was left behind to basically guard the chamber. Swinster knew that once the other six made the journey back

to Hollos through the alien subspace transporter, she would be rather alone. There would not be another sentient being, another human, within just over two million kilometres of her location. She hoped this alien construction was not haunted.

Bayanhong and the others arrived in the room where they had visited earlier. She was again surprised at the total silence around them, not a hint that this rather simple and unadorned structure was buried deep within a star, with all that fury and energy that surrounded them as a result. As before, they looked around the room and could not detect any changes to the room and what was in there.

“Well,” Hakamura replied, “here we go.” He watched as Dewuchun used his tricorder to scan the labels that the Arosians had added to the equipment and determined its functions. To Bayanhong, the security chief asked, “What do you think we’ll find on the other side?”

“Think or hope?” asked the first officer.

“What’s the difference?”

“Well, hope in that we will find answers on what happened to the *Clements*.”

“Hopefully without causing whatever that was,” Chan added, “which would put the lander in the line of fire. Being on *that* is not an assignment that I would wish for.”

“Certainly no less risky than what we’re doing,” Bayanhong added. “Based on the tricorder data from Lieutenant Rambling, travelling back and forth like this did not cause whatever it was that happened. It was something that happened afterwards. Rodall?”

“I’m ready here. It’s not complicated; push a couple of buttons... and we’re there.”

The six went through the doorway and into the confines of the alien subspace transport chamber. This one, she had to admit, had more room than the one they had used to get here from the *Athena*. Dewuchun glanced over the controls, his lights, and those worn by the others, causing a kaleidoscope of shifting light and shadows, and saw again those buttons, actual physical controls, and their labels. The Odonan said, “It looks like the engineers who built this device liked to keep things very simple.”

Twosen added, “And there’s no evidence that the Arosians built this.”

“No, I don’t think they did.”

“To the best of my knowledge, the Arosians did not have subspace transporter technology, which makes it a surprise that they did not reverse-engineer this.”

“We don’t know if they did or didn’t.”

Dewuchun pushed the first button, and that closed the door and sealed them into the chamber. When he pressed that button, a small light

went off, and an equivalent light appeared over the second button. He pushed that button, and that activated the subspace transport process. This time, the light stayed on, but changed from white to red, which Dewuchun assumed meant that the operation was in process; this chamber was somehow travelling through subspace and exchanging positions with a similar chamber at their destination. Then that light shut off, and a similar white light appeared over the third button. "We're there," Dewuchun said.

"At Hollos?" asked Chan.

"Yes," the Odonan engineer replied. The others felt a sudden burst of tension, inevitable when facing an unknown that was going to be exposed to them within a matter of seconds. They tensed up, took a deep breath and waited. Hakamura and Chan had their phasers out. Dewuchun would keep his fingers near those buttons in case they had to leave quickly, but now he pushed that third button. The door opened.

On the other side was light, not a lot of light, but enough to startle the five with their dark-adapted eyes. They emerged into what looked like some kind of engineering structure, filled with machines and devices that drew power and did... something, but it was in surprising shambles now. A lot of the equipment was disassembled or even destroyed, and parts and components and even debris covered the floor, and other pieces, along with conduits and pipes and perhaps even parts of the ceiling, looked like they could collapse at any moment. It was all inert, too, leaving the room silent and unmoving. Some lights were still functioning, causing some pools of dimmed light amongst darker surroundings.

"Not what I expected," Twosen remarked, as they left the chamber.

Bayanhong had her tricorder out, and was scanning. She had keyed in particular things to look for, and saw the results on the screen. "No life-forms," she remarked, "no bodies and no Starfleet technology."

"So," Hakamura replied, "the fate of the *Clements* was not here."

"And no one from the crew was left behind. Well, lets see if we can determine what brought the *Clements* crew here."

It did not take long to find what was likely what brought those people here. Dewuchun and Twosen had their tricorders out and were gathering readings. They quickly determined that the equipment that surrounded them was inert, with the possible exception of similar transport chambers they saw in the "arrivals" room, as Bayanhong was terming it. They had no idea where those other chambers went. Did the *Clements* crew explore that, and was that why Rambling met his fate on the solar subspace shunt centre? Because the equipment here was inert and damaged—and the damage looked to have occurred a long time ago, and so was not caused by the *Clements*—the engineers could not determine what it all did. They did find the one piece of equipment that was working, and led the others there.

About a hundred metres, through narrow corridors crammed with conduits and pipes and with narrow chokepoints, they came to another open area, a room that was roughly a square with about thirty metres to a side, and it was quite high too, the ceiling well over a hundred metres above them. Lights mounted on a frame below that ceiling illuminated up and down, and Bayanhong could not help but to think that the ceiling here was somehow related to the floor of that crater they had explored earlier. In the centre of the room was a column that extended from that ceiling down to the floor and beyond. It was relatively featureless, and in some respects, a duplicate of the subspace chamber that they had travelled through before, except larger. It even had a door that was now closed.

“This,” Dewuchun said, “is the only functioning piece of equipment, besides the subspace transporter that brought us here, that our tricorders are picking up.”

“Another subspace transporter?” Bayanhong asked.

“In manner of speaking, but not through space, but through time. This is a ‘time core’ of a time machine.”

“And it’s operational?”

“Yes.”

“Great,” sighed the first officer. “Is that where the *Clements* went?”

“We don’t know.”

Before Bayanhong and the others could speculate further, she heard her commbadge chirp. That was completely unexpected, as the other five were all around her, and Swinster could not contact them from where she was. The sound of the commbadge startled them, and she was momentarily unsure of what to do. It seemed impossible, and yet... she had no choice. The first officer tapped her commbadge and said, “Bayanhong here.”

“Vorwoorts, ma’am,” came the response. “The holographic barrier has apparently been shut down, and now we have clear reads of you and the facility.”

That was surprising, and yet, perhaps, not unexpected. Bayanhong asked, “Are we the only lifeforms here, the five of us?”

“Yes, four humans and one Odonan. There are no other lifeforms, though we’re doing a second, more intensive scan because the facility is quite large. We’re also scanning for any identifiable Starfleet technology.”

“Understood.”

“However, it appears that the only source of energy we’re detecting right now is where you are, some kind of power core.”

“Rodall identifies it as a ‘time core,’ the central component of a time machine.”

“Great,” sighed Vorwoorts. “Is it operational?”

“According to our chief engineer, it is.”

While the first officer was talking to the lander, Dewuchun and Twosen were conducting further scans, but both decided it was prudent not to approach too closely or to attempt to operate any of the controls. They were mapping as best they could the energy flows and the chronoton particles emitted by the energy flows, which clearly were able to traverse through time and thus generated the particles.

Vorwoorts remarked, "The captain will have to be notified. This does make matters more complicated. Were there any signs of the presence of the *Clements* officers in or near that device?"

"None that we have detected so far," Bayanhong remarked. She did have one question on her mind, and said, "If necessary, can you beam us out?"

A few seconds later, the tactical officer answered, "Affirmative. We have clear transporter locks on you."

"Good."

"I'm going to contact the captain and inform him of the latest developments. Vorwoorts out."

Once again, the six were alone amongst themselves, with the lander holding its position in a powered orbit above. Hakamura, standing near the first officer, said, "The most likely scenario is that the *Clements* found the facility like this, without the holographic barrier. They did something that tripped it."

"I find it hard to believe that they could not identify this as a time core, and equally hard to believe that they would take any chance with it."

"I know. Is it possible that it was not active when they arrived and their presence activated it?"

"I don't know. That still doesn't explain what happened to the ship and the crew. It's simply impossible to believe that the entire crew of a *Galaxy*-class ship, nearly nine hundred people, would go through the time machine and have the whole ship disappear too."

"Unless it went through it," the security chief suggested.

"Another possibility is that they had to go to another planet to retrieve people who went through it."

"But why would the *Clements* not keep Starfleet informed of that, in their usual transmissions back home?"

"I don't know."

"Is it possible something came through that time core?"

"Possible, but still, there are a lot of unanswered questions."

Dewuchun approached the other officers, and said, "We've completed a preliminary analysis. It appears to be an active time core, and as you know, when a time core is active for any length of time, any point in that time frame can be visited as easily as we can walk down a hallway. The technology here involves a kind of dimensional inverter, which rearranges the

dimensions in the space-time continuum so that time becomes the equivalent of a spatial dimension. Then, one can travel along this dimension and exit the core at any time. Imagine, as an analogy, a long corridor that allows you to travel freely to any point along its length, and at any point, you can create a door that allows you to exit the core. I’d imagine that the actual mechanism is more like a turbolift.”

“So,” Chan started, “you can step into that chamber, behind that door, and dial up any time and head there?”

“Yeah, but you’d come out in the same place, this installation on this planet.”

