

# Last Soul

Captain Leonard Thorpe of the Federation starship *Athena* looked out the windows at the front of the deck two duty lounge. He knew, of course, that the windows were not showing a real image of space as the starship travelled at a high warp speed, but were showing what space would look like if the speed of light were infinite. That was how the human brain was programmed, to accept that light travelled instantly from the source to the observer, and that it was not distorted by distance or had its frequency shifted by the relative speed between the observer and source. Travelling faster than light made matters even more confusing since not only could the observer see photons coming towards him, but he could also see the photons he was catching up to. In essence, the “real” view through the window would show what lay ahead, and what was behind them too, superimposed on each other and colour shifted and distorted. The human brain could not make much sense of that, so the holographic projectors in the window frame created a false image, of what things looked like if the speed of light was infinite. The human mind could handle that.

But even so, Thorpe was seeing very little through the windows.

First officer Julia Bayanhong was nearby, and said, “There’s not much to see in the void between the galactic arms.”

“I know, hardly any stars at all.”

“It’ll be just another day or two and we’ll be in more familiar surroundings.”

“I know,” Thorpe said. He had his tray, with breakfast on it, and headed to the senior officers’ table, where several others of the first-shift bridge officers were gathered. Thorpe, on this occasion, was taking it more easy, with a bowl of whole-grain cereal made of natural, though replicated, ingredients and a glass of orange juice. He sat at the table with the others.

Security chief Sal Hakamura remarked, “So another day of essentially nothing?”

“Pretty well,” Thorpe replied. “This is still the fastest way back to the Federation.”

“Not exactly the scenic route,” remarked Henrietta Vorwoorts, the tactical officer. Her breakfast consisted of pancakes with some sort of syrup, though

not maple syrup. Thorpe would recognize that.

“True enough, but we’re just heading home.”

After leaving the planet they had named Cheshire, and after dealing with an Arosian relic and the fear of another relic out there in potentially hostile hands, they were heading back to the Federation and their next assignment, whatever that was. Science officer Grace Brigson, who had a muffin with some hash browns for her breakfast, was talking about that. “I’m still surprised that the Cheshirians decided to stay on their dead planet, living underground.”

“They have their reasons,” Bayanhong replied.

“But I remain of the option that their reasoning is wrong. Sure, their numbers are small, but with assistance, they could survive and recreate their society.”

“And it would likely be a very different one from the one they had. Like most planets, they had a range of cultures and, as that database I brought back shows, they had a range of interests and practices and the like.”

“I know,” Brigson replied. “There’s a *lot* there, and it’ll keep some researchers going for a long time, but even so, to say that it’s the end and there’s no more, that’s hard to accept. I think that if a secondary mission, with a more specialized ship and a crew trained for this, heads to Cheshire, perhaps the leadership would change its mind. It’s hard to believe they had a hundred percent unanimity on their decision.”

Vorwoorts answered, “They probably realize that if a hundred and twenty survivors is likely not a viable number to recreate their species, a smaller number definitely is not.”

“Sometimes, when it comes to survival, rational thought does not always apply.”

“True.”

Hakamura, finishing up his sausage and bagel, said, “There is also the other aspect of that last mission, the third Arosian star-destroyer ship. Do the Remans actually have it?”

Thorpe answered, “I’m sure that at home, intelligence agencies are looking into that.”

“Hopefully, because that ship is dangerous. We know the technology is there to destroy stars, and the Remans, if they are the ones behind what happened at Cheshire, they can be dangerous. That ship has to be found.”

“Or perhaps when the self-destruct went off at the station and on the other two ships,” Bayanhong started, “the third ship was also destroyed.”

Hakamura replied, looking up, “It would be comforting to have that fact confirmed.”

“True.”

The captain, between spoonfuls of the cereal—which was not exactly something he preferred, but he had to watch his diet—heard his commbadge chirp. “Thorpe here,” he said after tapping it.

“TKor,” came the response, from the Vulcan intelligence officer and the

one who had the conn on the third shift. “Captain, sensors have detected something in this intragalactic void, something non-natural and which looks like a starship of some kind, and it appears to be disabled. Should we investigate?”

“Can the type of ship be identified?”

“Preliminary sensor data does not match any known configurations, but we are still a distance from it. Should we adjust our course for a closer look?”

“Yes, go ahead and change course. What’s our estimated arrival time?”

“Fourty-five minutes.”

“Very well,” Thorpe said, tapping the commbadge again to end the link.

Vorwoorts, finishing off her pancakes and sipping her tea, then said, “Perhaps this day in the galactic void won’t be as boring as we thought...”

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*“Captain’s log, stardate 56509.2, the Athena continues to head home from Arosian space to the Federation, and we decided to take a shorter route through one of the intergalactic voids between the spiral arms of the galaxy. Now, we have detected an unknown ship that appears to be adrift a long way from anywhere, and being the explorers that we are, we have to take a look. It’s not likely to be a disabled ship with a crew on board in need of assistance, but a derelict that might have been there for some time. It could even be Arosian—but it is not the star-destroyer ship we are still worried about.”*

By the time the *Athena* arrived at the location of the derelict ship that they had detected, the first-shift officers were at their posts on the bridge, with Captain Thorpe in the centre seat, since it appeared that some sort of mission was going to result from this. Sanjay Indesakar, the pilot and the one at the forward console, looked up and said, “We’re approaching the location of the derelict ship, coming out of warp now.”

The “streaking star” effect—although the streaky points were not really stars—disappeared and the ship found itself in the blackness of the intragalactic void, though a faint band of distant starlight, the “Milky Way” that leant the name to the galaxy, was visible. Not visible due to the lack of light was the derelict ship. Indesakar added, “The derelict is moving at twenty-nine point six psol on inertia, and we’re now matching its speed.”

“On screen,” Thorpe ordered.

Brigson was working the sensor and science station, located along with the tactical console behind the central seats, occupied by Thorpe and Bayanhong. She made some final adjustments, as she said, “It’s too dark to see in natural light, as if there’s any natural light out here. This is a computer-generated image.”

The ship appeared on the screen, and it was not something that anybody on the bridge recognized. Even the configuration was a little odd. Essentially, the vessel consisted to three cylinders, and from the vantage point of the *Athena*,

the cylinders were stacked on top of each other, although it was certainly possible that they were looking at a vessel that was on its side relative to them. The central cylinder was larger and slightly longer, and the one above and the one below were slightly shorter and their diameters a bit less. A thick central beam connected the three cylinders, and smaller beams towards each end produced additional structural connections and stability.

Brigson continued, "The vessel is just over a five hundred metres in length, for the central section, so it's a bit longer than the *Athena*. The two smaller cylinders are conventional warp drive systems, with nothing out of the usual. However, I'm not scanning anything that suggests that the ship is crewed. There's very little interior space, basically just a walkway down the middle of the central section. The rest appears to be electronics and equipment, and empty spaces that given their configuration could be fuel tanks—empty fuel tanks."

"So it is likely a probe?" Bayanhong asked.

"That seems likely. It could be something like our galactic mapping probes that were sent out a century and a half ago, although this one is considerably larger. Not all returned, you know. This could be something similar from another race, a probe that got into this intragalactic void and ran out of fuel and somehow lost its warpfield."

Thorpe asked, "Is there anything like this in the starship recognition database?"

"Nothing definitive, although the basic design element has parallels, but this configuration is pretty common. In terms of detail, there is nothing in the database that matches this. It is definitely not Arosian."

"Any indication on how long it has been adrift like this?"

"None at all. The hull is space-cold. I'm reading no power at all, and it might be so cold now that it cannot even be restarted."

Looking at the captain, Bayanhong asked, "Is it worth a look?"

"Perhaps an away team can go over," Thorpe replied, as he looked at the derelict as depicted on the viewscreen. "What we should try to determine is where this came from, since it is likely from a species that we have not encountered yet. It could have travelled a great distance."

"Of course."

A short time later, four *Athena* officers, dressed in full environmental suits, beamed onto the alien ship. Brigson and chief engineer Rodall Dewuchun were two of the officers, and along with them were Lieutenant Erik Skolgaad, who was the expert in alien technology, and a security officer, Ensign William Orell. As they rematerialized, the light effects from the transport briefly illuminated their surroundings, but that soon faded and left them in total darkness. Almost immediately, they switched on their helmet lights and looked around. The deck had no gravity, so they also had to switch on their magnetic boots, which did make walking a bit more difficult and awkward, but it also prevented them from drifting due to a lack of gravity. With some illumination, they could see that

they were in some sort of corridor, which ran most of the length of the central cylinder, with what appeared to be airlocks and docking ports at each end. The walls were panels, some recessed and some not, producing a very uneven wall, but it was clear that this ship was not meant to be a manned vessel. Equipment and ship systems and electronics and empty fuel tanks were behind those panels.

"Clearly not meant to be a manned vessel," Brigson remarked, stating the obvious for the record.

Skolgaad said, "This is probably just an access walkway for when they built the ship or when they had to work on it."

Dewuchun added, "And no idea who built this?"

Brigson did spot some writing on the panels, which to her suggested they were numbered or had some kind of labelling. She was not familiar with this particular writing system, which seemed built on straight lines connected at various angles, reminding her in a way of how Roman letters would look if only letters made of straight lines were used. Of course, her being unfamiliar with the writing system did not mean that it was unknown to the Federation. She scanned samples of it and then transmitted that back to the *Athena* and ran it through the linguistic database. It came back almost as expected. "No match," she reported to the other three, over their helmet radios. "This is from an unknown species."

"How far did it travel?"

"Given empty fuel tanks, probably a distance, which is why it is unknown to us." Brigson started to scan through the panels, but the various electronics and the like did not have much meaning to her. "Now if there was only some way to power up this ship."

"Hard to do."

Brigson asked, "We could not apply some external power source to perhaps get things started?"

"Where?" Skolgaad asked.

"I don't know. Surely there would be some sort of method for the builders to provide power to the ship, should it return home or whatever."

"We have no idea where that would be and how it would be done."

Nevertheless, the four of them did use their tricorders to scan the length of the ship as they walked through the central corridor. Their tricorders were linked to the computers on the *Athena*, where more powerful data analysis algorithms took in a great deal of data and compared it to how hundreds of other alien species had built various devices and technology to try to find a match and identify what each component did, while mapping out the ship and its systems. Through that, they did identify the computer and the memory storage units, which were quite extensive, but almost expected.

"If this is a mapping probe," Brigson remarked, "it's not surprising that there would be ample data storage to capture the data that it collected, and the scans have revealed a number of sensor systems. What's surprising is the amount of computer processing power that it contains."

Dewuchun said, "Perhaps there is some element of artificial intelligence

control here.”

“All the more reason to somehow activate this.”

A few minutes later, Skolgaad reported, “The computer on the *Athena* has identified the power distribution mode on this ship, and it appears to be an electroplasma system. If we can activate that, we might be able to power up at least the computer. We can’t do anything for propulsion, of course.”

“We could at least try to get the computer online.”

Using their tricorders, the engineers did locate access ports to what the algorithms determined was the electroplasma system. That plasma was a gas under normal temperatures and pressures, but it was a solid now. The tricorder determined the composition of the material in the electroplasma system, and Dewuchun had engineers on the *Athena* replicate some of it. That particular composition was not unknown for use in electroplasma systems, although he doubted that would help them identify the species that built and launched the ship. It was just that there were not that many different compounds that worked for an electroplasma system. Cylinders of the gas was beamed over to the derelict ship, along with an electroplasma generator and a fusion field reactor to provide the actual energy. At the same time, technicians on the *Athena* used detailed scans of the access ports, their shape, their active components and even the composition of metals that made up the ports, to replicate corresponding parts that could be plugged into them. This took some time to do, and the original away team was cycled out so that their air supply could be recharged and they could rest.

Before beaming back over, Brigson asked, “All of this, is this going to work?”

“Hopefully,” Dewuchun replied. “We’ve done this sort of thing before.”

“On a totally unknown ship?”

“Well, I’m sure that *someone* has attempted this before. This looks like it could work, but of course many things could go wrong, due to faults in the alien system and perhaps things that we couldn’t really match up or understand.”

“What are the odds that this would work?”

“About fifty percent, I would say.”

“And what are the odds that this could cause the ship to, well, blow up with us on it?”

“Not likely, since there’s nothing on board that can blow up. Still, we have to bring this online slowly.”

The two beamed over, and found themselves in the corridor with Skolgaad and another engineer, Ensign Mark Twosen, who was the machinist who had made most of the parts. The corridor was now quite crowded with equipment, as Twosen was now connecting the electroplasma generator to the alien system and testing to make sure that the parts fitted and connected. “How is it?” Dewuchun asked.

“Almost there,” the younger engineer replied. “I had to redo the connective slightly, as I think it’ll work better with the probe end being a little longer.”

“The frozen gas, what percentage of the system is it occupying?”

“About eight percent.”

Finally, the engineers were ready. They plugged the cylinders of the replicated electroplasma gas into the generator, and Dewuchun plugged in the field reactor and turned it on. That introduced energy into the generator, which in turn heated the gas and then converted it to the plasma form, where it could move energy through the system with limited loss, as if it was a highly-effective superconductor. Once the plasma was heated to the proper temperature for that particular composition—and Dewuchun had to assume the aliens used the same temperature because it was the most efficient for it—it was gradually introduced into the alien ship. Their tricorders monitored the electroplasma flows as the material was heated and then started to circulate, coming into the generator to pick up power.

“It’s holding,” Dewuchun replied. “The system is robust enough to hold the energy we are introducing. Now we have to hope that with power introduced, the rest of the system will ‘wake up’ on its own, because I haven’t located an ‘on’ switch yet.”

“Neither have I,” Brigson replied. “All we can do is wait.”

The officers on board the derelict spent two hours waiting, but they were patient, as were those on the ship, because something like this would take time. They did monitor the progress, and the scans of the electroplasma system showed that it was delivering energy to various systems, but they could not so easily tell if the system was converting that energy to power that other systems could use. Brigson did monitor the computer system in particular since it was unlikely that much else would happen on the ship until that was activated.

“How much longer?” Twosen asked. “I’m down to thirty minutes of oxygen in my tanks.”

Dewuchun said, “You can beam back. We can monitor things ourselves. We’ll give it two more hours, and if nothing happens, we might have to accept that we can’t reactivate systems here.”

“Very well,” Twosen said, as he contacted the ship and had the transporter technician beam him back to the *Athena*.

Another hour passed, and Brigson, who was doing little more than walking the length of the corridor, said, “I’m increasingly less optimistic that this will work.”

Dewuchun could hear her over the radio, and replied, “Yeah, I can see that. The electroplasma system now is fully active. I’m assuming the density of the material is correct, and the flow rates are good too.”

“Maybe the rest of the ship is just too old or too cold.” A few minutes later, Brigson was beginning to think that perhaps this was futile and they should give up. Then she noticed something, some electrical activity in the computer core. “Wait,” she suddenly said.

“What?” Dewuchun asked, startled by that sudden word.

“There’s electrical activity in the computer processing system. I think it’s

powering up, could be in what... what was that old-Earth term, booting up? Yeah, that, the computer is starting.”

And within minutes, there were more noticeable changes. Some lights came on. It was still, in an absolute sense, rather dim, but certainly brighter than what they had with their helmet lights and the portable lights they beamed over. “Wow,” the science officer said.

“Now what? Is there a way to access the computer? I’m not seeing anything like a terminal.”

Even before Dewuchun got all of those words out, the situation changed again. Brigson reported, “We’re being scanned.” That did concern them a little, and though they did look around, they did not perceive any sort of threat. There were no alien life forms on board, and their extensive scans indicated nothing that could be androids or robots or any sort of autonomous machinery. Still, they were prepared to beam back to the *Athena* on an instant’s notice.

“Now something might happen,” Dewuchun replied, “but probably not much. The power available to the ship is what we are providing. I don’t think it’s generating any of its own power.”