“And worse,” Twosen added, “information makes the trip too. In fact, most of the chronoton particles we are detecting are associated with energy and not mass transfers, implying a kind of monitoring.”

“Not good,” Bayanhong added. “Any idea on how far into the past and the future this extends?”

The chief engineer answered, “Based on chronoton particle flows and characteristics, I’d say about twenty thousand years into the past and an indeterminate number of years into the future.”

“So in the past, Arosians would have access to this device?”

“Yes.”

“But they did not build it?”

“I don’t believe they did.”

Bayanhong’s commbadge chirped again, and after she tapped it and acknowledged the hail, she heard Vorwoorts say, “The captain wants to make sure you touch nothing down there. He’s retrieved the subspace transporter cylinder from within the facility inside the star and is returning to Hollos. He wants you to return to the lander immediately.”

“Understood. Beam us up when ready.”

A short time later, the lander had docked with the body of the ship and once again, the *Athena* was whole. The vessel remained in a powered geostationary orbit over the now-revealed facility on the surface of Hollos, and the obscuring holographic field that had been present earlier was still off. As a result, the ship could get a full read of the structures and what existed there. While the main section of the ship returned from the vicinity of the system primary, the lander had run a series of comprehensive scans, which left Vorwoorts pretty assured that there were no survivors from the *Clements* in the facility, and also no bodies and no identifiable Starfleet technology.

The senior officers gathered in the conference lounge, with Thorpe pondering what the next move was, or what choices he had. The main viewscreen in the lounge was now showing a schematic of the time core, which was a large machine powered by the subspace solar shunt. The phys-

ics behind the device was relatively straightforward, the captain knew. This sort of time machine allowed time travel to any point in time in which the machine was continuously active, but it did not allow travel to a time period outside of the continuous operation from the point of entry, and it did not allow travel to any other location except where the time core existed. It operated by inverting dimensions so that different dimensions came into play, and time became one of the three dimensions of space that beings like Thorpe and his crew could experience. The energy and the dimensional inverters had particular effects on assorted subspace particles, turning them into modified forms called “chronotons” with properties that could be measured and which gave further information on the operation of the time core. In particular, if there was access to the core at a particular time—when the inversion process was carried out—there would be an increase in the chronotons with particular properties. That gave some information on when the inversion process occurred, at both ends.

Thorpe looked at the schematic, and said to Dewuchun, “That’s what we’re dealing with?”

“That’s it, a time core. It’s essentially the same technology we dealt with at Alpha CIPHERI, and technology that we have not really developed yet because of some aspects of the inversion technology.”

“But, that technology is right there, right now, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” the engineer admitted.

“So if we were to disassemble that device, we could reverse-engineer the technology to create the dimensional inversion process?”

“In theory, yes, but reverse-engineering alien technology is not always free of risk. I hope that you’re not considering doing that?”

“No,” Thorpe admitted, “but I’m wondering if Captain Rice would have.”

“He would have been foolish to try, and there are certain protocols to prevent that from happening.”

“Which could explain why he did not inform Starfleet Command of what he had found or what he was planning to do.”

Bayanhong was nearby, and said, “It was either that, or else they went through the time core. We have chronoton particles that indicate the portal was opened recently at this time, and also about twenty thousand years ago. That would’ve been during the Arosian Empire. Is it possible to tell which portal opened first?”

“No, not even in theory,” Brigson remarked. “The portal here opened a short time ago, and the portal then opened twenty thousand years ago. That’s all we can say from the chronoton particles. It makes no sense to state which happened ‘first.’ It’s like saying which of the two points at the ends of a line appeared first.”

“So, there’s no way to know if what happened was that *Clements’* officers went to the past or Arosians came to the future?”

“No, not by studying the chronoton particles, but it would have been very foolish for Captain Rice to order or organize any such trip through the time core. Because the planet existed in what was Arosian space, it’s logical to assume that the Arosians are in control of it during the existence of their empire.”

“But they didn’t build it?”

“I would not be surprised if they did not. It’s possible that they might’ve found the core and reactivated it. It’s hard to be sure. There’s a lot we don’t know about the Arosians, which was kind of the purpose of the *Clements’* mission here.”

Hakamura spoke up, “Perhaps there is some alternative. It’s possible that Captain Rice might’ve learned of the time core and realized its danger, and he attempted to either stop it or destroy it, and as Rodall has said, if the time core is stopped, then there can be no time travel through the period that the core is not active. That would prevent an Arosian incursion into our present. Perhaps that is what happened to the *Clements*. They fell to some kind of defense mechanism.”

“That’s possible,” Brigson replied, “but such defenses are not intrinsic to the technology, but would be added on by those who built this or those that operated and maintained the site. Such mechanisms should leave behind wreckage and the like. If the *Clements* had retreated, then surely they would’ve contacted Starfleet Command with their problem.”

“There is the one other aspect,” Vorwoorts added, as she looked over the other officers, and the schematic on the screen. “If the time core is active, as I understand it, information can be readily sent along the length of time that the portal is active. It’s possible that the Arosians at the other end could be monitoring the core through time to make sure that there is no, how shall we say this, unauthorized access. It would also have to be here, at this site, or at least somehow linked to this site.”

“But I wonder about that,” T’Kor spoke up. She had been sitting there and listening but not contributing much. “Whatever group monitored the time core would be aware of the future in that sense, and even the fate of the Arosian Empire. They would know how long it would go, and that would be very powerful information. Knowing future events would give such people a tremendous edge in directing how the future would proceed.”

“And how do we know that the Arosians did not act on that information?” Vorwoorts asked.

“We don’t, but it’s illogical, because the future is not fixed. Information that they learn from the future could be used to alter the future, and hence information available through the time core.”

"Then what would their reaction be to the destruction of the Arosian Empire? Could they be working to learn what caused the fall of the empire and then attempt to prevent it?"

"For all we know," Thorpe remarked, "their assistance might've been used to maintain the empire for as long as it did, but when the Arosians fell, they fell fast and it seems unlikely that there was much that they could do about it."

Brigson said, "And if those Arosians in the past knew when the empire fell, they might've responded by sending someone through to investigate. Another thing, of course, is that they would've known this all at once. They might've had a tremendous amount of information at their disposal and they would have to sort these things out. It's possible that the Arosians involved with this were the first ones to come across the time core. They would have, at their disposal, all the information that the device could gather through time."

"But how much?" Bayanhong asked. "If they knew about the time core, wouldn't they work to minimize access to it, not only in their time period, but through the entire time period that the core is active?"

"It's hard to say. This sort of thing is outside of our experience, and there are many among the Federation and its scientists that believe it would be well enough to leave time travel alone and not involve ourselves in it. Altering time, information flows through time and the rest is so foreign to our mindset, our basic understanding on how the universe works, that we could not help but to mess it up because we can't really grasp the possible outcomes of our interference. I can't imagine that the Arosians are any different."

"All of this is interesting," Thorpe started, raising his voice a little to get their attention. "The question that concerns us most is how is this involved with the disappearance of the *Clements*? None of these scenarios seems to be able to explain how the ship can disappear without a trace, unless there is something built into the time core that could send an entire starship... somewhere."

"Time cores do not operate that way, captain," Brigson pointed out. "The time travel must occur within the confines of the dimensional inversion. It doesn't project. Now, it's possible that the Arosians could have had a large-scale transporter and beamed the entire ship through time, but the apparatus to do that would be here, and we should be able to find that, and the pattern of chronoton particles is likely to be very different than what's observed."

"Which leads to another question. Is it possible to tell *how many* time travel trips were made? For example, if some Arosians came to our time period, and then returned at a later time, as observed outside the core, would that be detectable? Conversely, if someone from the *Clements* went back in

time through the core and then returned, would that be two incursions? Could the separate trips be detectible?”

“Yes,” the science officer admitted, almost immediately. “Multiple trips through the portal would be detectible, and we could determine that.”

“Has such a thing been detected?”

“No,” Brigson said. “The pattern of chronoton particles suggests one incursion only.”

“So that’s the problem,” Thorpe started. “If the Arosians came through the portal, they are still here, and if someone from the *Clements* went to the past, they are still there, and unless the return trips, as seen from our perspective, have not occurred yet, the Arosians might not be returning.”

Hakamura answered, “But I can’t imagine that there would be a large number of Arosians coming through. More than likely, the group would’ve been small, and it seems impossible that a small group of Arosians could do something to make the *Clements* disappear.”

“Unless,” Vorwoorts pointed out, “they had something, some kind of information, that Captain Rice would’ve found to be invaluable, enough that he was willing to risk disappearing so as to not alert Starfleet Command that a violation of time-travel protocols had been made.”

“If so,” Bayanhong remarked, “then we could just wait here for the *Clements* to return because this is the only place that the Arosians could go to return to their own time.”

“Assuming that they would want to, or that Rice would let them, given the information that they would undoubtedly gain about the demise of the empire and what they might do with that information.”

Thorpe again spoke up, saying, “Now, it’s certainly possible that the Arosians might come again. We would think that they would worry about those that have not returned, and send out another group, although again, with the seeming illogic of time travel, if they returned, no matter how much time they spent in this time period, they would return to the original period. The implication is that the original group would never return. Therefore, there is the risk that another group would show up while we’re here. What are we to do about that?”

Bayanhong had an immediate answer, saying, “Fake it.”

* * *

The others in the conference room looked at Bayanhong, as if she had said something inexplicable and unexpected. Thorpe was the one who said, “You’d have to elaborate on that, commander.”

The idea had come more or less to her mind spontaneously, as she

was thinking that the Arosians at the other end would have very little data on what was happening at this end, and certainly could not learn more except by coming through. Bayanhong started, "To prevent any possible tampering with the time frame, it might be best to tell any visiting Arosians what they want to know and not what the reality is. Perhaps then we could get information on the first group that came through and what they did."

"You're forgetting something, Julia," Dewuchun started. "The Arosians are extremely paranoid, having corrupted some orders assigned to a military garrison designated to protect a stash of hypermatter that had been uncovered around the time of the collapse of the Kroosian Empire. Most of the crew of this ship doesn't look very Arosian, and anything we said would not be taken truthfully by the visitors. It would also not be a good idea for me to deal with them, because if I did, and the Arosians returned to their time period, then the collapse of the empire would occur twenty thousand years ago and not fifty years ago."

"What alternative is there?" Thorpe asked.

Brigson said, "Holograms?"

"Now this is getting wild," Hakamura said.

The captain thought about it for a moment and seemed intrigued by the idea. He asked, "Could we pull that off?"

"I don't know," replied the science officer. "It would be rather difficult to create a holodeck around the time core, and I'm pretty sure that they could see through the fakery and realize that they were dealing with holograms."

"Then we'd have to work that into the scenario."

"We'd also need to work into the scenario a method to learn from the Arosians what their procedures are and what they might have done to the *Clements* or what the first group might have had or done to convince Captain Rice and his crew to go silent if the ship was not destroyed and remains in this time."

"Could they know?" asked Bayanhong.

"I don't know. It depends on what the people involved actually do. It's possible that the Arosians maintain a small group of people who monitor the timeline and basically are guarding against an incursion to their time, or perhaps a threat to the time core. It's hard to say. This has not been the experience of anybody in the Federation. For all we know, the Arosians might have maintained a small group of individuals whose job it is to keep the timeline uncontaminated. The existence of the time core might not have been widely known among the Arosians."

"So," Thorpe asked, "how much time would we have to prepare?"

"It's hard to say, since it's hard to know the accuracy of the time core, how tightly they can set their arrival time. However, we will know their presence before they come."

“How?” asked Vorwoorts.

“Chronoton particles travel forward in time, and backward too. The chrontons generated by the arrival will also travel backwards in time, so we will know they are coming.”

“We can detect this?”

“Yes.”

Thorpe finally said, “Okay, we will try this. I’m not sure that this will work, but this could be our best shot to contain the Arosians and learn what might have happened with the *Clements*.”

The engineers did use materials found on the surface of the planet to replicate the parts for holographic projectors, and they arranged them in the area around the time core adding their own fibre-optic line to what was already in place. It did not take much work to make their equipment look a lot like the original equipment in the place. When Dewuchun was on the surface, he was always worried that they would do something that would cause the holographic barrier to come on again, trapping them underneath. He was especially worried that it might appear once the time core was close to being active. Of course, they did have an escape plan, and he had suggested to the captain that if the barrier reappeared, the *Athena* should return to the system sun and use the subspace solar shunt structure to allow access to this location. He had agreed to the idea, but Dewuchun was hoping that they would not need it.

Assistant chief engineer Mark DeWillis was also on the surface, and as the other engineers, often using floating antigravity platforms, did their work, he said to Dewuchun, “This cannot possibly work.”

“I don’t know,” Dewuchun replied. “It depends on the level of sophistication of the Arosians, and also the story that the others are coming up with.”

“If it were not for the missing ship and crew, I would rather destroy the time core, or at least shut it off long enough to break the connection and prevent the Arosians from travelling beyond that time and into the future.”

“How would you do that?”

“I’m pretty sure some antimatter charges, or a tricobalt explosive, placed in the solar subspace tap structure would destroy it and stop the power flow.”

“And that would not have the same effect as on that planet in the Small Magellanic Cloud?”

“There, we destroyed the shunt on the planet side. Here, we’d destroy it in the sun.”

“Then what?”

“Perhaps we could study the technology in more depth.”

“Well,” the chief engineer replied, “our primary mission is to find the *Clements*. If we destroy the subspace tap, that could expose this structure and the technology here to scavengers, and we know they are out there. In addition, one piece of information that the Arosians would know would be the end of the device. They might want to know why.”

“Well, we still have the problem of scavengers finding this place.”

“I know.” As he spoke, the Odonan engineer heard his commbadge chirp. He tapped it and said, “Dewuchun here.”

The voice of Commander Vorwoorts came through the small device. “Rodall, a transmission has been received from the Odonan Central Memory Core, but it’s encrypted, and apparently you have the key.”

“Okay,” he said. “I do. Have me beamed back to the ship.”

Brigson arrived on the holodeck, where Hakamura, Bayanhong and Vorwoorts were waiting. Entering the holodeck felt a little strange, as it was showing a replica of the area around the time core done in such detail that the science officer thought she was on the surface of the planet. She had not been to the actual site, but was sure that if she did, it was indistinguishable from what she was seeing here. Bayanhong asked, “What was in the download that Rodall had received?”

“More information on the Arosians that the Odonans decided to release to us, some of it gathered from the brief time that an Odonan ship was exposed to them, and some interpreted from data, from the Battlesphere and other sources.”

Hakamura said, “It seems inconceivable that the Odonans sent an actual ship to the Arosian Empire. They had to know what would happen.”

“Perhaps they did,” Brigson answered, “and that was the only thing that would stop them. Remember, they had all but destroyed the Romulan Empire, and had Romulus and Remus in their grasp when it all started to unravel for them. Without that, the Romulans would’ve fallen and the Federation would’ve been next. Sometimes, I don’t think we appreciate the threat the Arosians would’ve been, because they did fall suddenly and easily.”

“Brought down by a disease,” Vorwoorts remarked.

“They’re not the first power, nor likely not the last, to fall from a disease.”

The first officer spoke up again, saying, “What else was in that data?”

“We got a more comprehensive linguistic database, based on what was in the Battlesphere.”

Brigson said, “You know, the language at the end of the empire is not going to be the same as it was twenty thousand years ago.”

“I know that, and the Arosians coming from the past will know that too. However, according to the linguistic database, the rate of change in the

language was pretty slow.”

“Why would that be?”

“Well, internally, there was only the one language, and so no other Kroosian languages to influence it, and the Arosians did not exactly associate with the other races that they encountered. Instead, they simply destroyed them. It was also the nature of the culture of these people. Remember, in the dying days of the Kroosian Empire, a stash of hypermatter was found on the planet that would be the new homeworld, Kazmarine. A military garrison was established to secure it. Now, fearing that contact could be broken, the garrison was given strict orders on what to do if that happened. That did, in fact, happen, and contact was lost and would never be regained. Now, remember, this was a military garrison, not a colony, but they did basically form a colony. Their society was a military society, not in the sense that they were conquerors or warriors that lived for battle. No, their society was highly regimenized, with protocols and procedures covering just about every aspect of their society. This was not a society that had art and culture at a level that we would have. They were all about maintaining the orders, protecting the hypermatter, letting nobody learn that they existed, and all of that. People lived their lives in a hierarchy. Their buildings were utilitarian, functional, and nothing more. It’s the same with their clothes and their appearance. There was no flair, no style, nothing much at all. In that environment, linguistic variation and experimentation simply was not going to be present. The Arosians knew there was just one way to speak their language, and that was what they taught their children, and they did not tolerate any alteration in it.”

“Culturally,” Hakamura remarked, “they seemed rather repressive.”

“Perhaps in our eyes they were, but dissent was rather limited and dealt with. Those who could not accept the Arosian way of doing things either found themselves at the lowest levels of society—and some degree of a caste system existed there—or internally exiled to one of the outlying farming planets. Then again, for the size of the empire, dissent was rather limited. The orders, their military purpose, had morphed into something of a religion, and the Arosians were indoctrinated in that from a young age.”

“So, the Arosians from the past that might come here, they would be a lot like that?”