“No, and maybe that’s why this is going so slowly.” Then Brigson looked away from her tricorder, and added, “The scanning stopped.”

Almost immediately after the scanning stopped, something changed. Appearing near the two officers was a holographic projection, a flat black surface on which white characters in an alien script appeared, a script that both recognized instantly although neither could read. “Preserver code,” Brigson replied.

“The scans probably identified us as unknown aliens.”

Brigson scanned the message with her tricorder, which then translated the highly precise and ancient alien language that was well-understood by pretty well all space-going races into something she could read. She read off the translations. “You have been identified as an unknown race. Where are you from?”

Dewuchun then asked, “How do we answer that?”

Brigson had the tricorder translate the answer she gave it, “We are from the United Federation of Planets,” and the translation in the Preserver code appeared on the screen. She did wonder how the alien system could somehow read that, and for a few moments, there was no response from the alien artificial intelligence. “How do I get this message across?” she asked.

Dewuchun had an idea. He looked at the screen on Brigson’s tricorder, and then using his fingertip, he traced out the characters of the answer onto the flat holographic surface. His finger did make an impression on the surface, as the characters he drew appeared in red. They were not precise representations of the Preserver glyphs, but the alien system straightened them out.

The science officer asked, “How did you know that would work?”

“I didn’t. I just decided to try something.”

Another message appeared on the black panel, “That entity is unknown to me.”

Brigson then composed another question, and inscribed it on the panel

herself. “Where is this ship from?”

The answer soon appeared, “The originating world is Reioshek.” The last word did not translate, and so the two assumed that it was a proper name and sounded it out in the corresponding sound values that matched English with the alien writing system.

“Never heard of it,” Brigson replied, but again that was not unexpected. She then linked with the computer on the *Athena* and confirmed what she suspected. “There’s no information on such a planet in the database.”

“Not surprising,” Dewuchun answered. “Perhaps it can tell us how far away Reioshek is from here.”

Brigson formed the request in the Preserver script and drew it on the black surface. The response was prompt and uninformative. “Unable to determine,” Brigson translated. “Unable to access external sensors to scan the starfield.” To the engineer, she added, “I guess there’s not enough power for the external sensors to work. We can just barely power the computer and this holographic interface.”

“Perhaps,” Dewuchun replied, “but maybe there are other things we can ask it.”

Brigson said, “Like what is its purpose, but perhaps we can get it to exchange linguistic databases so that we can communicate faster than tracing out unfamiliar characters on a virtual chalkboard.”

“Okay.”

The science officer did have to write one more translated passage on the “virtual chalkboard,” asking, “Is it possible using analog radio frequencies to exchange linguistic databases so that we can communicate verbally.”

A few seconds later, the response appeared on that holographic display. “It is possible.” The frequency of the radio transmission, correlated to the wavelength, which in turn was measured according to the Planck length. The number that came back was astronomical, one point five seven eight raised to the power of ten to the thirty-sixth. Doing some calculations, that produced a wavelength of twenty-five and a half metres, which was in the shortwave range of radio wavelengths. Brigson knew that the alien computer had to use something like the Planck length because that was a universal length that any advanced culture would know, while whatever measuring system the aliens had developed would not be known to the *Athena* crew. She adjusted the tricorder to receive signals of that frequency, and then linked it to the *Athena* computers because the database could be large and the data needed to be handled by the processing capability of the computers on the ship. The Preserver code consisted of precisely-defined words spelled out using a series of characters. The characters were given in a standard order based on stroke number and orientation and relative length, and an alien race would assign a sound value to a character. The first character was a short vertical line, and this was assigned the sound value of the letter “a” in English words such as “father.” The Reioshekians would have done likewise using language sounds that they were capable of making. The second symbol was

that line rotated forty-five degrees, and it had the sound value of the letter “e” in words such as “pen.” The Reioshekians had their own sound values assigned to each character, and then the database would consist of the Preserver word sounded out with Reioshekian phonemes and followed by the word in the Reioshekian language being used. The computers would take each Preserver word that came through, and decode the sounds to give the characters, which then would correlate to the meaning and hence the corresponding word in English. The English-influenced pronunciation for the Preserver word that meant “individual of a sentient species” was *eba*, indicating the sound values assigned to the three Preserver characters that made up that word. The Reioshekian equivalent, Brigson noted, was *oshu*, as close as human ears could determine it, and the actual native word was something like *sheka*. With this piece of data, the translation program could now render *sheka* as “human” or “person” in English directly. Grammar could be handled similarly, depending on the inflections and syntax. Preserver code indicated the plural of a noun by doubling the last syllable, *ebaba*, and the Reioshekian language indicated the plural with a prefix that started with *v* and then showed vowel harmony with the stressed vowel in the root, so their plural form for “person” was *vesheka*. The Preserver code could handle that, and with the massive data set that was transmitted to the *Athena* computers, the lexicon and the syntax and the morphology could all be determined with reasonable accuracy, and that accuracy could improve when an actual exchange between English and the alien language started.

That soon happened on the alien spaceship. The integration of the Reioshekian linguistic database was complete, and that allowed for more direct communications. Since the *Athena* officers were communicating with a computer, they did so using the same radio frequency that the data had been transmitted on, and set up the tricorder Brigson had for two-way communications. She spoke into the tricorder, which then converted her words into the Reioshekian language and broadcast it to the alien computer. Its responses were translated in turn and broadcast in English to the *Athena* officers through the speaker on the tricorder. At first, the translations might not be completely accurate, but were understandable. Brigson started, “Can you understand my words?”

The response soon came back, “Your words are interpretable.”

“Good,” sighed Dewuchun. “We’re onto something here.”

Brigson asked, “What is the purpose of this starship? It does not have the ability to support life.”

The alien computer replied, “That is correct. This vessel has the purpose of a probe. It has the mission to record location values for stars that it detects and to preserve those values so that a map of the stars can be made.” In other words, Brigson and Dewuchun realized, this was a mapping probe. However, it had been inert for an unknown period of time and so did not know how long ago it had been launched. However, it should have a record of the route that it had taken.

“What is the long diameter of the galaxy in units as used by your people?”

Seconds later came the reply, “One hundred and sixteen thousand, five hundred *valakhba*.”

Dewuchun did say, “That’s similar to the value of hundred and five thousand, seven hundred light years that is our value for the diameter of the galaxy, so *lakhba* is likely their term for a ‘light year.’”

“And their year, the time it takes for their home planet to complete an orbit around its star, is a little less than ours.” The science officer then set the tricorder to transmit her words. “How far is it to the planet you were launched from, expressed as a fraction of the diameter of the galaxy?” When the answer came back, the distance that was suggested was just under a thousand light years, but they had no indication of the direction. It was more than likely in the direction the *Athena* had come from and not in the direction that it was going. Brigson had the next question, “This vessel is adrift in the void between two of the spiral arms in the galaxy. Were you given a course to follow or did you determine the course to follow on your own?”

The alien computer responded, “The course was set by the people who built the probe ship and who assigned it its purpose.”

“And that course took it into this intragalactic void?”

“That is the course that was built by those who assigned it its purpose.”

“Why did you stop here, and become adrift?”

The answer did not come immediately, but eventually they did hear something, “Data of the ship mission indicates that fuel supplies dropped to zero and the probe vessel could no longer be powered.”

Dewuchun said, “That’s kind of odd, to set a course into a region of space where the ship could not use ramscoops or a resupply system to gather sufficient interstellar hydrogen to keep going. It’s like they sent the ship here to be trapped here.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, and perhaps the computer does not know either. Maybe there is some other purpose to this vessel than a mapping probe. Perhaps it is carrying something that our sensors had not been able to detect.”

“If it is,” Brigson answered, “it’s very small.” She did have an idea, and so asked the computer, “Is there something on board this ship that would not normally be used for mapping stars?”

It took awhile for the computer to parse that question and decide what “something” qualified, and then it added, “The closest correlation to the question that you ask is that there is an additional sentience on board the ship. The sentience is in the computer.”

Brigson was thinking that the computer was pretty sentient on its own, but it seemed that it had a separate “sentience,” whatever that meant. Maybe the Reioshekians created artificial intelligence for their ships or perhaps even copied the sentience of one of their own onto the ship to somehow command or guide it. She asked, “Is this sentience from a physical being from your planet?”

“That is correct.”

“What is the purpose of this sentence? Does it command or control the probe ship?”

“No. The sentence does not command or control the probe ship.”

“Then why is it on board?”

The computer did answer, “The sentence was put on the probe ship for the duration of the hundred *va'ikhba*-mission of the probe ship, to gather location data of the stars and the planets on the course that was assigned to it, and to determine if planets with lifeforms on it or planets that were inhabitable were located in orbits around those stars.”

Brigson did assume that *ikhba* was the alien term that represented one orbit of the homeworld around its star, which she already knew was less than the standard Earth year. She asked, “Did the sentence voluntarily undertake this mission?”

“No, the assignment was not voluntary.”

Dewuchun said, “That almost sounds like the person who’s been imprisoned for something.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Turning on the transmitter again, she added, “Is putting a sentence on a probe ship like this a common practice for the people on the planet that you come from?”

“I do not know the answer to that question.”

“If the assignment was not voluntary, then why was the sentence put on board the probe ship?”

The computer spent a few seconds accessing databases or doing something, perhaps accessing standardized information, or maybe even conferring with the sentence in question. “The sentence was convicted of a crime, and the punishment for that crime was to be on board the probe ship for a hundred *va'ikhba*. His physical body is in stasis on the homeworld, and when the mission of the probe ship is complete, the sentence will be returned to the body.”

That seemed like an odd punishment, Brigson thought. It was not unheard of for some societies to sentence those convicted of some crime to have their bodies put into stasis for a period of time, but to the prisoner, it just seemed that no time had passed—until he came out of stasis and found that the people he knew and the life he had known were all gone now. Keeping the body in stasis but transferring the sentence, the essence of the person, into an artificial-intelligence environment, seemed like cruel and unusual punishment because that sentence would essentially be conscious the whole time and isolated and alone, which could be hard to endure. And there was one more thing, she realized. They put the sentence on board this probe ship and then programmed it to head into the intragalactic void, where it would run out of fuel and so never return. It was not a sentence for nearly a hundred years, but a death sentence. What kind of crime would lead to that? She asked the computer that question, “What was the crime that this individual committed?”

“The crime committed was that the individual attempted to make as his mate a woman who was in a social caste that the individual did not have a right

to, and the woman made a complaint about the individual and what he was attempting to do.”

Dewuchun asked, “And that’s a crime for a hundred-year sentence?”

Brigson answered, “And a hundred years that he could be isolated and conscious and reflect on what he was accused of—and given how the probe is dead in space, it was not a hundred-year sentence, but a death sentence.”

“That must be some rather high-born woman he was infatuated with.”

“Yeah.”

“But how long ago was this ship launched?” the engineer asked.

Brigson had an idea. She asked the computer, “Can you access the data on the locations of stars that you gathered before the fuel on the probe ship ran out?”

“Yes, I have such access.”

“Can you display that data in the manner you had initially displayed the symbols you used to communicate with us initially?”

“That can be done,” the artificial intelligence answered, and quickly it displayed a mass of data, more than Brigson could make sense of. She spent a few minutes getting the machine to isolate the data that it had recorded at the end, and to expand the image she was seeing so that the information was clearer. She took some visual scans of the data. By this time, Dewuchun had a good idea what the science officer was doing. By gathering this data on star locations that the probe ship had recorded, she would correlate with the star positions as the *Athena* had recorded them. Given observed rates of stellar proper motion, they could determine how long ago the data was recorded.

Brigson then said, “We will be returning to our ship.” She really wanted to get out of the environmental suit, because she never did like working in one. “We will leave the power supply here so that you can remain active, and we might come back with further questions.”

“That is understood...”

\* \* \*

Back on board the *Athena*, Brigson was in the stellar cartography lab taking the data that had been gathered by the Reioshekian probe and aligning it with the data on the stars as they were now positioned, given that stars moved around the centre of the Milky Way much as planets orbited their suns, and their positions with respect to each other shifted over time. The changing positions did allow for the relative positions to be used to dating older patterns, though with the assumption that the proper motions of stars observed now did not change significantly over time. The further back the data being compared to the current positions, the less reliable was this dating method and so there was a greater effort to match up the stars. Not all the stars were in the database, as many red dwarfs were missing, but the brighter stars were there. Brigson was having some difficulty lining up the stars in the Reioshekian database with the current posi-

tion of the stars.

Bayanhong did enter the lab and asked, "Any results?"

"It's hard to believe," the science officer replied, "but that ship had been adrift in the intragalactic void for tens of thousands of years."

"Really?" the first officer replied, "and in all of that time, nobody else came across it?"

"Well, intragalactic voids are usually avoided by most ships, and others might've encountered this ship but saw it as nothing but a worthless derelict, and its components and base elements not worth the time to handle. Others might not have been able to provide power like we did, and so gave up. Maybe there were some valuable items on board that are gone now."

"I see," Bayanhong said, "and it's not impossible that it could've been adrift that long, but should it not have drifted out of the void by then?"

"The course might've been programmed to keep it in the void."

"Oh... then as you speculated, it was a death sentence for that sentence on board."

"Perhaps."

Bayanhong then asked, "Do you think that sentence is still on board? Could it be activated?"

"Why?"

"Aren't you curious to hear its story?"

"Well," the science officer replied, speaking slowly. "For all we know, when we were talking with the computer, we might've been talking with the sentence, which did not want to reveal its true identity right away."

"I see."

Bayanhong remained in the lab and watched Brigson as she attempted to align the data sets. The problem was that she had no idea of the coordinate system or the distance measuring system that the Reioshekians were using or how the data was oriented, so she had to expand it or shrink it and rotate it or do other things to it, as the computer was finding no correlation between the data sets. All she could do was to compare the sets visually by projecting the Reioshekian data on the data that the *Athena* had, and move the actual data back in time and try to match the new data to it. She kept going further and further back in time, and once she passed thirty-five thousand years in the past, Bayanhong commented, "Are you sure you're on the right track?"

Brigson answered, "I made some adjustments, based on what you said that the probe ship might've been programmed to travel the length of the void, on inertia."

"But thirty-five thousand years, is that realistic? I mean, the further back in time you go, the less reliable the data is."

"I know, but this is our best attempt." Then, as she continued to make adjustments, the computer did beep to attract her attention. It was monitoring what Brigson was doing, and when it detected a possible correlation, it signalled that to her. She accepted the request, and let the computer algorithms take over

the task of coming up with the best correlation. “Got something,” she said.

“What?”

Brigson displayed the information, saying, “This is the best correlation. It’s not perfect, but it’s a ninety-two point six percent match, which is good given the uncertainty in stellar positions that far back.”

“And how far back is it?”

The science officer read off the number, “Fourty-six thousand, seven hundred years ago, plus or minus five hundred years.”

“And that’s realistic?”

“It’s the best match the computer—and I—can find.”

“That even predates the Arosians. What are the odds that the Reioshekan culture is still extant?”

“Considering that there’s no record of them in our databases, probably not good. On the other hand, we have no idea what the Reioshekians look like, and for all we know, there may be a derived culture from them that we do know.”

“Now that you have correlated the data, can you locate the homeworld?”

“I’m working on that.”

A short time later, the senior officers gathered in the briefing room on deck one. Thorpe was thinking that perhaps the *Athena* should get on its way and that there was little to learn from the probe ship, which had been abandoned by its people and sent on what was essentially a doomed, one-way mission. He did find it a rather extreme way for a race to punish a person for an alleged crime. Perhaps this was a method for a society to carry out a death penalty when their laws and mores prevented it from carrying it out in a more obvious way, but surely, he thought, the crime allegedly committed—showing romantic interest in a person outside of one’s social level—was not worthy of a death sentence.

Brigson was present in the briefing room, and she started, “I have analyzed the data, and determined that the mission of the Reioshekan probe ship started about forty-six thousand, seven hundred years ago, and lasted approximately eighty years. with the vessel moving at low warp and recording star data, in much the manner of our unmanned mapping probes in earlier centuries. The course it took brought it into the intragalactic void, where it ran out of fuel and dropped out of warp and has been adrift ever since.” She displayed, on the room’s main viewscreen, the star map from the *Athena*’s navigation database, adjusted to the stellar positions almost forty-seven thousand years ago. Superimposed on that was the data from the alien probe ship, adjusted to the best fit. The likely course of the probe ship was also shown. She zoomed into a part of the map, explaining, “This is the likely course of the probe ship, and its origin is likely here.” The line marking the course started at a star identified only by a catalogue number. “This is a G2-class star, and our mapping probes identified a planet of suitable size and location for a class-M world, but the mapping probe did not detect non-natural radiation and so did not alter its course to get more detailed data.”

“Suggesting,” Vorwoorts started, “that the Reioshekian homeworld did not have a sentient society on it at the time.”

“At least not a society with advanced technology. In addition, the Arosian database that we got from the Battlesphere does not include this planet, though it was beyond the range of Arosian influence and activity. The planet is about four hundred light years from our current position.”

Bayanhong turned to the captain, and asked, “Is it worth a look?”

“That’s hard to say. That’s a diversion from our course. The question unanswered is whether or not the entity you were talking to on the probe ship was the computer, with some level of AI technology, or was it the sentience itself?”

“I don’t know,” Brigson answered. “Short of asking it and hoping it answers honestly, there’s no way to know for sure.”

“Then perhaps we should ask it.”

“On the other hand, the sentience if reactivated could not accept that forty-six centuries had passed instead of just the one. It might wonder what happened to its body kept in stasis, which I am pretty sure is not intact anymore.”

“Of course, but we need to know more.”

Dewuchun had another idea, as he spoke up. “Perhaps we can provide the fuel that the probe ship needs and that would allow it to power up more fully, and we could learn more about it, and perhaps send it on its way home.”

“Could that reactivate the sentience? Would it require more power than we are providing now?”

“Unknown,” the engineer asked.

“Could you determine the fuel that it needs?”

“I doubt that it would require anything other than some deuterium and some antimatter, both of which we can supply without adversely affecting our own supplies. Once we leave the void, we can gather more hydrogen for our own use.”

Doctor Ger Psakolaps, the chief medical officer on the ship, spoke up, “But what kind of effect would the sentience experience once it learned how much time has passed since the ship ran out of fuel? How would it react knowing that there was no way that the sentience could be reunited with its body, assuming the Reioshekians even have that ability?”

Bayanhong did say, “If the powers that be on that planet sent the ship on a mission that it knew would be a one-way one, then they probably did not keep the body in stasis anyway.”

Thorpe finally said, “We’ll go ahead and provide the fuel to allow the ship to more fully power up. Rodall, synthesize what you need and what you think the probe ship needs, and provide it. Maybe we can learn more when the ship is more powered, and then decide on the next step.”

Bayanhong, as she sat beside the captain, said, “In a way, you want to meet the sentience, don’t you?”

“I think we all do. It’s what we do out there, to seek out new life...”

Several hours later, the engineers, using the sensors and various extrapolation routines in the computer, had mapped out the fueling system for the Reioshekian ship and which was the primary tank, and they had their best guess on what the fuel requirements were. The ship would need antimatter to activate its warp drive, but deuterium and hydrogen could run its fusion reactors at full power, giving the ship all the internal power that it could use. Dewuchun had said, "I don't know if we can safely supply antimatter to it, and it is possible that the computer has no course in its system after the fuel ran out and the warpfield collapsed. It's not like there's a backup course plotted in to take the ship back home, given the assumption that this was planned as a one-way mission."

Assistant chief engineer Mark DeWillis replied, "That must have been some culture to expend the resources it had on this ship just to send one person to oblivion."

"Surely," the Odonan replied, "you've heard the stories from your history about how a ruling and powerful elite can do what it wants, despite the resources used, or wasted."

"Fortunately, I'd like to think we've moved beyond that."

"But other cultures might not necessarily had."

Once the fuel for the fusion reactors had been beamed over, the crew on the *Athena* waited to see if the computer would respond by powering up more systems, but as far as they could tell, the ship was still running on the small amount of power that the initial portable generator was supplying. Thus, another away team, with DeWillis, Brigson and Bayanhong, suited up and beamed over. Even with full power available to the alien vessel, they doubted that there was any life support capability even in the limited space available.

Once the away team was back in the corridor, Brigson, using her tricorder as a communications device again contacted the computer artificial intelligence. "We have returned," she said.

"I have noticed," came the reply.

"We have also provided fuel to one of your tanks, so that you can turn on your own systems and power up the probe ship. Do you have the ability to do that?"

"I do."

"Can you do it then?"

"That will take several *vakopada*," the machine replied, and the three humans had to assume that *kopada* was some sort of time unit, but was it closer to minutes or to hours? The machine replied, "I need to analyze the fuel mixture to determine if it is adequate for the fusion reactor. I detect no antimatter so the warp engines would not work."

"There's no need for the ship to go anywhere. We have determined that the amount of time that you have been adrift here in the intragalactic void is... fifty one thousand, six hundred and nineteen *va'ikhba*." At least she was hoping that she had done the conversion correctly.

The computer artificial intelligence replied, "That is not conceivable. How did you arrive at such a conclusion?"

Brigson explained, "The data you provided, that you had gathered on your mission, we compared it to the present location of the stars, and we determined there was no match. We then used the proper motion of the stars to see how they had been positioned in the past, and then compared that to the data you provided. The best match was fifty-one thousand, six hundred and nineteen *va'ikhba* ago."

"That is inconceivable."

Then more of the lights came on and there were some displays and other indications that the ship was powering up. The Reioshekian computer remarked, "The fuel provided is sufficient for the internal reactors, but cannot provide power to the drive system, even the sublight drives. Routines activated... transmitting a command signal to Reioshek... awaiting a response."

DeWillis asked, "Do you think that it'll get one?"

Brigson answered, "I'd be highly surprised if it did."

Bayanhong then asked the question that was really on their minds. "I was informed that on board is the sentience of a Reioshekian, his essence transferred from a biological body to the computer."

"That is correct," the computer replied.

"Are you that sentience?"

"No, I am the operational computer system."

"Is the sentience... in some sort of suspended animation?"

"That is correct."

"Can you reactivate the sentience? We would like to communicate with him."

The machine answered, "Awaiting the return command signal from Reioshek."

"Damn," Bayanhong muttered. A couple of minutes of silence later, she finally said, through the tricorder so that the computer could hear it. "It's highly unlikely that there will be a return signal because the society on that planet does not exist any longer."

"That is not conceivable," replied the computer.

"But it is. We have no records of Reioshek in our computer systems, and we had, a long time ago, sent out similar probes across the galaxy to map the stars and determine which ones had planets that could support life and which ones had civilizations inhabiting them. Using the data provided, we located Reioshek and there is no civilization on that planet, or at least one that has the technology and knowledge to build a probe ship like this one." Bayanhong was not completely sure about that, but it seemed most likely, especially since the computer was not receiving a reply signal.

Finally, after several more minutes of waiting, by which time Bayanhong and the others were getting impatient, the computer intelligence said, "No return signal has been detected. The cause for that fault is unknown, but I will attempt

to retransmit the signal shortly, after running diagnostics.”

“Can you activate the sentience?” the first officer started. “Would that individual be in command of the mission?”

“That is correct.”

“Then reactivate that individual and let him decide on the course of action to take in the absence of a return signal.”

Several seconds later, the computer replied, “That is the next stage in this situation. Reactivating the sentience now. He will appear as a hologram since sufficient power exists for the holoprojectors to work, but communications will be through the device you have provided.”

“Very well.”

Then the sentience appeared in holographic form, and Bayanhong and the others had to assume that it was an accurate or at least a reasonable visual representation of the Reioshekians. The alien was not of a clearly-determined gender, but given that the crime was attempting to romance a woman of higher standing, it seemed likely that the alien shown was male. He was short and slender, with a very pale skin, and the physique seemed weak, almost emaciated, but given that the alien physiology was unknown, that did not necessarily mean the same thing to the Reioshekians as it would to humans. Still, if the hologram was an accurate representation of the species, this particular one looked weak. He had tufts of hair sticking up from the top of his head, hairs that looked to be rather stiff. One thing that Bayanhong noticed was that the facial features were a little lopsided, with the mouth horizontal but the eyes were a little off, as if one side of the face was shorter than the other. It was not by much, just enough to be noticeable. One thing that Bayanhong could agree on was that this individual was physically unattractive, and she had the feeling that even within the society that he came from, he was unattractive. Bayanhong knew that she was projecting her own human-based opinions and even biases on this individual, but she knew that on Earth, even in the twenty-fourth century, human males who had the corresponding traits to this individual would have a difficult time attracting a romantic partner. That was simple biology, almost nature’s way of saying “bad genes here, do not mate with this individual.” Such was the luck of the draw, at least among humans. Bayanhong had the feeling that a similar situation existed with this race as well, and the rejection of this man by a woman of higher standing might not have been entirely about class levels.

The hologram was detailed enough that it looked pretty solid and lifelike, and did remind the crew of the emergency medical and emergency engineering holograms on the *Athena*. Right now, it was reacting almost as if it had woken from a sleep, which made Bayanhong wonder if the entity was aware that it was essentially hibernating for an unknown period of time. On the other hand, perhaps the initial perplexing look on the hologram was the system still starting up and loading parameters and the like so that the sentience, which was really in the computer and not in the hologram, could become fully aware of the situation and the methods by which he could interact with what it was encountering.

Finally, the hologram stopped looking around and stopped being confused. Instead, it looked at the three individuals in the space suits and realized that they were not fellow Reioshekians. “What has happened?” he asked, his voice being directed through the tricorder, which translated his language to English and transmitted it on to the radio receivers in the helmets. “Who are you?”

The first officer took the lead, saying, “I am Julia Bayanhong, first officer on the starship *Athena*.” Naturally, her name and that last word did not translate, but the sentence could interpret those as proper names. “Do you have a name?”

“I’m Bojek. You are not Reioshekians.”

“We are not. We are humans, from the United Federation of Planets.”

“I’m not aware of any of that.”

“We are from a distance away.”

Brigson took over the conversation, asking, “Before you were... just woken up now, what is the last thing that you remember?”

It took Bojek several seconds to respond, and Brigson was thinking that perhaps he had to gather his thoughts, or access additional memory. Then he started to speak, “The last thing I remember... is that the control computer was informing me that the fuel system was empty and that power would soon be lost and I had to go to the rest state.” That, Brigson surmised, was to have the sentience have his very existence stored in non-volatile memory so that it could be preserved. “We had lost the warp drive, and the sublight drive was low on power and we were travelling on inertia. In this region of space, the ramscoops could not gather more fuel, so I said that we should change the course and leave this spiral void and return to the galaxy, but the control computer informed me that the course was programmed and could not be altered. I found no way to do it, as I could not access that code. It was blocked from me. I had no choice but to go the rest state and wait until the ship left the void and the ramscoops could work again.”

“When the control computer had you do that, did it tell you how long you would be in the rest state?”

“No.” A few seconds later, Bojek added, “The sensors indicate we are still in the spiral void. How much longer?”

“I don’t know.” Then to Bayanhong, the science officer asked, “Should I tell him?”

Bojek asked, “Tell me what?”

Bayanhong said, knowing she was taking a chance here, “Our information correlated with yours suggests that you have been in the rest state, as you called it, for fifty one thousand, six hundred and nineteen *va’ikhba*.”

“That is... impossible,” Bojek said, with just a hint of panic in his voice. “That’s not possible. The ship surely would’ve left the spiral void well before that many *va’ikhba* had passed.”

“Not if the ship is travelling at a very low speed and following a course

that will keep it in the void for an extended period.”

“Still, that is impossible. Something must’ve malfunctioned.”

“Perhaps it had,” Bayanhong responded, not wanting to, at least now, speculate on what those who had launched this probe ship really had on their minds. “However, that is the current situation.”

Bojek continued, “That is still hard for me to understand. If we lost power, we would have lost contact with Reioshek, and they would have sent a starship to recover us.”

Although Bayanhong suspected that the Reioshekian authorities had no intention of sending a rescue vessel, she did not state that exactly, but said, “Clearly that did not happen.”

“Why?”

“We don’t know. We have had no contact with your people.”

“But surely after the end of my sentence, they would make sure that I could return home. That’s how the laws of my people work. Once the sentence is complete, I can return to normal existence.”

Brigson asked, “You know you were sentenced for a crime?”

“That is correct.”

“And what crime was that?”

“I attempted to pursue a romantic relationship with a woman who they said was outside of my social level.”

“And you think she was not?”

“I did not believe it. I know that we have social levels in our society, and normally there is no transition between them, unless a person is extraordinary. Surely, though, I believed, that there were women who were on my social level and so could be partners with me, but the authorities who judged me said that was not the case.”

Brigson did not know what to make of that, but she was looking at the weak and unattractive man in front of her, and surmised that perhaps an appearance like that indicated that he had questionable genes. Among humans, autism was often taken as an outward expression of undesirable genes, which perhaps should not be passed on. Thus, the person was unappealing to potential mates and socially awkward and even compelled by those genes to act in a way that was not conducive to forming romantic relationships. Over time, of course, such genes tended to fade from the population because those people in fact did not reproduce at the same rate as the rest of the population. However, there was a period in human history when individuals with these conditions tended to rebel and were saying that it was almost a right that they could have romantic and even sexual relationships, and that women were obliged to commit to them. The women naturally disagreed—but that was a long time ago and Brigson was not that familiar with the history. Still, it seemed that the Reioshekians had something similar.

Bojek continued, “By violating the social laws on our world, by being told that women were outside of my social level, I was punished for a hundred

*va'iikhba*. I was given the opportunity to operate the probe ship for that period of time in exchange for a return to society after the hundred *va'iikhba*, and perhaps those who made the complaint about my alleged social crimes would no longer have influence. I accepted that offer. For eighty *va'iikhba*, I did as instructed, but then the vessel exhausted its fuel supply in the spiral void and I had to go to rest mode. Now, I learn that more than fifty thousand *va'iikhba* have passed and the ship is unable to detect a signal from Reioshek."

Bayanhong admitted, "It's highly possible that the society you know no longer exists on that planet."

"But can I return home? Can the probe ship take me back home?"

"That's unlikely. We're not really able to get your warp drives operational again."

"But if we're in the spiral void, then you must have come on a vessel that is capable of warp travel."

"That is correct."

"Then is it possible to travel on your ship to Reioshek?"

"I don't know," Bayanhong explained. "I am not the captain and so that is not my decision to make. In addition, your true nature is in the computer system on this ship, as the hologram you are showing us is basically an interface, not the actual essence of you."

Bojek replied, "I know that."

Brigson then asked, "Why were you provided with a holographic representation?"

"So that I can remember what it is like to be in physical form, so remember my appearance and to be able to move around the probe ship without the need for life support. If I was just in the computer, then I would become like the computer, but in holographic form, I can experience what it is like to have a physical body and to be able to remember what that is like."

Bayanhong added, "The problem could well be that there's no practical way to transfer you to our ship in a manner that allows interactions like this, because your systems are incompatible with ours, more than likely."

"That is unfortunate. Can you not reactivate the probe ship and its warp engines?"

DeWillis now answered, "We lack the engineering knowledge of your ship and your technology to be able to do that."

"Then what can we do? Must I remain out here, away from my planet? Has those fifty thousand *va'iikhba* actually passed, or is something misinterpreted?"

"We believe those *va'iikhba* have passed, but we will return to our ship and see what we can do and what the captain decides we should do."

"I understand..."

Once the away team was back on the *Athena*, the senior officers again convened in the deck one conference lounge, where Bayanhong and Brigson

informed the others of what had happened on the probe ship once they had reactivated the holographic version of Bojek. Thorpe then asked, "Rodall, is it possible to transfer the data that is essentially the Reioshekian to this ship?"