“Probably,” Brigson answered, “but of course, the information we have now is how the Arosians were at the end of their time, not as they were twenty thousand years ago. Of course, that’s what the visitors, if they come, will be expecting, and that’s why we need to get this right.”

Brigson showed the clothing styles. There was no distinction between men’s clothing and women’s clothing, something that they shared with modern Odonans. Non-Odonans often had a problem of telling the men from the

women, and the same applied to the Arosians. The clothes were simple and functional, nothing more. They consisted of simple pants, secured at the waist, and made of darker materials. The tops were simple tunic-like pull-overs, revealing a little of the neck and the neck hairs, while worn outside of the pants. The sleeves often came with an extension to cover part of the palms and the top of the hand, with an opening for the thumb. The colours were lighter than those of the pants, but still rather bland and there was no such thing as patterns or more than one colour. The colours of the tops often correlated with one's social caste, so the lower castes had darker colours and the higher castes had lighter colours. Scientists, and Brigson assumed the time core guardians—or whatever they called themselves—would have been scientists, were a higher-level calling. Arosians, being of the same xenotype as the Odonans, had long hair that they never cut, but unlike Odonans, who either wore their hair tied back or loose, the Arosians bundled it up into loops and balls and “tuffs” on the back of the head. It was there, apparently, that people could exercise creativity and individualism, since their orders did not cover how to wear their hair. That was how their avatars would appear, so Brigson and the others worked on the design, in order that they looked “Arosian,” but with some features similar to the actual appearance of the person so that the avatar could be recognized.

The four avatars appeared on the holodeck as static images. Bayanhong could identify which was hers because there was a vague resemblance to her. Arosians had much the same stature as Odonans, so the Bayanhong avatar was noticeably shorter than the actual first officer, and it had the *san* and the *phyzza* that were typical of Odonans and which they had seen on Dewuchun. Yet, there was a bit of resemblance to Bayanhong in the shape of the face and the lips and the eyes, and even to some degree to hair texture and colour. Looking at it, Bayanhong said, “So that’s what I would look like as an Odonan, is it?”

“More or less,” Brigson replied. “Didn’t you always want to know?”

“Well.”

“By the way, the name of the avatar is Bayanon.”

“Bayanon?”

“Based on what we know of Arosian phonology, the velar nasal can’t occur at the end of words, and in fact is pretty rare in the language. Otherwise, the sounds fit in what we know of late Arosian phonology.”

“And that would make your name?”

Somewhat more sheepishly, the science officer answered, “Bigezon.” With a grin, she added, “But my avatar isn’t big.” The avatar for Brigson was rather small, shorter than the one for Bayanhong, and as advertised, the build was very slight. The hair was dark because the Odonan xenotype did not have hair lighter than a medium-strength brown, so Brigson’s blond hair

could not be represented. The same was true for Vorwoorts, whose Arosian avatar had dark hair as well, worn in front in a style similar to what the actual Vorwoorts did, but the rear had that bundled hair that Arosian females were known for. Brigson added, “I can’t make an avatar that as like me because Odonans don’t get fat. They have the advantage that excessive food and the fatty component of food is simply expelled from the digestive season.”

“And wouldn’t you love it if humans had evolved the same way?”

“Well, Odonans are not known for their taste buds either, so they don’t have a big culture when it comes to food.”

Hakamura also saw his avatar, and this one was not significantly different from the real person, because he looked partly Odonan already, even if his genome was entirely human. He was made a bit shorter, given a more Odonan skin colour and the *san* and *phyzza* added on. The name was shortened to Hagamur, because like Odonien, the Arosian language did not have intervocalic unvoiced sounds, and nouns and names ended in consonants in the nominative singular. The rhotic sound represented with the letter “r” existed only at the start and end of words, or at least the root of the word. Thus, Vorwoorts’ name was shortened to Vowod, as long vowels in Kroosian became short in Arosian, and the late Arosian language did not have phonemic length in vowels. Her holographic avatar was the smallest of the avatars, as it was a bit shorter than that of Brigson, but when she looked at it, she could see the resemblance, and how it looked like what a human-Odonan hybrid could look like, if such a thing was possible outside of an Idobian lab. “Freaky,” the tactical officer remarked. “That’s almost like what a child born to me and fathered by Rodall would look like.”

“But that’s not possible,” Brigson remarked, “and surely you know why.”

“Of course, the number of genes and individual chromosomes is different, the composition of the base pairs uses different proteins and the Odonans have six bases instead of the four that we have, and naturally, genes do not align. And most of all, both men and women can have the X or the Y sex chromosome and the males have double-X or double-Y and the women have one of each. That would make it impossible for humans and Odonans to have children together in the normal way, and no doubt, it could only be done in an extreme lab setting, like the Idobians had done.”

The four got away from looking at the Arosian version of themselves, with Brigson saying, “We need to work on the stories that we will have to spin to make this work.”

Hakamura remarked, “It’ll be pretty obvious that we’re holograms to them, as I can’t believe they could be that deceived for any length of time.”

“Unless they’re not suspecting it,” Vorwoorts remarked. “I doubt that

they would emerge in this time period and scan us to confirm what we are. The question would be, how much of this time period would they know?"

Brigson started, "We have to assume that they know something. Perhaps they don't, but we have to assume that they do."

"So," the first officer started, "when they come through and see our avatars here, what are we going to tell them? We would have to anticipate their questions, and the first one could well be, what happened to the first group that came through here. The problem is that we would have no information on the first group that came through."

"It's unfortunate," Hakamura remarked, "that there was no record kept at the time core of what was going on around it."

"It's possible that there was," Brigson replied, "but we don't have any way of accessing such information, or determine where and how it was stored. Lieutenant Rambling's tricorder had no information, which could well lead to speculation that he was in the facility either before the Arosians arrived, or after. We'd have to play the role of newcomers to the time core, or perhaps relief staff or something. As for what happened to the first group, we'd have to get creative here. We could say that in the future, the Arosian Empire is besieged by large interstellar realms that surround it, and which are angered at us—as Arosians—because of our propensity to attack other races that have learned of our existence."

"Which is essentially what happened," Hakamura pointed out. "The Arosians encountered the collective races of the Alpha Quadrant, and even without the Odonans and *overhimpenyon*, the Arosians were still in a bad way. I simply can't see that they could have won that battle, and destroyed all of those races."

"So," Bayanhong started, "we can assume that this is a parallel universe where the Arosians were unaffected by *overhimpenyon* and so the Arosian War continues into its fifty-fifth year or thereabouts, and things are going badly for the Arosians. Their empire is gradually shrinking, but a small group of us remain here at Hollos, guarding the time core and trying to remain hidden from the attackers."

"And," Vorwoorts added, "because we have access to the time core, we know how much time is remaining."

"How?"

"How much longer the time core will remain active."

"But we don't."

"We can, if we decide to destroy it."

"The *Clements* might have decided to do that."

"But we wouldn't destroy it here," Vorwoorts said, looking at the other three. "We would destroy it by using the subspace transporter to put a tricobalt device into the subspace shunt and set it off. The *Clements* didn't

have that ability. We could even argue that the first group may have drawn attention to the Hollos system by arriving, since that would likely increase the power flow through the shunt.”

“Except we don’t know that,” Brigson replied.

“It’s logical to assume. It’s possible that we had been hiding in this location, but the draw of power through the shunt, perhaps detectable by means that the Arosians might not be aware of, was detected by an attacking force, and now they have learned of the location of the time core and are preparing to destroy it.”

Hakamura added, “Then we could say that we’re low-level underlings, left behind by our superiors who have fled, with the original team that came through the time core, and our purpose here is to tell any further visitors to turn around and go back home.”

Bayanhong replied, “The only problem with that idea is that it won’t help us learn anything about the whereabouts of the *Clements* and how the first team might have been somehow responsible.”

“Then we change tactics,” the security chief continued. “At around the time the travellers come through the time core, the facility falls to the attackers. That would be my security team. Again, our avatars would be low-ranking officials not fully knowledgeable of what is going on, the last line of defense before the attackers storm in, and perhaps capture the time travellers.”

“That could work,” the first officer said, “but I’m not sure it’s a good idea to reveal the existence of the other races, besides the fact that they exist. However, we could use the idea that the attack is going on at this time, and that the new time travellers can’t leave the time core area, and they can’t contact the original team. That could allow us to ask them some questions.”

“Again, we could be the last line of defense.”

“But we can’t make it seem like the place is about to fall, because that would cause them to return. The idea is to keep them here and perhaps talking, to see if we could learn anything about what the first team might have done, but we don’t want them to leave the immediate area because it is dangerous.”

“We’d have to convince them that the first team might’ve been the cause of the attack.”

Vorwoorts was taking this all in, and thinking about how they could pull off this deception given their lack of information. They could work on a scenario where it seemed that their avatars would have a lack of information, but the longer the scheme ran, the more likely it was that it would fail and that the visitors would learn what was really going on. She did finally speak, “All we can really do is start the scenario because once it’s running, we would really have no say on how it would proceed and it seems unlikely that we can

anticipate everything that might happen. We'd have to stick with a background story and work with that, but it would have to be interactive, beyond what the computer could do itself."

"That could be difficult," Bayanhong replied. "How could we do that?"

Brigson did have an idea, recalling something that had been done on the *Socrates*. She started, "A number of years ago, the *Socrates* hosted a meeting between the Federation and a race called the Physarians. The thing is, the Physarians existed in an atmosphere that had a carbon dioxide level of a hundred thousand parts per million, compared to four hundred for our usual atmosphere. They were used to that because their planet was a long way from the sun and so they needed the greenhouse effect to stay warm and they evolved in such conditions. Such levels of carbon dioxide would cause us to lose consciousness and is perhaps fatal. For the Physarians, concentrations of less than five thousand would cause their photosynthesis system—they were seemingly half-plant, half-animal—to shut down, with bad effects. They also had a culture where face-to-face meetings were normal. The solution was to use two holodecks. In one, they would meet our avatars, and in the other, we would meet theirs. This allowed the meeting to be essentially in real time, so that each side could react to the other, and how they reacted would be reflected in the avatars. It was like each side was truly face-to-face. We could do something like that here, using a holodeck and running the same simulation as in the surface in that holodeck, with us, in our real forms, in the holodeck. I believe that the programming we had developed for that was made available to Starfleet and to other ships. We should have it."

"Except," Bayanhong pointed out, "we're only using one holodeck and the second is nothing but holoemitters for the avatars on the surface. Would that work?"

"It's possible. I see no reason why not."

"Then perhaps we should find out."

The crew spent several days adjusting the programming code that Brigson said had been developed by the *Socrates* for the simultaneous meetings in two different holodecks, although it was revealed that Brigson's former ship had not developed the code from the beginning but merely had refined existing code to make the simultaneous meeting work with basically no lag. Marlina Tsonga and others in the computer department adjusted the code again, and because only the avatars had to be simulated and not the whole environment, she was able to make the reactions and interactions rather fast. They tested the process too, with the four officers who would be filling the roles in one holodeck, where the overall environment was made to resemble the area around the time core on the surface, and their avatars on the surface. Imaging cameras were also installed, so that the arriving time

travellers could be scanned and their images captured from multiple angles, with this information transmitted to the ship and used in the holodeck versions of the time travellers. Several of the engineers volunteered to be “test time travellers,” so they would beam down to the area around the time core, and let the imaging systems scan them and recreate their likenesses on the holodeck in real time. Thorpe and Dewuchun watched the tests from the bridge, where the viewscreen was showing a split screen, one with the avatars and one with the actual officers.

As the two watched, Dewuchun explained, “We’ve refined it a bit more, so now the avatars will speak in the Arosian language, the one we know, and which the time travellers have to assume is what they’ll hear, while on our holodeck, the avatars of the Arosians will speak English. Again, this will be done to reduce the lag effect. To work, this has to be as nearly simultaneous as possible.”

“It will still be a feat to pull this off,” Thorpe remarked. He watched as the engineers interacted with the avatars, while on the holodeck, the holograms of those engineers interacted with the officers, moving around, gesturing, showing expressions, and what the real individuals did at one end was expertly and immediately mirrored on the avatars at the other. It was uncanny, if not a little unnerving, to see that, the captain thought.

“No,” the engineer replied, as he too watched the essentially synchronous movements on each side of the split screen. “Pulling *this* off is easy. What’s hard is getting useful information from the time travellers, to help us find the *Clements*.”

“Yeah, I can imagine, but we have to start somewhere. If we can’t do this, then perhaps we’ve wasted our time here trying to get information on the whereabouts of that ship.”

“But do you seen an alternative course of action we could’ve taken?”

“No, unfortunately.”

The two were not the only officers on the bridge. Given where the *Athena* was, other bridge officers were at their posts. One of those was the second-shift science officer, Lieutenant Isabella Sanchez. Now, she spoke up, saying, “Captain, sensors are indicating a build-up of the chronoton particles in the vicinity of the time core.”

“Increasing?”

“Confirmed,” Sanchez said, after checking the results once more. “There is a detectible rise in the chronoton particles, and they have to be coming from the future.”

“It must be the second round of time travellers,” Dewuchun remarked.

“Probably,” Thorpe answered. “Any indication on when the time travellers will appear?”

The science officer ran another series of tests, and calibrated what she was seeing against known chronoton activity. "I'd say, based on established patterns, between twelve and sixteen hours."

"Looks like it is time," Thorpe replied.

Looking at the captain, Dewuchun added, "What was that expression I had heard about this?"

"Show time."

* * *

"Captain's log, stardate 56,215.1. The chronoton particles from the future continue to build up, but days have passed since we detected them and still no Arosians have emerged from the time core, despite our earlier estimations on the time. Lieutenant Commander Brigson had been re-calculating when the event should happen based on the decay rate of the particles from the previous incursion, assuming that the decay and build-up rate are the same. Theories vary on that, but if the decay rate is the same as the build-up rate, then it could be days yet before something happens. We have been in contact with Starfleet Command, to update them and request additional information on the Clements, but Command has said that we should stay at Hollos and see this through. There has been no further word from the missing ship, but Command has sent out transmissions indicating that it now knows that the Clements has engaged in possible time-related activity and that Lieutenant Rambling's body has been recovered, so there is no need to remain hidden and incommunicado if that is in fact their state."

"So," Thorpe asked his first officer as they arrived on the bridge for another day. "You have the scenario worked out?"

"Yeah, with all of this time waiting, Sal and Heni and Grace and I have been basically working on scripts, scenarios to follow and we've had some holodeck sessions with Arosian holodeck characters."

"But there's no way to know how they will react for real, is there?"

"No," Bayanhong replied. "What's odd, though, is that what we're doing reminds me of a high school play that I was part of. We even had a partial holodeck."

"Partial holodeck?"

"That was the stage. It wasn't sophisticated enough for movement, so all the holographic images were static, but that was our set. I remembered those times practicing my lines and rehearsing with the others in the play, and in rehearsal, we were able to get it down. I was so hoping I wouldn't blow it."

After a pause, Thorpe asked simply, "Well?"

“I blew it.”

The two took their stations on the bridge, though Thorpe would not stay for long before heading to the ready room to attend to routine administration work. He asked, “What’s the status of the chronoton particle build-up?”

The third-shift officer on duty, Taylor Bryce, replied, “No change. The particle density and energy levels is consistent with Commander Briggson’s calculations.”

“So tomorrow then?”

“It looks that way,” replied the young xenotechnologist. “We should have one more day looking at the facility, but we haven’t learned much. We haven’t been able to access any kind of computer system, even with the information the Odonans have given us on the Arosians, based on the Battlesphere. It’s not the same technology.”

“It’s probably alien,” Bayanhong replied.

“But the Arosians managed to figure it out.”

“They had more time.”

“And it’s probably an amalgamation of Arosian and alien technology. We are having a problem simply turning it on, or even learning if it *can* be turned on.”

“Which,” the first officer started, “might actually be better for our attempt at deception. It’s possible a lot of the equipment here doesn’t work anymore.”

A couple of hours later, Thorpe was in his ready room. He had found that there was less administrative work than he thought, mostly because the *Athena* was on a one-off mission and after completing this one, they would return to Earth. Thus, there were no other mission reports to worry about, except exploration on the surface of the planet. Other than this one structure, Hollos had nothing of interest. There was life elsewhere on the planet, plants and animals and the like, and though interesting in itself, there was no real purpose in cataloguing and recording the lifeforms because the Federation had no real future on this planet. Some other race would claim it first, or else the lifeforms themselves could establish sentience, although there was none now. Information on what lived here had no bearing on the Federation and nothing found here could alter life in the Federation—except for that one structure that did exist. Thorpe was also contemplating a possible order from Starfleet Command to destroy the time core. Such things were inherently dangerous and simply could not be left out there to be found. So far, no such order had come in, and so he was contemplating giving the order himself. It was not easy.

Now, he was taking a break, and was having a lunch that consisted of

Orion coffee from the replicators and a kaiser bun with liverwurst on it. That was a childhood favourite he had when he was growing up in Winnipeg, and not so much since leaving that city—at least until he spent some time in his new San Francisco apartment and found that interesting local deli. Just as he was taking his second bite, his commbadge chirped. Tapping it, and swallowing first, he said, “Thorpe here.”