The Odonan engineer answered, "It might be, although it would be more of a copy than the actual entity, but when it comes to computer sentience such as this, the concepts of what is a lifeform and the essence of it become murky. However, while the hologram was active, we were monitoring the computer systems on the alien ship and the power and data flows, and it seems that the sentience is in an isolated computer system compared to the main system, and the sentience interacts with the ship through the hologram."

"Why would they do it that way?" Vorwoorts asked.

"Perhaps to prevent Bojek from taking over the ship, and countermanding the programming that the Reioshekian authorities had put in. On the other hand, that does make the transfer to the *Athena* easier, or should I say, the copying. Afterall, Bojek is just data and code, and if we direct that into one of the holodeck isolated computers, it might be possible to have him on board. I would recommend keeping him in an isolated system, with no physical links to the rest of the computer systems."

"Of course," Thorpe agreed. "See if you can make this transfer possible."

Bayanhong asked the captain, "Are you thinking of going to Reioshek?"

"We should find out what happened to them."

"After fourty-eight thousand years, there might not be a lot left."

"I know, and it's almost certain that they no longer exist as a functioning advanced-technology culture, but still, what is their state now?"

"And can Bojek be returned to them?" asked Psakolaps.

"Perhaps."

"And what if he can't be returned? What if there is nothing left?"

Thorpe had thought about that, and was thinking that the simplest solution was to return to the probe ship, and let one copy of the Reioshekian transmit information to the other and then be deleted, but he did not want to exactly state it that way now. Now, he simply said, "We'll make that decision when the time comes."

\* \* \*

It did not take long for Marlina Tsonga and the engineers to figure out a method to transfer the data from the Reioshekian computer system to an isolated computer system on the *Athena*, although it was mentioned to Bojek that he would be copied to the starship's systems and not transferred in case there was a fault. There was a massive amount of data, as Dewuchun remarked, "That's probably the amount of computer coding and stored memories that allows the average living person to function." However, it was fairly easy to translate the data format from the alien system to the Federation one, and then convert it to a format that the holodeck processors could accommodate and utilize. Because

there could be unexpected errors in that, that was another reason why the data was copied and not transferred.

DeWillis was back on the probe ship and was meeting with Bojek. “The transfer is ready, and we have identified the communications portal that you must use to transfer to the *Athena*. This is just a copy, and your original data and code will remain here.”

“So I will exist in two places at once?” the Reioshekian asked.

“In a manner of speaking, yes, but once power runs out on this vessel again, you will have to go into the inert mode again.”

“Of course, but once I am returned to Reioshek, I can reintegrate with my body.”

DeWillis added, “I would not get my hopes high. What you wish for is highly unlikely to happen.”

“Because the authorities do not think I have finished my sentence?”

“No, because none of what you remember from Reioshek is likely to still exist.”

“I find that hard to believe.”

“But we suspect that it is highly likely that is the truth.” After a moment of silence, the engineer asked, “Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

DeWillis activated the suit communicator and said, “DeWillis to *Athena*. We are ready for the transfer.”

“We’re ready to receive,” Tsonga replied.

Bojek asked, “Is it going to happen?”

“Yes.”

“Then I should shift to an inert mode.”

“Understood.” The hologram of Bojek disappeared, so the engineer said, “Begin the transfer...”

Once the transfer was complete, DeWillis had the computer intelligence confirm that the copy of Bojek that remained on the probe ship was put into an inert mode, or essentially suspended animation for a sentient artificial life form that existed in the computer system. The engineer then packed up the portable generator and the other equipment from the *Athena* and beamed back to the ship. Once he was on board, the ship set course for what they believed was Reioshek. The star they were heading to was four hundred light years away, so it would take a number of days to travel that distance, and it was way off of their course back to the Federation—but then again they were explorers, and this was what they did.

Brigson, Bayanhong and Dewuchun headed to the holodeck assigned to Bojek once the ship was under way. The three entered the holodeck, which was in its inactive state as all they saw were the red and yellow grid lines on the floor, walls and ceiling. Bayanhong called out, “Computer, activate the Bojek hologram.”

There were some chirping sounds but no vocal response from the computer, but a hologram did appear in the middle, and it resembled the Reioshekian as he had appeared on the probe ship. However, his appearance seemed to have startled Bojek himself. He looked around, and seemingly felt his body, and for whatever reason, it did not feel *right*. He looked around, and saw the other three people in the room, and realized he had no idea who they were—and yet his intellect and his memories told him they were among the people he had seen on the probe ship, but they had been wearing environmental suits then, but had no need to wear them now. “Where am I?” he finally asked.

Bayanhong answered, “You are on the *Athena* now, and we are on our way to Reioshek. You are visible to us as a hologram, and you’re in a special part of the ship called a holodeck.”

“I see. I have my memories, but my body... does not feel right, or normal.”

Now Dewuchun spoke, “That’s a consequence of the fact that your memories and other features are playing through our holographic generators, which may not be fully similar to your own, but you will get used to it.”

“But this room... this seems like a prison.”

“It’s not, as you can instruct any setting that you want.”

Brigson demonstrated. “Computer, generate a typical sitting room on Earth.”

The grid lines changed and vanished and soon they were in a room that Bayanhong would not consider “typical,” but probably found in a large home of a wealthy owner. The room was spacious with carpeting, a pair of couches that faced each other along with some chairs, end tables and plants and other decorations. One wall had windows that looked out to a deck, and beyond that, a seashore, with gentle waves falling onto a sandy beach. “This is impressive... and yet, it does not seem right.”

“Why?”

“The colours seem... off.”

“It’s possible,” Brigson explained, “that Reioshekians perceive colours differently than humans. We do not know Reioshekian physiology so we cannot adjust for that in the visual inputs into your holographic coding. However, if these surroundings are not satisfactory, we can instruct you on how to create surroundings that are more familiar to you.”

“I guess... in time I could do that,” Bojek started, “but I do not think I will be here for long. This ship can travel much faster than the probe ship and will soon arrive at Reioshek.”

“That will take a few days,” Bayanhong explained.

“Am I confined to this room, or can I move around on the ship?”

“You are confined to this room.”

“So the imprisonment continues.”

“The reason is that you are a hologram, and there are no holoemitters on the ship outside of this room and others like it.” She did not need to explain that

there were some holoemitters elsewhere on the ship, such as engineering and sickbay for use by the emergency engineering or medical holograms. She also knew that as long as Bojek was here, this particular holodeck would not be available for use by other members of the crew. “You might consider it as a prison, but since you are basically a computer AI and manifest physically as a hologram, you can create your world around you in this room.”

“I see,” the Reioshekian said, as he moved around the room. He decided to try out the couches, which were dark in colour and covered in leather—or at least they would have been had they been real. However, the holographic coding that Bojek was being projected to made it feel to him that his body was moving as he willed it—more or less—and he could feel the couch when he sat down on it. “This is quite interesting. It’s like I can feel a body and feel the furniture I am sitting on... though it does not feel exactly as I remember it.”

“Again, that is because you look Reioshekian, but your body functions as if it is human when it comes to sensory response.”

“Still, this is amazing technology.”

Over the next couple of days, Bojek did attempt to recreate a typical setting in a Reioshekian dwelling, but the result was not that different from what he started with, though the couches were lower and the tables had metal frames with inward-curving legs at the base, and the windows looked out into an urban landscape, as if this sitting room was on the sixtieth story. One thing that he did not have access to was the holographic stock characters and the character creating tools, though Brigson was partly curious on what he would create if he did. She was thinking he might recreate the woman whom he was infatuated with and which led to his exile. He did meet others from the crew, especially Ensign Carla Chu, who was asking questions about his native language, and Lieutenant Erasmus Quinn, who was the sociologist and historian on board. He did ask questions about the history and society of Reioshek, but came to the conclusion that Bojek was not that knowledgeable in that field.

Quinn did say to Chu after a session, “I gather that when he was a physical entity, he was young, and not terribly knowledgeable. Sometimes, we expect the people we meet in space to be more knowledgeable because they are in a space service of some sort.”

“But Bojek was convicted of a crime,” Chu said, “or at least a crime in the eyes of his society, and I think he is still thinking about the woman that got him in trouble.”

“And worse,” Quinn continued, “he does not seem to accept that forty-six thousand, seven hundred years have passed.”

“I guess from his perspective, that’s hard to accept since to him, those numbers of years have not passed. Even so, eighty yeas have passed, so it is impossible that the woman he was infatuated with would be the same. There’s no indication that the Reioshekians are a long-lived species.”

“And no indication that they are not.”

“But I still wonder how he would react when we reach the planet and the

truth of the situation become irrefutable...”

Several days later, as the *Athena* approached the G2-class star that they determined was the most likely home star for Reioshek, the first-shift officers were on the bridge, with Thorpe in the centre seat and Bayanhong to his right. Brigson, at the sensor console, remarked, “Still detecting no non-natural sub-etheromagnetic radiation and no non-natural electromagnetic radiation from the system.”

“But this has to be it,” Bayanhong remarked.

“This is the most likely location,” the science officer replied, “but we don’t know with one hundred percent certainty.”

Indesakar reported, “Now entering the system. There is a class-M planet, a near-Earth-sized planet in orbit around the star in the inhabitable zone. Adjusting course.” The stars on the screen seemed to spin through about thirty-three degrees counterclockwise, as the plane of the system was at that orientation with respect to the reference plane of the galaxy, which was how the ship travelled between star systems. Within a system, the ship shifted its orientation so that it was parallel to the plane of the system.

Brigson reported, “Sensors are picking up non-natural objects, what appear to be satellites or something similar in orbit around the outer planets and their moons. They are inert, space-cold and not emitting anything but black-body radiation.”

“Dead in space,” Thorpe remarked.

“In other words, yeah.”

As they approached the planet, they found more signs that at one point, there had been an advanced society on this planet, but it did not exist now. There were satellites in orbit, some of which were large and more like space stations, but they saw nothing that looked like ships. Up close, the installations in space were cold hunks of metal, stripped of anything of value or usefulness, leaving just the shells and some debris. None of them had any energy signatures that suggested that they were active. Indesakar reported, “Now entering standard orbit, with some debris in high orbit, but not so much in low orbit.”

“Do one powered orbit,” Thorpe ordered. “Brigson?”

“Mapping commencing, scanning for lifeforms... detecting smaller creatures of various forms, and a lot of wreckage. Though vegetation has reclaimed most of the surface, there is still a lot of evidence that an advanced civilization lived here, with cities, transportation infrastructure, landform modifications, everything one would expect to see on an advanced planet—but it is quite dead now.”

“Any indication on how long?”

“Hard to say. Using standards of vegetation reclamation, I would say twenty-five thousand to thirty thousand years. With that much time, it is hard to distinguish between natural decay and breaking down of the structures and so on, or if they were damaged by war or some other disaster.”

"Well, we did not seriously expect anything but this," Bayanhong remarked. "If the Reioshekians were still extant, I'm sure we would've heard of them."

"Of course."

"So an away team?"

"If only to confirm that this is Reioshek," Thorpe replied.

In the holodeck where Bojek was existing, Quinn was with him. He said, "We have arrived at the planet we believe is Reioshek."

"And yet I am confined here," the hologram said. "How can I return to my home, and be reintegrated with my body?"

Quinn replied, "I do not know, but we need to confirm something first." He looked away from the hologram and called out, "Computer, generate a display screen here and show on it the map generated by the orbit around the planet were are currently at."

The computer complied with its usual beeps, and soon a display screen, similar to the main viewscreen on the bridge, appeared, and it looked to be suspended in midair. On that screen was a map, as plotted by the ship's computer using the sensor data taken from the initial powered orbit around the planet. There were two dominant continents, roughly centered on the equator and about a hundred and twenty degrees of longitude apart. One had a roughly diamond shape and the other was more square, though with a large, narrow sea intruding in it, almost like a rift valley. The northern ends were more mountainous, the southern parts a mix of forested and desert lowlands. Several smaller continents were located between the two main ones, and there was one northern polar continent, but according to the sensors, seventy-five percent of the planet's land area was located on the two main continents. Quinn had a simple question for the Reioshekian. "Is that your planet?" He was pretty sure an inhabitant of a planet could recognize the map of that planet.

Bojek simply answered, "Yes, that is Reioshek."

The officer tapped his commbadge and said, "Quinn to bridge."

"Bridge here," came the response, the voice recognizable as that of the captain.

"Sir, Bojek says that this is Reioshek."

"Very well."

The hologram then spoke up, "When can I go to the surface? Have you been in contact with the planetary authorities yet?"

Thorpe heard the voice through Quinn's commbadge, and so replied, "No, we have not been in contact with the authorities. There is no sentient life on this planet, just some ruins of a society that existed here a long time ago."

"But that's impossible."

"Yet it is fact."

"I must see this with my own eyes."

"You will when we can arrange it."

An away team was arranged, with Bayanhong leading it, and DeWillis

and Brigson joining her, along with a security officer, Lieutenant Edward Chan. The planet had near-Earth normal gravity and the atmospheric composition was similar to that of Earth. The sensors had detected what had once been a large city, and it was an area that had not been reconquered by the plant life, perhaps because the infrastructure was quite extensive and extended a fair distance underground. There was no sign of any power, and little indication on how this society had powered itself. Bayanhong, to the others, said, "This is a simple survey mission, and the primary purpose is to try to figure out what happened to this society and when. Did they destroy themselves, or were they invaded, or perhaps it was a pandemic?"

"Or perhaps the machines ran amok," Brigson suggested. "It has often been a fear of developing societies that expanding artificial intelligence could have the machines regarding their biological creators as no longer necessary and destroying them. We have not noticed too many societies that went this way, but it's possible that could've happened here."

"Are we in danger then?" DeWillis asked.

"Probably not, because we're detecting no power, and had detected nothing since we entered the system."

The four took their places on the transporter platform, with Bayanhong facing the console and transporter chief Megan Wilder. She asked, "Do you have the coordinates?"

"Yes," Wilder replied.

"Then energize."

The engineer set the transport process into operation, and the four were converted to the wave state of matter and transmitted to the surface.

When rematerialization was complete, Bayanhong and the rest were surprised where they ended up. It was daylight at the beam-down location and they were supposed to appear on the surface. Instead, they found themselves in a dark environment, though with what little light they had, they realized that they were surrounded by some machinery.

The fact that the away team did not arrive at the coordinates that had been entered into the system was immediately apparent to Wilder, as the system sounded an alert tone. "What the," she mumbled, and then ran through some routines, and even attempted to beam the four back, but there was nothing to lock onto. The transponder signals from their commbadges disappeared along with the four officers. Wilder tapped her commbadge and contacted the bridge.

"What?" asked Thorpe.

"I lost the away team. I beamed them down, but they did not arrive at the programmed coordinates, and I cannot scan for them and I cannot pick up their commbadge signals."

"How did that happen?"

"I don't know. The beams were somehow captured."

"How? There's nothing active on this planet."

"Apparently, there is..."

On the surface, Brigson asked simply, "Where are we?"

The first officer tapped her commbadge and said, "Bayanhong to *Athena*. Do you read? *Athena*, do you read?" Brigson and Chan tried their commbadges but had a similar lack of success. "We must be underground somewhere, and the signals are blocked."

"How?" asked Brigson. "There's nothing active on this planet."

"Apparently there is, and now we have to figure out how to get out of here."

Chan said, "We should've brought some lights with us."

"We had no idea that this would happen."

DeWillis did have his tricorder out and was conducting some scans. "We're more than likely underground, perhaps a distance underground. Something on this planet is still functioning, though I don't know how. There is machinery in this room, machinery of an unknown purpose, but the walls are blocking our sensor beams."

"And how do we move around in here?" Brigson asked. "It's completely dark. More importantly, why are we here? Who or what brought us here?"