“Brigson, sir,” came the prompt, and hurried, response. “The chronoton particle density and energy level has suddenly spiked, unexpectedly so, and this is accompanied by a surge of energy through the solar subspace shunt.”

“The incursion is occurring?”

“At this rate, the particle density will become saturated in about fifteen minutes. Then it’ll occur.”

“Understood. Are you ready?”

“We should be.”

“Then it’s...”

“Show time,” Brigson replied. “I hope this works.”

“So do I.” Thorpe tapped off his commbadge and returned to the bridge. Vorwoorts had already left her station, leaving a subordinate officer in charge, while T’Kor had the bridge. He said, “Go to yellow alert. In case this choronton surge has some unexpected effect—which might’ve affected the *Clements*—I don’t want to be taken by surprise. Shields up and helm, be prepared to break orbit on an instant’s notice.”

“Understood,” Indesakar replied.

T’Kor added, “Shields activated; ship at yellow alert.”

Thorpe headed to the holodeck, which was running their simulation of the time core and the area around it. The four officers with Arosian avatars were already on the deck, ready to act out their roles, while the holoprojectors would “beam” any Arosians onto the holodeck. Thorpe was there as an observer, and perhaps to give advice and suggestions on how to proceed, but he would not be seen by the Arosians on the surface. He was almost like an old-time movie director, he thought. What were the terms they used, “action” and “cut”? He also noted that one of the consoles, inert on the surface, was actually functioning here, and tied into the *Athena* computer systems. It was showing various readings, including the chronoton particle density, which as it became higher also became harder to measure as the time-distorting effects started to manifest themselves. It was like sensor beams were arriving before they were sent, or well after they should have been received. This made the data, as Brigson termed it, “mushy.” A second screen was showing the actual view from the time core area on the surface, but whatever happened there would be duplicated on the holographic simulation here. “Any time now,” Brigson said softly.

“The anticipation is the worst of it,” Bayanhong remarked.

Hakamura added, “We’ve worked out the opening scenario. It’s the carrying it out part as we go along that’s the hard part.”

“I know.”

Lights started to appear on the time core structure itself, and those effects were duplicated on the holodeck. Also duplicated were the sounds, with something like a siren warbling in the background, along with other, sharper beeps and similar sounds. A light on the door itself came on. Brigson, seeing this, said, “The curtain rises...”

For Jenuthrol Peya and Maklino Kewa, it was like an elevator ride. The car was spacious, and had room for a bench that they could sit down on as the trip did take a short time. The time travel process was not instantaneous when the dimensional inversion method was used. The dimensions in use had been altered, and by tampering with the ultra-short “string space” dimensions, the actual physical distance travelled was not that great. The elevator ride was akin to going through a thousand-story building in an elevator at normal speed. However, there was no sensation of movement here, and the only display they had was when they arrived, as determined by the chronoton particles that were being generated by the process. Peya and Kewa were young, in their third decades, and were associate members of the Temporal Maintenance Directorate. As such, they were considered expendable, and they knew what that meant. They had spent a quarter of a year training for the follow-up mission to the first pair that went through in response to the incursion that had been determined to have occurred. The two were typical of their kind, short and slight in stature, with pale skin and long black hair, now tied back in loops at the back of their heads, in typical fashion. Their clothing was typical, simple pants, a simple sweater-like top and a jacket, for the possible chill. They each carried an equipment bag, containing the gear that they would need. As the journey progressed, they said nothing to each other, and did not face each other, at least until their journey approached its end.

Kewa said, “So, you think it’s true, the Empire has fallen in the time we are to emerge?”

Peya replied, “It’s possible. Remember, no Empire lasts forever, not even ours.”

“So the order was never fulfilled?”

“I don’t know about that.”

A red light came on, which was their signal that the journey was about to end. The two stood up, the shorter Kewa standing close to the man, as she said, “Now we’ll find out.”

He replied, “We have a mission. If it succeeds.”

"I know... if."

The journey came to an end. There was no real sensation of motion, but the two Arosians could seemingly sense when the dimensional inversion reset itself so that space was again space and time was again time, and all was proper and normal. The interior lighting in the travel car flickered, and the status light went from red to blue. For a brief moment, the car jostled and there were clicking and grinding noises. "What's that?" asked Kewa.

"The doors have difficulty aligning," Peya replied. "The structure at this age might've deformed a bit, or somehow degraded. At worst, we can manually connect and open each door separately."

However, that proved to be unnecessary as the doors finally aligned, and opened, albeit slowly. The two waited until the doors were sufficiently open before stepping through, and into what was for them, fifteen thousand years into the future. It was difficult to comprehend, Peya knew. The two lowered the sensor-glass visors over their eyes, and took in their surroundings. It looked mostly the same as the time core that they knew, though some equipment they knew was missing, and other equipment was added, but things did seem darker, grimmer and much older than they remembered. A quick sweep of the sensor-glass, the results displayed in front of them, indicated that virtually all the equipment was not functional, and Peya was not exactly sure if it could be made functional. That was not a good sign.

Kewa, through her sensor-glass, noticed something else. "There is a forcefield around the area, and it's obscuring the rest of the facility," she said.

"Why?" asked Peya.

"I don't know."

"The first thing that we need to do is establish the power flows through the subspace shunt."

"That should be... over here."

The two stepped away from the time core itself. Behind them, the door closed, and the lights and the sirens and other chirps all went out. Instead, they heard something else, a voice coming from unseen speakers. The words were only vaguely recognizable. "Switch on the translation system," Peya ordered. "Hopefully, we have enough data on the language of this period to make sense of this message."

"I think it's a warning," the woman replied. "The message repeats."

"It is," Peya replied. He had turned on the translation system, and that was able to interpret enough of the future language to make it understandable to them.

"Warning, for your security, do not leave the time core area. You will be met with facility officials shortly. Remain in your present location."

"That's not good," Kewa remarked.

On the holodeck, Thorpe, who had heard the translation of the warning message, was about to comment on the choice of scenarios, as several had been presented to him. He left it to the four involved to pick one, depending on the circumstances. However, he was distracted by something that he saw on the two rather Odonan-looking individuals who had emerged from the time core. “What are those things that they’re wearing?” he asked.

Brigson replied, “I would imagine that they are some kind of sensor system with a heads-up display unit in front of their eyes.”

“In other words, they’ll know that the avatars are holograms.”

“We have a scenario for that too.”

“The forcefields?”

“They’re deployed. Rodall would know to have them interfere with the sensor readings from those devices. Even if they want to go, they can’t get very far.”

Thorpe asked, “What’s the plan?”

“We’re going to let them stand there for a few moments, to see if they will reveal further information that might be of use.”

“But can we understand them?”

“The original form of the Arosian language was Old High Kroosian, which we know, and this in time became what can best be called Late Arosian, their language before their demise, which we also know. The linguistic routines hopefully can take the data and compare it to the two languages—which are not all that dissimilar, actually—and understand it.”

“But over twenty thousand years, wouldn’t languages change a lot?”

“Well, Odonan languages tend to be more stable because of their longer lifespans.”

“But modern Odonien is nothing like Old High Kroosian.”

“Which is understandable since modern Odonien is from Tharaxian, which is as similar to Old High Kroosian as English is to Japanese.” Brigson could see the information that was coming up on the screen. “Yes, the translation routines are working. The translations are not perfect, but they are giving us some information.”

“What are they saying?”

Peya used the sensor-glass to get readings on their surroundings. “Yes, there appears to be a forcefield around the facility. As far as I can tell, the generators are on the other side of the forcefield and so there’s no way to turn them off.”

“Could we interrupt the solar subspace shunt?” Kewa asked.

“That’s possible,” the man replied, before he approached one of the consoles. On the holodeck, Thorpe and the others were carefully watching the representation of what the Arosians were doing, so that they too could

access the systems. "The question is why there is a forcefield here."

Peya replied, "I still believe we are in the time period after the empire fell."

"But as far as we know, the time core only goes to the end of the empire, that if the empire fell, the time core would be destroyed. That is what the orders implied." At one of the control stations, Peya removed a device from the bag he was carrying. He laid that small object over what had been previously identified as a data access port, and touched some buttons on it. That caused the console to activate and light up, with several screens coming on and showing data.

On the holodeck, the data on the screens was also displayed, and because the language on them was modern Arosian, they were translated into English. Brigson and Thorpe moved to that part of the holodeck representation and looked over the shoulders of the holographic Arosians and at the displays. The science officer said, "It appears to be an engineering diagram showing the power flows and control systems."

They heard the Arosians speak, the male saying, "I can't find the power leads to the forcefield system, and I think it's an add-on with a power source I can't identify."

The female added, "Is there anybody here?"

Running another set of controls, the male replied, "No, no lifeforms detected."

"It's against protocols to leave the time core facility unattended."

"Things could be different in this time period."

"But if there's nobody here, who are these officials that are supposed to meet us?"

"I don't know."

Thorpe looked over at Bayanhong, and said, "Isn't it time that we introduce ourselves, to them?"

"Yes, perhaps, but we'll have to work on the assumption that they know that we are holograms."

"You said you have a scenario for that."

"Of course," the first officer replied. "We'll wait until they overtly say they're holograms."

One thing that Bayanhong noticed was that the two Arosians had lifted their visors so that they could see the controls and the displays without interference from the devices. That might give them a few minutes before the visitors learned the true nature of the avatars. "Sal?" she asked, looking at the security chief.

"Ready."

"Put us in."

Brigson accessed the alien control panel that was actually linked to the *Athena* computer, and said, “You’re live in three... two... one...”

On the surface, Peya said to his companion, “I find it incomprehensible that the previous team encountered the forcefield and what looks like the changes in the facility.”

“Then why did it appear for us?”

“I don’t know. Perhaps their appearance had caused these security measures to go into effect.”

“How long do we wait?” Kewa asked.

“We don’t have much choice if we can’t restart the time core and the return function from this end.”

Then they noticed something; they were not alone. Two other people appeared, walking out of the shadows that were extensive in this ancient complex. The two Arosians saw beings similar to themselves, though a bit taller, one male and one female, with their long hair tied up in loops at the back of their heads. They were wearing simply-styled pants and tunics in a darker colour, not exactly the right combination of style and colour for the Temporal Maintenance Directorate, but over time, those things could change, they thought.

Peya stepped forward, saying, “Who are you?”

Bayanhong’s avatar was the one to speak, and she spoke in the modern Arosian language, which the visitors’ translation system could accommodate. “I’m acting facility commander Bayanon, and this is my acting security director Hagamur.”

“We did not detect your presence earlier.”

“We beamed in. Who are you?”

“I’m Jenuthrol Peya and my associate is Maklino Kewa.”

“You’re from the past. Why are you here?”

“We are here in response to a time incursion from this end. One team was sent to investigate, but they did not return. We had been learning of information that suggested that travel at this end of the time core might not be possible, and that they could not return. We’ve been specifically trained and prepared to attempt to repair and make operational the system at this end, and then to bring the others home.”

Bayanhong was on the holodeck, facing the avatars of the two Arosians, and she had to think on her feet and not necessarily get the captain’s opinion on how to proceed. She did say, “Then perhaps you should get started.”

“Where are the others?”

“It’s not safe for you to stay here, so if you can repair the systems in order to allow travel originating at this end, then it would be wise to do that.”

“Why?”

“How much of the future history do you know?” Bayanhong asked, through her avatar, almost slipping up and saying “future history of your people.”

“We are not informed.”

“As you know, our primary purpose is to follow the orders.”

Peya recited them, almost if by rote, as if this was a pledge that all Arosians had to make. “We are a military garrison that has been assigned by our leaders to guard a supply of hypermatter for the use of the empire, and we are to guard it until the oracle bearer returns with their half of the oracle and unites it. Until that time, we are to protect the hypermatter and if some other race learns of the existence of our garrison and the hypermatter, we are to destroy them so that we remain unknown.”

Of course, Bayanhong knew, the other half of the oracle had been found and the oracle had in fact been united as the Arosian Empire crumbled, but that was not the history that she was using right now. Instead, she said, “And it was those orders that have proven to be our undoing.”

“I don’t understand,” replied Kewa.

“We encountered a group of space-going civilizations that were linked together, a vast interstellar organization. It was a hundred times the size of the empire, with a hundred times the population, a hundred times the number of planets, and they were in some respects more advanced than ourselves. The original leaders, the ones that gave us the orders, are by now long gone, the oracle a distant memory, but we tried to carry out the orders. That failed. It was impossible, so now that other civilization is taking apart the empire bit by bit.”

“So it truly ends,” Kewa remarked.

“I always thought it would,” Peya added. “As I said, nothing lasts forever.”

Bayanhong continued, “Now, this planet, Hollos, is on the verge of falling. Already, there has been an attack, and an incursion. The invaders found the time core and attempted to access it, but failed, as far as we know. However, those that came before you ran into the problems we face here. As of now, they’re not here.”

“Where are they?”

“That’s the thing, we don’t know.”

“Impossible,” retorted Peya, with a touch of anger on his voice. “Administration must be maintained. We must follow procedure and orders and regulation. That is how society operates.”

“Those things break down in war,” Bayanhong admitted, and she knew that was the truth. “The thing is, we don’t know if the previous command officers of the facility here left with the original time travellers or if

they were captured by the attackers.” That did mirror what the first officer was thinking, as they had no idea if the Arosians had been captured by the *Clements* or taken somewhere, or if they had somehow taken control of the ship and led them somewhere. “Communications off the planet right now are difficult, nearly impossible, so we don’t know what the situation is.”

“This is almost unacceptable,” Peya replied. “This breakdown of discipline and order is undesirable and unprecedented.”

Hakamura, in the persona of his avatar, stepped forward, and said, “We are doing our best to maintain order and discipline, but the situation here is very bad. This is no time to react this way.”

“It is very important that we recover the original travellers, because it is undesirable, improper and a violation of protocol to remain in this time period. It appears that once they confirmed that travel through the time core from this end is not possible, they left the area.”

“Or were taken,” Bayanhong added.

“We must find them.”

“We understand that,” the first officer replied, knowing that she wanted to find them too because that could lead to what happened to the *Clements*. “We would like to find them too. First of all, you need to make repairs to the time core, to do what you must, so the return journey can be made, and then we can attempt to see about finding the original travellers.”

“How?”

This was where it was getting tricky, Bayanhong thought. If the original time travellers convinced the *Clements* to go somewhere, they likely would have known where that destination was. That would be knowledge known to the Arosians twenty thousand years ago, and if that were so, then it was possible that these two from the past would know. This was the question that she had to ask, but she had to phrase it right. “I do have one question,” Bayanhong started. “Assuming Hollos was about to fall and none of the occupied worlds in the empire were safe to go to, was there some location that the travellers could have convinced the personnel here to go to?”

Peya stood there for a second or two, to absorb the question, and he exchanged glances with Kewa. It was as if that was not exactly the kind of question that she was expecting right now. He then faced Bayanhong and said simply, “We don’t know. There could be many places.” After another glance between the two, he added, “We should attempt to repair the time core machinery.”

“Yes, you should.”

Bayanhong retreated, but Hakamura remained in the background, making sure he was out of the way of the two Arosians.

On the holodeck, Bayanhong stepped back and left the active simulation. If she was in a certain part of the holodeck, she was no longer in charac-

ter. That was where Thorpe and Brigson were located, and they had observed the whole interaction. The holomagers continued to record and display what Peya and Kewa were doing, and this could give the *Athena* crew valuable insights into how the time core machinery worked. The first officer said to the other two, "It appears that they don't know that we're holograms yet."

"It can't be long," Thorpe replied. "So far, we haven't really got any information on what happened to the *Clements*."

"I know, but if the original time travellers caused something to happen, or convinced Captain Rice to take them somewhere, the destination has to be known to the time frame of the original travelers, and so these two might know too. They would have to know something."

"But getting that out of them could be difficult."

Brigson added, "I do like the way you outlined the history. I think I got a way to keep the scenario going once they realize we're holograms"

On the surface, Peya and Kewa removed a couple of panels in some of the support machinery and attached devices from their shoulder bags to ports on the inside. They were distantly aware of Hagamur hovering in the background, while the one known as Bayanon had disappeared. "The people here," Kewa said, keeping her voice down, "are a little strange, and they lack discipline and order."

"I have noticed that," her companion replied, as he used a power supply to start up internal circuits in the time travel machinery. "The times seem more decadent here, with less application to orders and regulations. Such living would lead to... chaos and a breakdown of discipline."

"But these things happen at the end of the empire, and it might be true now, that the orders have failed. We have to take these people at their word, and they do not know where the first group went to." By now, Peya had lowered his sensor-glass visor to cover his eyes so that he could get some readings on the equipment inside the panel. He did glance at Kewa to ask her to adjust the calibration on one of the devices they had attached. In so doing, Hagamur came into the field of view, and the readings on him were very interesting. In fact, he was startled enough by what he saw that Kewa noticed that.

"What?" she asked.

"Look at Hagamur with the sensor-glass."

She did, turning backwards to look where the alleged security director was standing, and the results were rather different than what she was expecting. "He's a hologram."

"And the other one is a hologram as well, I suspect."

"What does it mean?"

“It’s possible that the time core facility has already fallen to the invaders, and that these holograms are an attempt by the attackers to lure us into telling them things that we should not be.”

“But surely they would know that we could not be fooled for long. Besides, you’d think that they would know about the Brusbarka already.”