The four just had the feeble lights on their tricorder screens, though in the total darkness of their surroundings, that did provide enough illumination to allow them to move around and not bump into things, once their eyes adjusted to the darkness. They found that they were in some sort of chamber, with a lot of machinery that they could not readily identify. They did move into another chamber, looking for a way out, but the room they entered was a long, narrow room and the machinery here did look a lot like cryochambers, vertically-mounted tubes with glass-covered openings, and a number of conduits and pipes going in through the top and what looked like a control panel mounted below the glass panel, though it was all inert.

"What place is this?" Brigson asked, "and how did we get here?"

"Clearly," Bayanhong replied, "something is active on this planet, and it brought us here. We have to somehow find it and figure out what happened, and reverse it. Unless the ship can quickly figure out what happened to us, they're not going to immediately risk another away team."

Wilder, still in the transporter room, reviewed the sensor logs to determine what had happened. She saw nothing on the first look, but then she slowed down the data and looked for anything unusual something that the computer might not recognize as an anomaly, but which she might. There was nothing out of the ordinary, nothing that was non-natural as the only radiation detected was essentially reflected sunlight or re-emitted solar energy. As she looked, she heard her commbadge chirp, so she slapped it and said, "Wilder here."

The voice was that of the captain, and he asked, "Have you determined what happened to the away team?"

"Not yet, sir," Wilder replied, with some frustration on her voice. "I'm checking the sensor logs from the transport process, but I'm not seeing anything

unusual... but wait.”

“What?”

“Some very slight power reading, apparently intercepting the beam.”

“Can you localize it?”

Wilder ran some routines and checked readings, but finally had to say, “There was too little signal and it was not active long enough to get a reading on its location, so I’m not sure what happened... but my best guess is... the surface we are seeing is somehow not the actual surface.”

“That seems unlikely,” Thorpe replied.

“It’s not easy to intercept a transporter beam and keep it coherent and direct it to another location, especially a beam that is alien to the system with different coding parameters.” That did imply something that Wilder did not want to think about and that was that the capturing of the beam also scrambled it and when the wave state was converted back to the normal state, all the molecules would be there, just in a completely different order.

On the bridge, Jules Torin, the second-shift science officer who was now on the bridge as Brigson was off the ship, looked over the data the sensors were picking up, and reported, “There’s no evidence of what Megan was suggesting. There’s no power signature, nothing that suggests any sort of holographic or projected image. We did beam the away team down to what we determined was a major centre in this civilization, with extensive ruins that did extend underground.”

“But how could something still be active so many years after the apparent end of the civilization?” asked Vorwoorts.

“Perhaps they are still extant but had created this illusion of a dead world to discourage the Arosians. Admittedly, Reioshek is outside of the known sphere of Arosian influence, but it’s possible that the Reioshekians might’ve been aware of the Arosians and their reputation.”

“That would imply a rather advanced society.”

“The probe ship and how Bojek was put on board does suggest that they were technologically advanced, even then. We do not have that ability, to basically turn a person into an artificial intelligence.”

Thorpe said, “We might have to send a shuttle down and take a closer look.”

Dewuchun then spoke up, saying, “Alternatively, we can beam down a probe, using a quantum entanglement communications system so that it can get around shields and cloaks, as see what it can detect.”

The captain thought about that for a moment, and then said, “Go ahead and prepare the probe.”

On the surface, in the darkened chambers that they assumed were underground, Bayanhong and the rest of the away team continued to examine their surroundings, including the cryochambers that they had discovered. They looked in them as best they could, but saw nothing. There were no bodies inside

them, not even skeletons or other identifiable remains. They seemed empty. Brigson did remark, "This is perhaps the same type of chamber that Bojek's physical body could've been put in."

"It's clearly not here now," Bayanhong replied.

"We don't know how many years, centuries even, passed between the time Bojek's probe ship was launched and this was shut down. It's possible that this society imprisoned people by putting them into chambers like these and transferring their minds to... something, perhaps to serve out their sentences in some sort of virtual prison."

"Or send them off in a probe ship."

"Perhaps."

And then, without warning, the room lights came on, startling the four with the brightness. They had to close their eyes quickly and shield them with their hands until they adjusted to the sudden appearance of the lights. As their eyes became acclimatized to the light, they realized that they were not alone. Someone else was in the room, and given the similarity in appearance to Bojek, they knew that this person was a Reioshekian, but the first question on Bayanhong's mind was where did this individual come from? Then DeWillis said, "It's a hologram."

The hologram spoke, and since the away team had their universal translators programmed with the Reioshekian language, they understood the words, although it was possible that there might have been some shifts in the language since Bojek's departure. "You are intruders here, and you are not native to the planet. Why have you intruded into this cryogenic suspension chamber?"

Bayanhong used her tricorder to translate her words to the local language. "We are not intruding. We had no intention of coming here. Instead, we were beaming to the surface, but were somehow redirected to this location."

"Then you must be from off this world."

Bayanhong was thinking that the hologram should have somehow known that, but she said simply, "That's correct."

"Then you have violated our laws by trespassing on our planet."

To herself, mostly, Bayanhong sighed, "Oh great."

On board the *Athena*, Dewuchun was in the main transporter room, with Wilder at the controls and the captain was also present. Dewuchun and a couple of other engineers had moved the probe onto the transporter platform. It was cylindrical and covered in a metal sheath painted a matte black. It stood vertically on a flat stand. The surface had various sensors on it, and inside was the power supply and the communications systems. The primary system was conventional, and could transmit audio and video, while a second system used quantum entanglement, where two particles, one on the ship and one in the probe, were linked. A change in state in one would be reflected in the change in state of the other particle. If the main system lost contact with the ship, the backup would engage. The main limitation of the quantum entanglement was that the bit rate

was very low, so it would transmit basic text data only, but the advantage was that as long as the two particles existed, their states were linked and they could be used to communicate, regardless of what kind of interference or shielding or whatever was in place.

“Quantum entanglement is working,” Dewuchun said, as he checked his engineering tricorder. “The two particles are linked and we can transmit data in both directions through them.”

“Okay,” Thorpe remarked. “When ready, beam it down to the original coordinates that the away team was supposed to go to.”

“Understood.” The chief engineer looked back at Wilder, and said, “Ready?”

“Yes,” she said. She saw the probe on the transporter platform, knowing that for quantum entanglement to work, the transport had to be done at quantum resolution, so they were using the personnel transporter and not the cargo one. Wilder checked the coordinates and the readings one more time, and then said, as she worked the controls, “Energizing.” The probe vanished into the transporter beam.

Second later, it was on the surface of the planet, rematerializing where it was supposed to be. The transporter chief reported, “The probe is on the surface. It was not snatched.”

“Open the comm link,” Thorpe ordered, and Wilder did so, transferring the image to a viewscreen in the transporter room. The images soon appeared on the screen, with Wilder using the controls to have the imaging sensors rotate through a full three hundred and sixty degrees. What they saw was a field of grass-covered wreckage, what looked like walls and flat surfaces, and a lot of formed stone broken on the ground. There was grass over most surfaces, along with some taller weeds, but no substantial plants, such as trees, simply because the infrastructure went deep and so there was little soil to hold the roots of any larger plants. Erosion had broken down some of the concrete, adding to piles of small debris around the larger ones.

Dewuchun looked at the image, and said, “The probe ended up where it was supposed to be, and the ship sensors confirm it’s on the surface.”

Wilder added, “The sensors on the probe indicate with high probability that the surface is real, and not some sort of holographic illusion or otherwise.”

Thorpe asked, “Then how come the away team was snatched and the probe was not?”

“Two possibilities,” the Odonan engineer answered, “One is that whatever technology snatched the away team could determine which transport signal contained lifeforms and which did not.”

“How is that possible,” the captain asked, “given that both transports were at quantum resolution?”

“I don’t know. The second theory is that whatever power source is responsible for snatching the away team did not have the power left to snatch a second beam. We don’t know what the power source is, perhaps geothermal or

perhaps a solar tap, but given how old it must be, it might not be able to snatch beams in such quick succession.”

“Still, it would be too risky to send down another away team.”

“We can always use a shuttle.”

“That’s the next approach...”

Bayanhong said to the hologram, “Do you have a name or position?”

“I am the chief administrator of his cryostatic detention centre,” the hologram replied, as it did not have a name and likely was not based on an actual individual.

“How did you intercept the transporter beam? We aimed to beam down to the surface.”

“Security protocols intercept unauthorized teleportation signals that are picked up. Teleportation signals without prior authorization are not allowed.”

Brigson then asked, mostly for the benefit of the others in the away team, “How much of this society still functions, even after all of these years?”

“I’m not sure,” DeWillis replied. “However, there must be some sort of functioning sensor system, probably passive sensors. It’s also possible that whatever destroyed this civilization might have caused some sort of security protocol to be activated, and that could still essentially be in effect.”

Bayanhong continued to converse with the hologram. She explained, “We are from a ship of explorers, and we encountered a vessel from your planet adrift in the void between spiral arms of the galaxy. We decided to come to this planet for further examination, but we found the world to be basically destroyed.”

“That’s not possible,” the hologram replied. “Our society is still quite functional.”

“No, it is not. Who do you answer to? Is there an official in your government that you report to?” Bayanhong hoped that the hologram and the computer intelligence behind it understood what she was asking.

“The director of judicial affairs directs us.”

“Contact that individual and get his opinion on your bringing us here.”

The hologram did not respond, but it went inert, or at least gave that appearance, perhaps while the computer code behind it was running something. After more than a minute of waiting, during which time Brigson and DeWillis speculated that their request might have crashed the program, the hologram finally did respond, “There does appear to be a communications fault, as the system is not able to contact the director.”

Bayanhong replied, “The communications fault is that the director no longer exists, nor does your government or your society or anything else... except this place, apparently.”

“That is quite impossible,” the hologram continued. “If our entire society has been destroyed, then how does this facility still function? I am sure that some directive would have been transmitted to us if our world was under attack or some natural disaster struck, but a search through our records and our database

indicate that no such directive has been received. Therefore, I conclude that our society is functional and that you were intercepted and transmitted here because your teleportation was unauthorized. We are attempting to resolve the fault that has prevented communications.”

“Good luck with that,” Bayanhong commented.

“I do not understand that reference.”

“It means that no matter what you try, you will not resolve your ‘communications problems’ because the problem is that there is nobody at the other end.”

“We will attempt to resolve our communications problems.”

Brigson said to the engineer, “Sometimes, don’t you just hate talking to a computer.”

“Especially when the so-called AI is not all that intelligent afterall, but then again, the AI is only as good as the coding behind it. I doubt that they would give something like this hologram a great deal of leeway in its intellectual abilities.”

“More than likely,” Brigson agreed.

Bayanhong approached the hologram, and asked, “What will happen to us?”

“Your case will be transmitted to the appropriate magistrate when the communications issues are resolved, and that individual will decide on your outcome. If convicted as trespassers, you will be sentenced.”

“And confined to the cryochambers here?”

“If that is the punishment that the magistrate recommends, then that will be what happens.”

“That could take time.”

“We are attempting to resolve the communications errors,” the hologram remarked, again.

Bayanhong then tried another angle. “What was the date of your last communications with the director or the magistrate or anyone outside of this place?”

After a second or so, the hologram reported, “The last successful communication was on the fourty-second day of the thirtieth cycle of the Havensforp Era.”

That did sound like a weird sort of calendar, Bayanhong thought, but each society would measure dates and time in their own way. She asked now, “What is the current date?”

More seconds passed before the hologram answered, “It appears to be the eighth day of the thirty-first cycle of the Havensforp Era.”

Bayanhong had no idea how many days were in one of those cycles, but no matter what the length was, it did not seem like too many days had passed at least to the hologram, and certainly not the tens of thousands of years that had really passed. DeWillis did remark, “It’s possible that the system might’ve been in some sort of standby mode until something triggered it, and so the hologram is

measuring time only when it is active. Something similar was happening on the probe ship.”

“I know, but I was hoping,” replied the first officer. She faced the hologram again as that was a means by which it got its attention. She started, “Let me explain the situation. We are from the United Federation of Planets, which is a great distance from this world. During our travels, we encountered a ship that originated from this planet, as far as we have been able to tell. On board was a sentience, apparently one of the people from this planet that was basically sentenced to be on a ship that was mapping the galaxy. We found it adrift in the void between the spiral arms.”

The hologram asked, “Did you have contact with the sentience on board that ship?”

“Yes,” Bayanhong admitted, but she was not yet prepared to say that it was on board her ship.

“Do you know the name?”

“Bojek.”

The hologram froze for a moment, perhaps accessing records, assuming that they still existed. Then it said, “Bojek was sentenced for the crime of interfering in an interpersonal relationship with an individual outside of his social class. He was given the assignment to be the guidance of a mapping probe vessel.”

“When was that sentence handed down?”

“Eighty three and a half years ago,” the hologram remarked, and that was probably Reioshekian years, although the difference between that and Earth years was not that great.

“That’s not correct,” Bayanhong remarked. “The probe ship, when we encountered it and compared the data it had with the current position of the stars suggested that it had been adrift for at least fifty-one thousand, six hundred of your years.”

“That is quite impossible, unless something happened to the ship that was unexpected, such as going through some sort of wormhole or temporal anomaly.”

“Which no doubt the ship would have recorded, but it did not. I mean, we determined its age by looking at its data of star positions and comparing it to the current situation, knowing stellar proper motions and all of that, and going backwards to get the best match.”

“Still, that is quite impossible,” the hologram remarked. “We are still working to resolve the communications issues.”

Brigson then stepped forward, and said, “If Bojek was sentenced, and his essence transferred from his body to the ship computer, that would mean that his body is held in cryostasis in a chamber such as this, and when he returns and his sentence is complete, he is returned to his body?”

“That is correct.”

“So can we see the cryochamber that contains his body?”

The hologram answered, "The cryochamber containing the body of Bojek is on another level of this facility, but since you are considered possible prisoners, you do not have authorization to access the other levels of the facility."

"Can you transfer the essence of Bojek back into his body?"

"It is not strictly that. His essence, if that is the term you mean by his quantum life force, that was not transferred but was copied, and upon the completion of the sentence, whatever memories he acquired will be added to his memories when he is revived from cryostasis."

"Whatever," Brigson mumbled. "Can you do that now?"

"But his sentence is not yet served."

"It's fifty-one thousand of your years," the science officer said, with a touch of frustration on her voice.

"But you said that the probe ship is adrift and Bojek is on it."

"He's on our ship now."

"How is that possible?"

"We basically copied his essence to our computer system, and he is able to interact with us by being in a holographic simulation room."

The hologram then said, "I would need to speak to him."

"If you remove whatever is blocking communications with our ship, I am sure that can be arranged."

"That is not permitted because you have demonstrated the use of teleportation technology, which implies that an attempt to communicate with your ship could also lead to an escape attempt. I would need to visit your ship and speak to Bojek directly."

"But you're a hologram. There are no holoemitters on the ship except in the holodecks, and I am not sure that the captain would allow you to access the ship through those."

"There is no need for me to access holoemitters on your ship, because I have access to a self-contained holoemitter system that allows me freedom of movement anywhere I need to go."

"I see," Brigson remarked. "But we would still need to contact the ship."

"I have the means to do that," the hologram remarked.

Bayanhong added, "We would have to accompany you on the trip to the ship, to explain what is going on and all of that."

"That is not permitted. You are still considered possible suspects in the charge of trespassing as aliens without authorization to access our world. Potential escapes are forbidden."

DeWillis then faced the others and said, "Let him go to the ship. There, no doubt he will learn the reality of the situation and then realize how ridiculous these charges are and will let us go. Arguing with a computer seems pointless as this hologram can't move beyond its programming."

Bayanhong thought about it for a moment, and then said, "Very well, we'll proceed that way." To the hologram, the first officer said, "Very well, you can contact the ship and explain the situation, but you also need to tell the cap-

tain what happened to us, and ensure him that we are well and not in any danger.”

“I will inform him of that, since it is the right of prisoners and those potentially charged with an offense that they are not being mistreated while under confinement.” With those words, the hologram vanished, but at least the lights were left on.

Brigson then asked, “Now what?”

Bayanhong answered, “We simply wait here for the hologram to contact the ship and actually realize what is happening—and if possible, the ship could trace where the communications is coming from and even locate us.”

“We could be anywhere on the planet.”

“I know.”

\* \* \*

Captain Thorpe was in the ready room adjacent to the bridge, and T’Kor had the conn as the second-shift officers were on the bridge. Not much was going on, as their search for the missing away team was fruitless, and they had to wonder what had happened to them since Reioshek appeared to be a dead world, and they could not find any functioning power source, and yet it had to exist. The Reioshekian ability to hide such things was reaching to the point of frustration for those on board the *Athena*. All that Bojek could say was that there were certain areas of the planet that were shielded with fields that blocked and even fooled sensors, and included were such locations as prison cells and the like, so that prisoners could not be located. Even with that information, the ship could not find anywhere that could possibly be some sort of sensor-blocking or sensor-reading-mimicking field. Jules Torin, the second-shift science officer, remarked, “This sort of technology appears to be rather advanced among the Reioshekians.”

Moments later, the tactical console beeped out an alert tone, which caught the attention of everyone on the bridge. Second-shift tactical officer Lorne Hathson said, “We’re being hailed from the surface.”

T’Kor asked, “The away team?”

“No, it’s a local signal, analogue, communications hail... now getting a Preserver code linguistic database so that we can translate between languages.”

“Accept the hail,” the conn officer said. She then tapped her commbadge and said, “T’Kor to the captain. We’re being hailed from the surface, Reioshekian signal.”

“Really?” came Thorpe’s response.

“Apparently so, linking linguistic databases now.”

Hathson said, “Databases integrated, and we can translate between languages now. Incoming hail, audio only.” By this time, Thorpe was back on the bridge.

“On speaker,” the captain ordered.

The voice came through the speaker, the intonation indicating a non-

native speaker, but the words were in English. "I am Tolbak, a detention facility administrator on Reioshek. I am attempting to contact the alien spaceship in orbit around our planet. I have transmitted a Preserver-based linguistic database to your ship, which is, according to my understanding, a means by which we can mutually translate our respective languages and allow communications. Is that in fact happening? Can you respond to me?"

Hathson naturally had set up the communications system to respond using the same method that the Reioshekian was using, with the assumption that the individual at the other end could receive and understand the transmission. Thorpe ordered, "Open the link."

"Link open," the officer replied, tapping at the display a couple more times to allow communications.

"This is Captain Leonard Thorpe of the United Federation of Planets starship *Athena*. I believe that you have information on the whereabouts of four members of my crew, who transported to the surface of your planet and then disappeared."

"That is correct," Tolbak replied. "The members of your crew that came to the planet did so without authorization from our government, and in application of standard practice, they were taken into custody and will be tried and sentenced in accordance with our laws."

Thorpe could have said that there was no functioning government on this planet, and no apparent higher-order or sentient lifeforms on this planet as well, but he was speaking to *someone*. Maybe there were parts of the planet that were effectively hidden from view and where remnants of this society still existed. Perhaps they had done this to hide from the Arosians, or they had some other reason. Instead, he did say, "I would like to speak to the members of my crew that you have in custody."

"That is not possible," came the reply, "but I can assure you that they are in the same condition that they were when they left your vessel, and they have not been abused or injured in any way. That is in accordance with our laws."

"Then why are you contacting me, beyond informing that you have custody of the four?"

"I have been informed that you have a Reioshekian on board your vessel."

"Well, in a sense, since the individual is non-corporeal and exists within our computer system as a system-level sentence, and it would be difficult to speak to him though a communications link."

"I can come on board your ship, if you permit, and speak to him directly."

"That could be possible."

"It is necessary to speak to him," Tolbak said, his voice always level and steady. "Is the name of the individual Bojek?"

"Yes, and why?"

"Because he is no longer on the probe ship launched from our world eighty-three and a half years ago, I would need to speak to him."

*Eighty-three and a half years ago?* Thorpe thought, and the others on the

bridge were thinking of the same incredulous remark. Did that little time pass between the departure of the probe ship and the demise of this civilization? Just like Bojek had not been able to immediately grasp how many years had passed since the probe ship was launched, neither could Tolbak, which seemed to imply something about the person he was speaking to. Thorpe asked, "I believe I am speaking to a computer AI, a computer sentence."

"That is correct. How could you determine that?"

"Because if you were an actual biological entity, you would know that the probe ship was launched forty-six thousand, seven hundred years ago."

"The members of your crew in custody made the same statement, which I have found hard to accept."

"But if you are a computer sentence, it could take some time to make adjustments so that you can come on board the ship and meet with Bojek."

"Such precautions are not necessary. I have access to a self-contained holographic emitter system that allows me to appear as a physical being and interact with others as if I was a physical being, and it even has mobility capabilities." That, Thorpe realized, was pretty advanced technology, and beyond what the Federation was capable of, although he was aware of some primitive and basic attempts at developing that sort of technology. "You can use your teleportation technology to bring me on board your ship and I can move around the vessel and interact as necessary without relying on holoemitters on your ship and being introduced to your computer system."

"I see," Thorpe replied. "That is acceptable. When will you be ready to come on board?"

"Momentarily," Tolbak answered. "I will transmit coordinates momentarily."

"Very well." When the link ended, the captain asked, "Lieutenant Torin, could you trace the source of the communications?"

"It actually came from one of the satellites in orbit, which I thought was inert. However, it appeared to have some functionality in it."

"How could this infrastructure be maintained for so long?" Hathson asked.

His counterpart at the central console answered, "It is perhaps possible that in the forty-six millennia since they launched the probe ship, the Reioshekians have evolved into a machine culture, without the need for physical bodies, and they are somehow hiding their existence by making the planet look like a lifeless ruin. It seems that they are effective in hiding their presence."

"I can understand that," T'Kor remarked, "except for the comment that Tolbak made that the probe ship was launched only eighty-three and a half years ago."

"Yeah, it's hard to reconcile this, but something is going on."

Moments later, Hathson informed T'Kor and Thorpe that he had received the coordinates from where Tolbak would be beamed to the ship. Thorpe asked, "Where on the planet is that location?"

“Actually, it’s pretty close to the coordinates that the away team were supposed to bema down to.”

“That somehow does not surprise me.”

Thorpe headed to the transporter room, where Wilder was behind the controls and Dewuchun was in the room as well. The fourth person was a security officer, Lieutenant Allison Jones, a tall blond-haired woman known for her exceptional strength without it being obvious. Dewuchun was discussing something with Wilder when the captain walked into the room. He asked, “You have the coordinates?”

“Yes,” the transporter chief answered.

“What’s at those coordinates?”

“It appears to be machinery of some type, a cylinder about a metre long, and about fifteen centimetres in diameter, packed with electronics.”

“A self-contained, self-propelled holographic emitter system,” Thorpe replied/

“As I have been informed. Captain, since it is a machine, we can transport it at molecular resolution and record the composition so that we can duplicate it.”

“Steal their technology?”

“I doubt that the Reioshekians would be using it much anymore, and if we had a copy, we can have Bojek in that instead of in our computer system.”

“I see,” Thorpe replied, but of course he knew that the engineers would study the technology and then adapt it for their own use. The possibilities of self-contained and self-propelled holoemitter technology seemed limitless, though he did wonder about how long such a device could function before it needed to be recharged. “Very well, go ahead and do it.”

Hathson contained the transporter room, and said, “Tolbak indicates that he is ready for transport.”

“Understood. Lieutenant Wilder, beam him up.”

The engineer worked the controls and initiated the transport process. As the incoming wave state passed through the pattern buffer, the system recorded the molecular composition and interconnections of the steam and recorded the data, molecule by molecule, although the material came in vast patterns, relative to the number of atoms, which allowed the data to be simplified. Still, the copying process delayed rematerialization by a few seconds, but the entity beaming up would not notice that. Soon, the Reioshekian self-contained holoemitter was on the transporter platform. It was a cylinder, about a metre in height, standing on an end. Its surface was covered in a crystal that looked like it had thousands, if not more, facets, which were seemingly sparkling under the lights in the transporter room.

Wilder did say, “We successfully copied it, and the computer is processing the data.”

“Interesting appearance,” Dewuchun added.

For a few seconds, the cylinder stood there on the platform, but then,

startling the four looking at it, it seemed to expand and transform, and then fill out into the shape of a Reioshekian male—they were assuming—who looked a lot like Bojek, but he was dressed mostly in black, with some silver trim and ornamentation that suggested the outfit was some sort of uniform. Once the hologram was formed, it stood there stiffly, looking a little awkward. Thorpe and the others had the feeling that it was booting up, loading up programming and algorithms that let it function. When it completed its activation, the hologram looked indistinguishable from a biological lifeform. It was able to walk off of the transporter platform, and it did so given that there were no holoemitters in the room.

“Welcome on board the *Athena*,” the captain started. “I’m Captain Leonard Thorpe.”

“Of course,” Tolbak replied. “This is my first time on an alien starship. So... this is your appearance. One of you... seems different.”

“That would be Lieutenant Commander Dewuchun. He’s from Odonia. The rest of us are from Earth.”

“We can discuss such matters later, but now I must meet with Bojek. Take me to him.”

“Very well. Lieutenant Jones will escort you there.” He indicated who Lieutenant Jones was, and Tolbak understood the implication that that particular member of the crew would guide him to where he needed to go. He followed her out of the transporter room.

Thorpe did ask, “Were you able to get a copy of that self-contained holoemitter?”

“Yes,” Wilder replied, “and the initial analysis indicates that the technology is quite advanced. It looks like a zero-point energy module powers it, and the sophistication of the emitter system indicates that the forcefield system generating the shape has high resolution and high tactility.”

“Meaning?”

“It would be hard to tell you’re touching the forcefield of a hologram rather than the skin of a flesh-and-blood person.”

“I see.”

Jones guided their Reioshekian guest to the holodeck where Bojek was residing. “Computer,” the security officer called out, “is the Bojek program running?”

“Affirmative,” came the response.

“Allow access.”

“Access granted.”

The doors to the holodeck opened, and Jones and Tolbak entered the simulation, which was that of a typical residence on Reioshek. To Jones, homes all looked the same, as there were tables and chairs and shelves containing decorative items and even books. That was not a surprise, she knew, since pretty well every sentient culture had books or something very close. The writing system could be different, but books were an effective way to store knowledge and records before the advent of computers and digital storage and display. The room

was square, and had windows that looked out onto a cityscape, and given the orientation, it seemed that Bojek had established his residence at a noticeable height. The Reioshekian was sitting in one of those chairs, and turned around to face the two that entered the room.

Both seemed to recognize each other. Bojek said, "Tolbak, I knew that you would one day come. Are you the real person or a holographic copy?"

"The latter," Tolbak replied. "My physical self would not lower itself to be in the presence of someone like you."

Bojek, seeing the *Athena* officer in the room, remarked, "You can go now."

Jones replied, "Protocol requires that I say here and monitor this."

"Very well," the Reioshekian answered, surmising that the human could not understand the language that he and Tolbak were speaking, but unknown to him, Jones was capable of understanding what was said as her universal translator implant had been programmed with the local language. Jones stood by the archway exit from the holodeck, which as the doors closed disappeared and was replaced by more conventional doors that could lead to somewhere else.

Tolbak walked around the room and looked out the windows, saying as he did, "I guess that it should not be unexpected to me that you would recreate a residence that is far outside of your social class. Never in the wildest moments of imagination that you could conceive would you ever succeed to the level of a location such as this."

"I see no reason why not," Bojek replied. "Are we not all of the same species, all capable of great things, or not? Our station at birth is not the determination of the outcome of our lives."

"But it is, and it has been established through our history. The social structure has served our society well."

"It served it well for those in the levels that made the rules, but not necessarily for everyone else."

"That's not true," Tolbak continued, "and you know it. Sure, there is always the probability that some individuals in a particular class could achieve more than his class allows, but there is always the probability that he could achieve less. One may talk about the possibility of rising in social class, but nobody talks about the possibility of descending. Our ways have served us well."

"But have they? The crew of this spaceship has told me something interesting. According to them, fifty one thousand, six hundred and nineteen *va'ikhba* have passed since the probe ship I was on was launched, and that upon the return to Reioshek, they found a planet in ruins."

"And you believe that? If fifty one thousand, six hundred and nineteen *va'ikhba* have passed, then how could I possibly be here?"

"Sometimes, computer sentiences are maintained even after the physical body is no more."

"That is against the strictures of our society."

"But it happens, and you know it."

On the surface, Bayanhong and the other three members of the away team could just wait, and hope that the departure of the entity apparently in charge, who was meeting with the captain, hopefully, on the ship would eventually lead to their release, once they learned of the futility of their situation.

Other holograms were present, almost as if they were performing guard duties to keep them contained in this location. DeWilis had been thinking that if they could move around more, he might be able to find what was powering this facility and hopefully shut it down so that the fields that were hiding them from the sensors on the *Athena* would be shut down too. The engineer did approach one of the holograms, and though the translation function on the tricorder, asked, "How is power supplied to this facility?"

"General power from the local power grid," the hologram replied.

"But what if that power was disrupted? I'm assuming that there is a backup power system in case the main one is disrupted."

"That is correct. The backup power system relies on zero-point energy modules."

"Oh," DeWilis sighed softly, and that would explain how power was maintained here through all of those millennia. Very low power drain while everything was suspended meant that the system could endure for a long time. He would not mind seeing the modules and the power system, but he doubted that the holograms would allow it. He did ask, "Are you still having communications problems connecting with the outside world, the world beyond this prison?"

"That is correct. All methods of communications have failed."

"And nobody in here can go outside and see what's going on?"

"We lack that capability."

"I see."

Bayanhong, seeing that the engineer had engaged one of the holograms in conversation, approached another, and asked, "If we are convicted of this alleged crime of being aliens trespassing on this planet without prior authorization, what would the sentence involve? Would we end up in one of those cryochambers?"

"That is correct."

"And what would we experience?"

"Your essence would be transferred into the prison simulation. There, you would be performing tasks that correspond to the sentence you have received, and during the performance of those tasks, for which you would need no rest and no food and no other accommodations, you can reflect on the crime you have committed and resolve to not repeat those crimes."

"That does not seem like fun," Bayanhong replied.

"I do not understand the reference."

"It means that such a prison sentence, continuous work and effort with no rest, even for an essence existing within a virtual-reality simulation, would find that to be a very unpleasant experience."

"That is the purpose of the sentence, to punish the individuals for the

crime they have committed, and it is not meant to be pleasant. It is supposed to be unpleasant, very unpleasant, but it does not affect the physical body. With that concept in the mind, they would not commit the crime again.”

“Does it work?”

“I do not have data on that.”

“In the virtual reality, does the apparent length of the punishment exceed the actual time that the prisoner is confined, so that mere days pass in the real world while many years appear to pass in the virtual world?”

“That would depend on the sentence,” the hologram explained. “For some simple crimes, that could happen so that the prisoner is in the cryochamber for only a short period, but he experiences a longer sentence. For serious crimes such as murder, the time in the virtual simulation would apparently be multiples of the time outside the simulation, so that the prisoner serves his full sentence, even if it is longer than his normal lifespan. At the end of the sentence, all of those memories are restored to the person, and he is released, having completed his sentence but retaining all the memories.”

“Oh,” Bayanhong sighed.

The hologram moved to one of the cyrochambers, and said, “This person is sentenced to a three hundred year sentence because he was convicted of murdering three people. He will experience all three hundred years of his sentence, and when that is complete, the memories are restored to the person and he is removed from stasis. This approach to prison sentencing means that there is no realistic escape opportunities, and at the end of the sentence, the person is physically unharmed.”