The words that the two Arosians were using were being picked up, and those listening in knew that the revelation that Peya had made was inevitable. However, they did not suspect yet the detail of holographic monitoring of what they were being subjected to. “The gig is up,” Brigson remarked.

“Isn’t it ‘the jig is up’?” asked Bayanhong.

“I have no idea,” Thorpe said.

The translation of what the two were saying was tripped up by one word. Brigson noted that, and said, “This ‘brusbarka’ doesn’t translate. There’s no correspondence in Old High Kroosian or modern Arosian. What does it mean? What would the Arosians know about a brusbarka?”

“Perhaps it’s a proper name,” Bayanhong suggested. “A race or a planet.” She turned to the control arch, which was still on display over the entrance to the holodeck, and said, “Computer, identify any planet or race referred to as Brusbarka by the Arosians.”

The machine beeped, and in its flat voice, said, “There are no references to that particular term as used for a name of a planet or a race. I have included a search in the database of information that has been given to us on the Arosians.”

“No information,” the science officer said, facing the other two. “Now, we have only a fraction of the information that is apparently on the Arosian Battlesphere, so perhaps the Odonans thought that Brusbarka was not important enough to release. They had released no information on Hollos either.”

“Could they be related?” asked Bayanhong.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s been established that the Arosians did not build this time core. They came across it. Perhaps it was built by a race known as the Brusbarka, and the location of their originating world is known to the Arosians, of at least fifteen thousand years ago. It would seem to be known by the Arosians in more modern times too.”

“And you’re thinking that the original travellers, unable to return to their time, might have convinced the *Clements* to take them to this other location?”

“It’s a lead, one more lead than we had.”

“But how do we get the location out of Peya and Kewa, beyond

eavesdropping?”

On the surface, Peya was looking at the readouts on the equipment, and he was not liking what he was seeing. “This is not expected.”

“What?”

“There’s nothing wrong with the equipment here. Everything works. The Temporal Maintenance Directorate continued to do their tasks here and keep the machinery operating. However, they made alterations to the programming, preventing it from working and preventing anyone from this time period to return to previous ones.”

“Can you undo that?”

“It would be difficult. The programming is very advanced and we did not really study that. Very few of the directorate’s staff can understand the code, and fewer could alter it. I’m not sure that I can do this.”

Kewa asked the inevitable question, “Why was this done?”

“Before the time core fell to the invaders, they might’ve done this to prevent them from going into the past and destroying the empire in the past.” He checked the display on the interface unit again, and said, “Yes, this is it, the altered code. The notation is different. I’ll attempt to decompile it and see if I can make sense of this.”

“Okay.”

On the *Athena*, Brigson overheard that, and said, “That’s strange. The Arosians altered the code on the time core? I’m pretty sure that the *Clements’* crew didn’t do that.”

“Why?” asked Thorpe.

“The empire-wide self-destruct system did not operate here, but maybe that code alteration was designed to prevent access to the core, and without knowing the original code, it might be very difficult to recreate it.”

“Then those two are out of luck?”

“Unless they have a copy of the code with them, and can reload it.”

On the surface, Peya did attempt to decompile the code, but the actual code would not decompile into source code that he could understand. It still was a lot of machine-code symbols and things he could not fully comprehend. However, one part did come out pretty clear, the comments that had been attached to the code. “A plague?” Peya said, with some surprise. “They tampered with the time core code to prevent access to it, because of a plague?”

“Perhaps,” Kewa replied, “they were worried that people might try to escape the plague by going into the past, and if they did, they might accidentally bring the plague with them.”

“But a plague? I mean, medical science should be able to handle that. It’s a disease, a microorganism, and that can be stopped and erased. There

are lots of ways to do that. Plagues affect more primitive societies, not advanced ones.”

“Unless it’s a weapon of war.”

“Really?”

Peya knew that unless he could reset the code to what it was, there was no way to operate the time core and allow access to it and a start of the dimensional inversion process. There was nothing here that he could fix. He again looked at Hagamur, and wondered what was going on. He knew that the individual was a hologram, but *why*? Was he one of the invaders in disguise, or was he suffering from the plague, or did the plague wipe them out leaving just autonomous holograms to keep things going?

On the *Athena*, Hakamura could see the two Arosians approaching, and he noticed that they were looking around, perhaps trying to spot the holomitters. “What now?” he asked. “Do we go off-scenario and reveal ourselves?”

“Clearly, the plague they’re referring to is *overhimpennyon*,” Bayanhong said. “I guess they altered the code to prevent the plague from going into the past.”

Thorpe said, “But the original travellers would not be affected by it, since there are no Odonans on the *Clements*. These two should not be affected by it either.”

“But,” Hakamura said, “we can imply on them that they can be.” The two Arosians were now close enough that he had to get back into character.

Peya was the one that confronted Hakamura, saying, “The time core operating code has been altered to prevent access and activation at this end. This was done to prevent the spreading of a plague into the past, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re a hologram too.”

“Yes. This area around the time core was secured with the forcefield so that time travellers who come through the time core would not be immediately exposed to the plague. It’s also why we’re appearing to you as holograms.”

“So you won’t infect us?”

“In manner of speaking.”

Kewa asked, “But how can a plague be this serious? How can it lead to the downfall of an empire?”

“It’s the nature of the plague,” Hakamura explained. “It’s an engineered cell that is designed to turn your immune system on itself. The immune system works by destroying the invader cells, but this plague changes the nature of the immune system cells so that the body itself is attacked. There’s no cure, and it’s inevitably fatal. The only thing that can be done is to avoid exposure.”

“So” you’re telling me this plague is in the empire, even while the invasion is going on?”

“Actually,” Hakamura now said, hoping the captain would back him up on this. “The plague has already run its course. The empire is no more.”

“So random holograms still operate and run the place, to act as warnings or whatever?”

“Not exactly.”

Peya then stated the obvious. “You’re one of the invaders, aren’t you, pretending to be one of us through a holographic avatar?”

“Not exactly,” Hakamura repeated.

“What does that mean?”

“The invaders are long gone too. We’re essentially explorers, seeing what’s left. Actually, we’re not even that. We’re looking for another ship that had come here, and likely were responsible for the time travel incursion that caused the first group of travellers to come here. That ship has disappeared, and we are trying to find it and figure out what is going on.”

“And” how are we to believe you?”

“Wait here,” Hakamura replied, and with that, he disappeared into a transporter beam.

On the holodeck, the security chief said to the other senior officers, “The ruse is over. There’s no point in carrying on with this scenario.”

“Should we reveal ourselves?” Bayanhong asked, speaking to the captain.

“With Rodall on the ship, it would be risky to have those two on board, and yet, we really can’t leave them there. I’m not sure what kind of life support system that the facility has, but it seems impossible that they can reprogram the time core to return home.”

“But would the Arosians send a third team?” Brigson asked.

“I don’t know. At some point, they would have to cut their losses.”

“Okay,” Bayanhong replied. “I’m going back in scenario.”

With those words, the first officer stepped back into the active part of the holodeck. To the two Arosians, she rematerialized before them, Peya said, “You again. You’re not really Arosian, are you?”

“No,” Bayanhong replied. “I’m not Arosian. I’m of a race called Ter-ran, but right now, we’re in this holographic representation for you, now mostly for translation. We have been monitoring the time core since we detected the chronoton particles associated with an incoming time-travel event. What my ‘security director’ said was basically true. We’re looking for a ship that was here originally. The original time travellers likely encountered the crew of that ship. We know they were here because one of the crewmembers on the ship died and we found the body, in the solar station at the other end of the subspace shunt. The ship has disappeared and no longer responds

to our communications. We need to find it.”

“So” the empire is gone?”

“Yes. The disease my companion mentioned is real, just as he described it. It caused your empire to fall, and likely prompted the code alteration to prevent the disease from spreading into the past. The original time travellers are perhaps on the other ship, and they are missing. The only clue we have is what you referenced earlier, the word Brusbarka.”

Peya and Kewa looked at each other, and then said, “How can you know about that? Only those in the Temporal Maintenance Directorate know of it. It is not known among the population. It’s in no database. Only those in the Directorate know of it.”

“We overheard you mention it.” To the incredulous looks from the two, Bayanhong added, “This whole area is closely monitored.”

“I know,” Kewa retorted, “we should’ve not mentioned that once we realized Hagamur was a hologram and not real. We should’ve anticipated being monitored.”

Peya added, “But they know it now.”

“The other ship might also know about it, and could be dealing with it.” Bayanhong, with a touch of impatience, asked, “Again, what does that word mean?”

“It’s the race that built the time core. It’s their homeworld.”

The other Arosian then said, “We can’t stay here if the time core does not work. We can take you to Brusbarka.”

TO BE CONTINUED