“So this person here will be released at the end of his sentence?” Bayanhong asked, as she looked through the glass plate into that particular cryochamber.

“That is correct.”

“But this cryochamber is empty.”

The hologram looked into it, and replied, “I assure you that it is not.”

“It is. There’s nothing in there.”

“That is quite impossible.”

DeWillis approached Bayanhong, and said to her, “I suspect that the holograms here do not actually see anything, but are relying on other sources of information. They may be working on the assumption that little time has passed, and there are no warnings or whatever from the chamber, so the situation to them is unchanged.”

“Weird,” the first officer replied.

“The Reioshekians might’ve programmed their artificial intelligence to not be too independent, perhaps out of fear that the AI would take over or something similar.”

“Perhaps.” She decided to not press the matter that the hologram could not see what was plain in front of it, perhaps because the actual hologram could see nothing at all. Instead, she was thinking about the situation she and the rest

of the away team was in, so she asked, "So what is the kind of punishment that we would face, given that we are charged with some sort of trespassing offense."

"I do not know. That is up to the magistrate to decide."

"The magistrate that you could not seem to contact."

"In time, we will resolve those issues."

"And if you do not?"

"That is not conceivable," the hologram replied.

"But assume it is. Assume there is nothing left of your society because it really is fifty one thousand, six hundred and nineteen *va'ikhba* since Bojek was convicted of his crime and actually sent away on a probe ship."

"That is inconceivable."

"But just play along."

"I do not understand that reference."

Bayanhong said, "Consider it a hypothetical scenario. That much time has passed and you have some individuals who may have committed a crime but there is nothing outside of the prison, no magistrate, nothing at all. What happens then?"

The hologram had no answer, so DeWillis, standing beside the first officer, remarked, "I don't think he has the programming to respond to that."

Bojek faced Tolbak, and as he did, he was not completely certain of what was going on. The crew of this ship had offered no firm proof of what they had said about the amount of time that had passed since the probe ship was launched. Now, Tolbak was here again, and that further confused him. "The aliens on this ship say over fifty one thousand *va'ikhba* have passed, and yet you are here. It seems inconceivable that I could have remained in an inactive state in the ship computer for such a long period of time, and it is even more inconceivable that you also survived that long, somehow, without being aware of the passage of time. Therefore, it seems likely that the aliens have not fully determined how long I have been adrift in the probe ship, so it certainly does seem likely that I have completed my sentence."

Tolbak paused for a moment. He knew that once he learned who the prisoner was, he did update his records, and remarked, "You are correct. Sufficient time has passed that your sentence is complete."

"Then I demand that I be reintegrated with my body."

"That might not be immediately possible."

"Why?" demanded Bojek.

"It is possible that you may have committed another crime by abandoning the probe ship."

"I had no choice. It was adrift, without fuel, and this ship and its crew rescued me. The ship is still there, and one of our vessels can retrieve it."

"I see," Tolbak remarked. "However, you are, as I understand it, currently stored in an alien computer system, and it might be difficult to integrate their system with ours so that you can be transferred."

"The crew of this ship integrated their systems with those on the probe ship, so it can be done. They can assist you."

Tolbak hesitated for a moment, and then said, "I will have to speak to higher authorities about this, and also to confirm that the transfer can be done with alien technology at one end. This is not the sort of thing that we have done before."

"Of course," Bojek replied. Then he added, "I wonder if Injae would remember me?"

"We made sure that was unlikely." Tolbak then turned from the other Reioshekian, in his fake living quarters in a manner he could never occupy in the real world. Facing the *Athena* officer and switching on the translation system at his end, he said, "I wish to leave this simulation and speak to your captain."

"Of course," Jones said. She turned and said, "Computer, arch." The simulated door vanished and the holodeck entry arch appeared. The two approached it and the doors opened and they stepped onto the ship itself. She tapped her commbadge and said, "Lieutenant Jones to Captain Thorpe."

"Thorpe here," came the response.

"Tolbak has concluded his meeting with Bojek."

"That was quick."

"I guess they did not have much to discuss."

"Very well," the captain answered. "Bring him to the conference lounge."

"Understood. Jones out." She tapped the commbadge again to turn it off, and then had Tolbak follow her to the turbolift, which took them to the top deck and then the conference lounge that was behind the bridge. The Reioshekian commented only that it seemed that this was a large ship.

In the conference lounge, Thorpe, Vorwoorts and Dewuchun were seated around the table. Jones left, while Tolbak remained standing. Thorpe surmised that the holographic emitter that was actually generating the hologram did not have the programming to allow it to sit, except perhaps by generating its own chair, which it did not do. Thorpe remarked, "I presume that your conversation with Bojek was enlightening."

"He has claimed that the probe ship ran out of fuel and was adrift."

"That is correct," Thorpe replied. "That's how we found it."

"And yet he abandoned it, and now he is expecting the government to expend resources to retrieve the ship that he abandoned. That would be a matter for the magistrate to decide. Nevertheless, it has come to my attention that the sentence he was assigned is complete, and thus he has the right to be reintegrated with his body."

Thorpe and the other officers exchanged glances, as they were all pretty sure that the physical body of Bojek no longer existed, but Tolbak was hard-pressed to believe that all that much time had passed and that the society on Reioshek no longer existed. He did ask, "We did manage to transfer his essence from the probe ship to our computer, so we can do the interface, but where should we redirect the data stream?"

“There are receiver stations on the surface, at various locations. We can connect with one and do the transfer through that. The protocols are the same as on the probe ship, so if you could interface with that, you should be able to interface with the ground station too.”

Thorpe, along with the others, were thinking that was possible, because they already knew that at least one system was still running on this planet. It was possible that there could be others, and it was possible that some kind of artificial-intelligence society may still exist on the planet, hidden from view. “Very well,” the captain said. “My tactical officer and chief engineer will direct you to one of the engineering labs, and we can find one of your ground stations and link to it. When we do so, we can transfer the essence of Bojek.”

“That is acceptable.”

Moments later, the three were in one of the engineering labs. They had a sensor display of what Tolbak said was the capital city for the planet, which was also the location that the away team had headed, and which was the location that they were likely still at, though hidden somehow by technology that still functioned even after all of those years. Perhaps it has been built in a robust manner and powered by zero-point energy modules and so was still functional. With that in mind, Dewuchun knew, other technology could still exist. The sensor display indicated that the city was largely in ruins, but since it had such massive infrastructure, not even more than forty millennia were not enough for the vegetation to reclaim it. However, Tolbak had no knowledge on how to interpret the data displayed on the screen, but he did recognize the outlines of the coast and rivers and the major transportation corridors, which still existed, and that allowed him to locate the receiver stations. He had Vorwoorts use a locator to guide him to the desired point, saying, “It is there.”

Dewuchun asked, “Can you give us what we need to know to access it?” Tolbak provided the frequency and the modulation and the code necessary to access it, but when Dewuchun attempted to contact the receiver, he got no response. Several more minutes were spent fine-tuning the information and trying again, but the result was the same. They got no response. Tolbak had the information on two other receivers, so they tried them and had the same lack of response.

“I do not understand this,” the Reioshekian hologram said. “We have had communications issues at the detention centre, and now the receiver stations are not responding.”

Dewuchun then stated the obvious, “The most likely explanation is that the receiver stations are no longer functional because the surface of the planet has been destroyed.”

“That is not correct,” Tolbak replied.

“But it is. Our own sensors indicate that there are no biological Reioshekians on the surface.”

“Then your sensors are faulty and providing you with false information. The current population of our planet is five point two billion people. They do not

just vanish.”

Vorwoorts did say, with a shrug, “This is pointless.”

Dewuchun added, “Nevertheless, the receivers on the surface are not functioning, or at least not responding to our signals.”

“Perhaps your signals are not compatible with our systems. We might need to head to the surface to get an on-site look at the equipment.”

Dewuchun was thinking that might be a good idea because then the hologram could see with its eyes—or the technological system in the self-contained emitter that functioned in that role—the condition of the surface of the planet. He could display high-resolution images of the ruins on the surface, but had the feeling that Tolbak would not believe what he was shown. His programming simply could not accept that so much time could pass and he had no recollection of it or no data that showed that it happened.

On the surface, Bayanhong and the others were getting restless. DeWillis wanted to see what was powering this facility and if there was a way to shut it down, while Brigson simply wanted to get back to the ship because she was hungry and this mission was lasting longer than they had anticipated. Bayanhong approached the hologram that she had talked to earlier, and which had assumed a frozen state when she asked it a question it could not answer. She was thinking that if they were all frozen, perhaps a glitch in ancient programming and circuitry that was giving out over so many centuries, the away team could leave this area and explore more of this structure, and find and disable the power system.

She approached the hologram, and asked it a question, “Are you still having communications issues?”

“That is correct,” the hologram said, and it was suddenly animated again. That was not the outcome that Bayanhong wanted, and the others could see the disappointment on her face, which was alongside their own disappointment.

“So you are unable to contact a magistrate to determine our guilt or innocence?”

“We have not been able to do that yet.”

“Is the magistrate a biological being or a hologram, the visible manifestation of a computer intelligence?”

“The magistrates are biological beings.”

“Then your problem is that there are none.”

“You have said that before, but there is no indication that that statement is true. I am sure that our communication difficulties will soon be resolved.”

Bayanhong then said, “I have an idea. One of the members in my away team is an engineer. Perhaps if he can see your actual systems, he might be able to determine what is wrong and perhaps make the necessary repairs.”

“That is not permitted.”

The first officer did look back at DeWillis, and had this look on her face that said, “I tried.”

\* \* \*

Dewuchun and Vorwoorts met Thorpe in the ready room, with Tolbak kept off of the bridge. Vorwoorts said, “The hologram simply refuses to see what is in front of him. I can understand that he might find it difficult to accept that so much time has passed that he is unaware of, but he seems unable to comprehend that his world is ruins now, but he keeps thinking that it is intact and that they are having technical problems.”

Thorpe replied, “Being essentially a computer intelligence means he cannot go beyond the programming.”

“But,” Dewuchun added, as he stood by the ready room windows, “perhaps if he confronts overwhelming evidence that the society here is dead, he might somehow understand what has happened and allow the away team to go free. He suggested that we go to the surface and inspect the receiver stations, none of which are actually working.”

“That’s a good idea, but you’re not beaming down, even with the holographic emitter. There’s the chance that the transporter beam might be snatched again. We will use a shuttle instead, and make sure that the shields are raised.”

“Of course.”

Tolbak was alone in the conference lounge, but the controls and screens were all turned off, and the programming was not advanced enough to convince the entity to somehow learn more about this ship and its people and its purpose in being here. He was not programmed for that, and did not have the programming to think beyond his mission and purpose. He simply waited for someone to come and direct him to what was next, as he was here to complete a mission, but it was a difficult one that offered contradictions that he could not resolve. Part of him knew that Bojek should be returned to the surface and reintegrated with his body, because that was the normal procedure in cases such as this, but another part told him the physical body no longer existed—and that was not because he was suddenly understanding that fifty one thousand, six hundred and nineteen *va’ikhba* had passed since the probe ship was launched.

The doors to the room opened and security chief Sal Hakamura entered the room. He said, “The captain has approved of the mission to the surface of the planet, so you will accompany us.”

“Understood,” Tolbak replied. “I have the coordinates for one of the ground receiving stations so that we can use your matter teleportation system to head there, but I will need to shut down the holographic image for that.”

“We’re not using the transporter,” Hakamura replied. “We’ll be taking a shuttle.”

“Why?”

“Captain’s orders.”

Hakamura and Tolbak were joined by Dewuchun in the turbolift, and they stood there in silence for the rather long trip as the lift took them to the shuttlebay at the rear of the saucer section of the ship. Again, the Reioshekian

was getting the impression that this was a rather large ship. By the time they got to the shuttlebay, one of the type-four shuttles had been fueled and prepared and was sitting on the pad ready for launch. The three climbed on board, with Hakamura taking the pilot's seat and Dewuchun the co-pilot's seat. They ran through the prelaunch checklist, bringing up the shuttle systems to operational status. Hakamura did look back at Tolbak, who was standing at the rear of the cockpit section, despite the fact that two empty seats were nearby. He did say, "You can sit down."

"This self-contained holographic emitter does not have a seated mode."

"Oh," the security chief said, and then to Dewuchun, in Odonien, he said, "I guess if he's a hologram, he wouldn't get tired by remaining standing." The Odonan just nodded.

The forcefield over the shuttlebay doors came on, and the doors opened to the star-speckled blackness above. Hakamura had the controls and guided the shuttle through the barrier field, the intersecting fields a ring of light passing over the shuttle as it rose. Once it was clear of the shuttlebay entrance—and Tolbak did get another impression of the size of the *Athena* as the shuttle moved over the starship—Hakamura turned the shuttle towards the planet. The starship was in a powered geostationary orbit over the location of the planetary capital, and it was currently late afternoon there. From two hundred kilometres up, the planet looked benign and even inviting, the usual lush greens of the land masses, mixed in with some darker and more brown areas, and the deep blues of the oceans and seas. On top that were the whirls and bands of spots of the scattered clouds. From this height, this did not look like a ruined world.

Then the small ship re-entered the atmosphere, the shields configured for re-entry, and as the shuttle slowed, the flares of light from the air heating as it hit the shields obscured their view. As the brightness of re-entry faded, they passed through some cloud bands before emerging below them. Ahead, they could see what was left of the capital city of Reioshek, and it was not much. They could see what looked like elevated highways or other transportation corridors, some of which had collapsed, and others showed a lot of wear. They saw some large structures of uncertain purpose, and the ruins of collapsed buildings. Some buildings did remain, but they looked stripped, like they were just hulks of buildings that once had grandeur. The ground around them was filled with rubble and debris, making travel on the ground virtually impossible. In some places, groves of trees had appeared, and elsewhere, other plants did poke through the rubble. However, much of the ruins were exposed and degraded by erosion, discoloured and corroded and with puddles of brackish water. Sometimes, it was hard to tell if they were looking at the decaying remains of a now-ancient city or some sort of bizarre landscape with rather blocky features.

While Hakamura was flying, directing the shuttle to where Tolbak said was a receiver station, Dewuchun was running sensor routines, looking for possible power sources and anything that might suggest some sort of sensor-blocking field. He was pretty sure that the away team was in this general location, but

hidden. However, he was detecting nothing suspicious and had to admit that Reioshekian technology was advanced and pretty good, even in its current state. This species had been pretty advanced in their heyday, but something did happen to them, and he was wondering what that might have been.

Tolbak said, "The receiving station is here."

Hakamura was seeing another open and flat area, something that looked like a landing field, though now it was cracked and eroded, with trees and other plants growing through the cracks, and some of the concrete-like material had been heaved and shifted to odd angles. He saw nothing that looked like a radio-telescope antenna or something similar, but there was a lot of unrecognizable and rusted wreckage on the ground. Dewuchun said, "Can you find a place to land here?"

"I'm trying," Hakamura replied, "but this area might've been a landing field once, but it isn't anymore." However, after a few minutes of flying around, he found a sufficiently large and intact and level section of the landing field that he could land the shuttle. "This is it," the security chief replied. He guided the shuttle down to the ground and powered down the system. So far, they had not been snatched by whatever had taken the away team, but they decided to take no chances. Both officers were wearing the forcefield belts, and so turned them on, an action that Tolbak either did not notice or did not question. Afterall, he knew little of Starfleet protocol, or in this situation, the protocol of *Athena* officers with access to Odonan forcefield belts. Once the belts were activated, Hakamura shut down the shields on the shuttle.

The hatch opened and they stepped out. Hakamura said to Dewuchun, "There's not much here."

"Ruins as far as the eye can see."

Tolbak, however, said, "The receiver station is this way. We can access the control room." He stepped out of the shuttle and walked over the rubble strewn field as if there was nothing there. He was oblivious to what was around him. He headed towards what looked like just another piece of rubble on this rubble-strewn field, though it was a larger piece of rubble than most.

Hakamura remarked, "Can a computer program be delusional?"

"I do not know," Dewuchun answered. "He is limited by his programming."

Tolbak approached the debris, which looked like it might have been part of a building once, but whatever it was, it had collapsed upon itself with just a wall remaining, and that wall was covered with water stains and other discolouring and dust and pebbles. Still, the Reioshekian hologram was tapping on the wall for some reason. Dewuchun and Hakamura approached, and as Tolbak sensed their presence, he turned to face them, and explained, "There appears to be a malfunction here. The power appears to be out and I cannot access the control function. We have been having these problems lately, communications failures, power and energy issues. I have no idea when they will be resolved, but I am sure that they are working on them."

Hakamura stepped forward, saying, "They will never be resolved. There's no entrance there, just the ruins of a wall and behind it, the remains of a building that has caved in."

"That is not the situation at all," Tolbak replied.

"But it is."

Dewuchun, switching to Odonien so that Hakamura could understand him and the hologram could not, "I think that Tolbak's problem is not that he cannot see, but he is programmed to respond to what he believes is here, what he has been programmed to know is here. I don't know why the Reioshekians programmed their holograms that way, but I think that's the issue."

"And yet he must have some kind of visual system," Hakamura replied.

"That's possible."

"Afterall, he moved around on the ship without any problem, and there's no way he had preloaded data on *that*."

"Of course."

Hakamura switched back to English, aware that Tolbak had realized he could no longer understand the two officers and so was looking at them. The security chief started, "I believe that there is a problem here. You are a hologram, and so you do not have eyes as a biological lifeform would understand them. I see in your Reioshekian appearance that your biological form has eyes, but your self-contained holographic emitter must have some sort of visual system."

"That is correct."

"But when you're here, on your planet, you are not seeing what's really there. You are relying on, basically, your memory, your programming, on what is here. Therefore, you cannot see what is really around you because your programming is overriding your visual system."

"I see you and your fellow officer. That would not be in my memory."

"And so you have visual sensors that can supply visual data when necessary. When you were on the *Athena*, your visual sensors would have been fully active since you would have no data on our ship. Thus, you are capable of seeing everything around you, with no preconceived data on what you should see."

"That is correct."

"So I am asking you now, to switch on that system, and have the visual sensors override everything you conceive to be here. Even though this would be a known location to you, do it anyway, as a test, as an exercise to the ability of the equipment."

After a pause, Tolbak said, "Very well." For a moment, he was motionless, as he was doing something to his programming to change to a full visual mode.

"What do you see?"

The Reioshekian turned around slowly, taking in a full circle. "This is... unexpected."

Hakamura repeated the question, "What do you see?"

"I see... you and your fellow officer, and I see the shuttle, and I see what I

do not expect. I do not see the city or the receiver array, but I see ruins everywhere, debris and wreckage and nothing that I expect to see. I see that the access to the receiver control room is blocked by debris and that the control panel has corroded to uselessness. Is this... what is really here?"

"It is," Hakamura answered.

"How long has it been this way?"

"For more than fifty thousand *va'ikhba*."

"How widespread is this?"

"Planetwide. Your entire planet is like this. Your society is gone, and has been gone for a long time, or at least the biological individuals are gone."

"Then how come I am still here?"

"You were likely in suspended animation, with some sort of computer system still functioning, perhaps using zero-point energy modules similar to what's in your mobile holographic emitter, and that monitored space and detected our approach and awoke you, or perhaps you were woken when the first away team beamed down. You would have no concept of the passage of years."

Tolbak did remark, "This would explain our problems. Our communications failed because there was no one to answer our comm calls. There is no magistrate to judge the crimes of your people that came to the planet without authorization. It is hard to believe that it is gone, and has been for so long. I have... no idea how to proceed."

"Releasing the away team would be a start," Dewuchun remarked. "Surely you can't argue that coming to this dead world is trespassing without authority. There's no authority here."

Tolbak had no immediate answer, and Dewuchun was thinking that perhaps the artificial lifeform really could not go beyond its programming for core matters. The Rheoshekian did add, "There is no procedure for handling those who are facing charges when there is no magistrate to try them. A conundrum in the rules has resulted."

"Let them go," the engineer remarked. "They committed no crime. They were unable to get authorization to come to the planet because there is no entity capable of issuing such authorizations. Are you capable of giving such authorizations?"

"No," Tolbak replied. "I can see the logical argument in that if the personnel from your vessel attempted to seek authorization, their communications would have failed just as ours had, but your personnel would no doubt know why their communications failed."

"Because there is no authority here."

Then Tolbak looked at the two *Athena* officers and said, "We must return to your ship so that I can use the teleportation device to return to my start location, unless this shuttle contains the teleportation device."

"It does not," Dewuchun remarked. The three returned to the shuttle, and Hakamura quickly got it off of the ground and headed back to the ship.

From the *Athena*, they could see that the shuttle was returning, so

Thorpe had it hailed. "Dewuchun here."

"What's the status? What happened there?" Thorpe asked.

"Tolbak started to see what's really there instead of what he's programmed to see. We're returning to the ship?"

"And the status of the away team?"

"As of now, it's like Tolbak can't go beyond his programming. He has this sort of conflict, and does not know what the correct procedure is. He's requesting that we return to the ship and have him beamed back down to the planet from where he beamed up, perhaps so that he can connect with *something* and resolve this situation."

"Very well," the captain replied. "Return to the ship." Both Hakamura and Dewuchun turned and glanced at each other, and they had the same thought: the captain had some plan on his mind

Shortly thereafter, the shuttle returned to the ship. Thorpe was on the hangar deck to meet those on the shuttle once it landed, and he approached the Reioshekian hologram. "I understand that you have been able to determine that what we said about your planet is true," he stated.

"Unfortunately," Tolbak replied. "I do not know how it happened, but when I reset the sensors in the self-contained emitter, I was able to determine that the current condition of the planet did not match my expectations, and that would explain the problems that we have had."

"So the away team will be released?"

"That is... not my decision to make. Unfortunately, it appears that there is no one who would be in the position to make the decision."

"In other words, if you release them, there are no repercussions for you."

"That is... possible. Anyway, I need to return to the facility."

"Very well, we'll beam you back to the surface." Dewuchun had already left the hangar deck, while Hakamura accompanied Thorpe and Tolbak. Once the three had left the hangar deck, another vessel that was sitting there, the run-about *Styx*, lifted off and headed through the barrier field and into space. It hovered close to the *Athena* before engaging its cloaking device. On board was T'Kor, and she was the mission commander. The assistant chief of security, Pa'o Ha'iakwa, was on board, as was another engineer, William Drell.

In the transporter room, Tolbak stepped onto the platform, and then he transformed into some sort of unidentifiable configuration that when it disappeared, left the cylinder containing the self-contained holographic emitter on the platform. Thorpe asked Wilder, "Do you have the coordinates?"

Even though he was just the emitter, Tolbak still had the voice. He said, "Return me to the coordinates that you used to bring me here."

"Very well," Wilder replied, calling up that information and then setting the transport sequence.

"Energize."

Wilder ran through the procedure and soon the cylinder dematerialized and was gone. Thorpe then added, "Relay those coordinates to the *Styx*."

Wilder asked, “Do you really think that would lead them to the missing away team?”

“It will lead them to something,” Thorpe replied. “Tolbak might release the away team, or perhaps not. He seems conflicted, and since he truly is nothing more than computer programming, he could be like one of those old-style programs that goes into a loop with no way to break out of it.”

“Of course.”

Because the *Styx* was travelling under cloak, it had to slow down before it entered the atmosphere so that the frictional heat generated by re-entry would not be visible. The ship once it was low enough in the atmosphere, headed to the coordinates that had been transmitted from the ship. It was no surprise to T’Kor that the coordinates were located in the sprawling ruins of the capital city, but they were also underground, and she was worried that that location could be hidden by a sensor-blocking fields. Indeed, as they got close, they could not scan the location that the coordinates pointed to.

“Why am I not surprised,” Ha’iakwa remarked.

“But we’re prepared for that,” Drell added. In the rear of the runabout was a probe that the engineering department had put together, and it was the same size and shape as the self-contained holographic emitter. They would do a blind transport and beam it to the same coordinates, and it would automatically record data, and a minute later, the ship would beam it back. He went to the rear and got the probe, and set it up on the transporter platform on the *Styx*.

“That assumes that once on the surface, Tolbak would continue to operate out of the mobile emitter.”

“That seems logical,” T’Kor replied.

“And if not, then the transport is blocked. We can hope that it’s not.”

Moments later, Drell had the transporter ready, and he set it for a blind transport, which meant that the sensors could not confirm that the object could be transported there. That had the usual warning indicators come on, but the engineer bypassed them, and activated the transporter. It cycled through the process and did not fault, so the probe did rematerialize. A minute later, he beamed it back, and it came back intact.

“What do you have?” Ha’iakwa asked.

Drell could see the visual image, and replied, “It’s like a storage facility for those emitters, racks of them, perhaps attached to power, zero-point energy emitters. Beyond that, I can’t say. More than likely, Tolbak moved himself—or his emitter—to a docking station and then transmitted his essence through a circuit to where the away team is.”

“Is there any possibility of learning where that circuit would lead to?” T’Kor asked.

“Given a lot of time, perhaps, like we deciphered systems on the probe ship, but it’s not safe to beam down to that location because I could not beam you back. The *Styx* transporter doesn’t do zone transports.”

Looking at the image, the Vulcan intelligence officer asked, "Can you beam up one of those self-contained emitters?"

"Perhaps."

"We could study how they work. I am aware that the ship copied Tolbak's emitter when he beamed onto the *Athena*, but having an authentic one would be useful, if only so that Bojek could have some mobility."

Drell answered, "That should be possible." The information that the probe had gathered allowed him to compute the coordinates for one of the devices, and when he entered that into the transporter and activated the system, one of those cylinders appeared on the platform. "I got it."

"We'll return to the *Athena* then," T'Kor ordered.

Tolbak returned to the detention centre, and conferred with the other holograms. At least Bayanhong took that to be conferring, as they were communicating electronically, she was sure, and no doubt he was passing on information that he had acquired on the ship. She just hoped that it was useful information. Tolbak walked along the length of cryochambers on this level, looking at them. According to his programming, they were filled with the prisoners serving their virtual sentences, their bodies held in cryogenic suspension. That was what the programming was telling him to see, but when he switched to the real view, he saw that the chambers were empty and had stopped working, with no indication when that happened, except that it was a long time ago. After a couple of minutes of that sort of wandering and conferring, the other holograms switched off, leaving just Tolbak.

Now Bayanhong approached him, and asked, "You were on the *Athena*?"

"I was," the hologram answered.

"And you met with Bojek, and saw the state of your world?"

"In time, I was convinced on what I was seeing, even though I found it impossible to contemplate how it happened, or when it happened. Perhaps it was in the time frame that you suggested. I do not know. It also explains why communications with outside authorities failed."

"Because they do not exist?" the first officer asked.

"That is the most likely explanation. Now, I see that the cryochambers here, which were supposed to contain the prisoners in cryogenic suspension, are empty and the chambers themselves no longer function."

"So we are free to go? How can we trespass on an empty world?"

Tolbak froze for a moment or so, a look that DeWillis was taking to indicate that the computer code that operated him was in conflict again. Then he said, "The conundrum here is that there is no magistrate here to determine guilt or innocence, and no means to carry out any sentence that is issued. Nothing is possible then. As I was told on the ship, if you are released, despite violating a law that I thought was still in effect, there would be no repercussions on me."

"That is true. There is no one on this planet to hold you to account. As far as we can tell, you are the only functioning sentience on this planet." She said

that, but suspected that if this one was held in a sort of computer hibernation until needed, there were probably others too.

“That is unfortunate.” After a pause, Tolbak added, “You are free to return to your ship.”

“Understood.” To see if the Reioshekian was true to his word, the first officer tapped her commbadge and said, “Bayanhong to the *Athena*, do you read?”

“Affirmative,” Vorwoorts replied, sounding just a bit excited. “You just appeared on the sensors.”

“Beam us up,” Bayanhong ordered, before Tolbak changed his central processing unit mind, and the rest of the away team took that as an instruction to get close to the first officer.

“Right away.” A few seconds later, Bayanhong, Brigson, Chan and DeWillis disappeared into the transporter beam, leaving Talbok standing there by himself, at least until he deactivated the hologram and returned his essence to the hibernation mode in the computer. His last thought was wondering if he would ever be awoken again—or if he would want to be.

On the *Athena*, there was one last issue.

The self-contained holographic emitter that Drell had beamed onto the *Styx* was now set up in the engineering lab, and it was connected to the isolated computer memory units that Bojek had been occupying and using in his holodeck simulation. Using the information that had been learned when transferring the Reioshekian essence from the probe ship to that isolated holodeck memory unit, the engineers knew how to transfer him back to the mobile emitter. Quintollez had already contacted him and informed him what was going to happen and that he had to end his holodeck simulation. Bojek, sensing no other alternative, agreed to that. Once the simulation ended, the data stream that was his essence was transferred to the mobile emitter. The only issue that they had was whether or not Bojek knew how to operate the self-contained emitter, because none of the engineers did.

Bayanhong was in the engineering lab, along with Thorpe and Dewuchun. She asked, “What are we going to do with him?”

“I’m not sure,” Thorpe remarked. “The simplest thing to do is to delete the data. Afterall, his physical body died millennia ago. His society is also dead.”

Dewuchun added, “It’s possible that there could be pockets of machine intelligence still operating on the planet, because we did experience one in action. There could be others.”

“So Bojek would have to spend whatever time he has on the surface, trying to learn what happened to the planet, his society? That could be hard.”

Bayanhong said, “Perhaps we should let Bojek decide.”

“If he can activate the holographic emitter,” Dewuchun said.

A couple of minutes later, the Reioshekian was able to do that. A sort of holographic image appeared around the emitter, and this transformed into the recognizable shape of Bojek, who had the same appearance that he had when they

saw him as a hologram on the probe ship and again in the holodeck. "This is amazing," he finally said. "It's basically the same as the emitter system on the probe ship, but it's internal, and I have additional sensor capabilities. I can actually see as I was meant to see."

Dewuchun did remark, "The Reioshekian holographic technology is remarkable."

Bojek continued, "Does this mean that I can move around the ship, at least to non-restricted areas, and I am no longer confined to the holodeck?"

"Essentially, yes," Thorpe remarked. "But we have a problem."

Bojek knew what the problem was as well. "What to do with me?"

"That."

"My world is dead. My biological form has long decayed to dust and remains, and the woman I loved and which caused this problem is as departed as the rest of them. I saw the images of what was left of the planet, the ruins and the like. I heard speculation that perhaps some machine intelligence exists on the planet, but that's not me. That would be intelligences designed for use in machines and adapted to it. That's not me. I do not think I can continue with that kind of existence."

"There are not many alternatives."

"Could I not stay on the ship with you, as you travel to your home? You could say that I am the last Reioshekian, in a sense. Could I not see where you live and how you live, knowing that there's nothing left for me here? Being like I am, I do not believe I am any danger to your crew, and since the emitter has a zero-point energy emitter, I consume no resources on the ship."

Dewuchun remarked, "This is a rather unique lifeform, not biological, not an android, but something different."

Thorpe knew that it would not be proper to strand the last soul of Reioshek on the dead and uncertain world, because even he could recognize that was no kind of life for someone like Bojek. In one sense, perhaps, he was a refugee, a survivor from a now-dead world, and it was not Federation policy to leave such refugees behind. There were certain procedures to follow. "Very well, you can stay," the captain remarked.

"Thank you, captain. After what I had all learned, I appreciate the chance to stay on this ship and head to your Federation. It is a new life for me."

"Of course." The captain tapped his commbadge and said, "Thorpe to the bridge."

"Bridge here," came the response from T'Kor, who had the conn.

"Break orbit and resume our course for home."

"Understood, sir..."