

## THE HIDING GAME

*“Captain’s log, stardate 56,351.7. We remain here at Hollos, while waiting further instructions from Starfleet Command on what we should be doing next. We have taken the opportunity to look around the planet, and perhaps learn more about the time travel technology that we found here. The planet is inert now, as the subspace shunt has been destroyed. The engineers have started to disassemble the device to try to learn its secrets. I keep thinking of other matters.”*

Captain Leonard Thorpe was in his ready room, adjacent to the bridge of the *Athena*, when he heard the buzzer sound. Almost by instinct, he said, “Come.”

The door opened and his first officer, Julia Bayanhong, entered the room. “Sir?”

“Are you here to report that Starfleet has finally sent instructions for us?”

“No. Commander Dewuchun is requesting permission to bring on board the ship some alien technology recovered from the time core. He believes that this would be the key technology that creates the dimensional inversion that allowed time travel.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“That’s what we don’t know. Of course, right now, it has no power. The technology is quite complicated, and quite advanced, and requires work with equipment on the ship.”

“Very well, he can bring it to the ship, but he’ll need authorization before he applies any power to it.”

“Understood,” Bayanhong said. She was prepared to leave the ready room and inform their Odonan engineer that the captain was giving his authorization to the request. However, she was sensing that the captain was not giving his full attention to what she had just said. “Is... something bothering you, captain?”

“Well,” Thorpe said, sitting back in his chair. “I was thinking of the Yudens, and the idea that Captain Rice and the crew of the *Clements* are the origin of that race.”

“That seems likely, since you did let them go.”

“I know that.”

“And you’re worried about the ramifications from Starfleet?”

Looking up, Thorpe answered, “I don’t believe that Starfleet gave me authorization to let them go.”

“But not letting them go changed history. Letting them go was how history was meant to play out.”

“But I still can’t get the idea out of my mind that without the Yudens, there’d be no Arosians, or that they would not have been the threat that they were.”

“There’s no way to know that, and besides, not having the Arosians would produce a major change in history. History was meant to play out the way it has... even if it seems that sometimes, it plays out in a non-linear fashion.”

“I still think we need to learn more about the Yudens. I’m sure that Starfleet will have many questions about them, and wonder how a Starfleet crew could go so far back in time that they formed what became a civilization in its own right. Are they still around?”

“The Arosians we encountered seemed to believe that they were, but we have no idea where they could be.”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

“What?” Bayanhong remarked, with some surprise.

“Think about it, Julia. Edmund Rice would have made the decision to go back in time, so far back that he was thinking about the origins of the Arosian civilization. That’s a long way back. Where was he going to go? I don’t believe that he would’ve picked a planet at random. He would have used information available to him to find a planet where he could go with his crew.” By this time, Bayanhong had come over to where Thorpe was sitting, and saw a star map on the terminal screen he was looking at. “That same information is available to us.”

“So you’re trying to think... like Captain Rice would’ve thought?”

“Century-old Starfleet mapping probes, scanning star systems, looking for planets, class-M planets perhaps with no life on them, or life that no longer was. He would’ve had access to the information.”

“Assuming that the Yudens are still around, wouldn’t the probes have found... them?”

“Or some evidence of their existence, yes. Now, another bit of information that they would have had would be the extent of the Arosian Empire, so they would’ve picked a planet that was relatively close to their space but never within it.”

“But yet the Arosians and the Yudens did conflict.”

“The Arosians never found the Yuden homeworld,” Thorpe remarked.

“And you’re saying that you have?”

“I have one advantage that the Arosians did not have. The Arosians did not launch mapping probes. Remember, they destroyed any civilization that found out about them, so they were not going to broadcast their presence

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by sending out those probes. Therefore, they would not find the Yuden homeworld unless the Yudens did something that would draw attention to themselves.”

“And the descendants of Captain Rice and his crew would be aware of that, and would do everything possible not to bring attention to the planet he picked.”

“Exactly,” Thorpe replied.

The first officer asked, “You found such a planet?”

“There is one planet that matches all the criteria. It’s in the database, and there are indications of advanced life, but that life is emitting no non-natural subetheromagnetic radiation. I had Grace conduct a scan of subetheromagnetic radiation, and that planet is still dark.”

“That doesn’t mean that is the Yuden homeworld,” Bayanhong replied.

“No,” Thorpe answered. “It’s the most probable location. It’s the only planet that matches the criteria, near enough to Arosian space but never in it, the data on it is available to us now, and there are signs of an advanced civilization without non-natural subetheromagnetic signals. It may not be the Yuden homeworld, but it’s the most likely location.”

“And you’re thinking of going there?”

“Starfleet will want answers.”

“And you want to avoid facing Starfleet, and possible accusations that you let the *Clements* go, without those answers?”

“Well, there’s that too.”

\* \* \*

Captain Thorpe was in one of the engineering labs, and he saw a lot of equipment and a lot of machinery or ... whatever lying about. It seemed to have a quite a volume, and quite a lot of components considering what was scattered on the various tables and lab counters. Several of the other engineers were working on it, but his Odonan chief engineer, Rodall Dewuchun, was there too.

Thorpe asked, “This is it, the Brusbarikan time core?”

“Part of it,” Dewuchun answered, without really looking up. He was analyzing some of the technology, including using an electron microscope to see some of the smallest components. “This is the primary control unit and the field inverter itself.”

“So... it might be possible to reverse-engineer this?”

“I don’t know what use it would be, because this is a different sort of time machine. The main component, the column and the vehicle within, is still on the planet, and we’ll probably leave them there. This is not exactly technology we want to leave behind, though.”

“It’s a dimensional inverter?”

“You could use that phrase. The basic idea is that it takes one of the three dimensions and swaps it with the fourth one, time. Now, the vehicle within the column can basically “travel” along a dimension, and that corresponds to time. At the end of the journey, the dimensions revert to their previous forms, but the vehicle is now basically in a different time, like a regular vehicle could be in a different spatial location after a journey.”

“Hard to mentally grasp,” Thorpe admitted.

“I know. The amazing thing about this technology is that it was powered for the entire time it was operational. This only works if the system is powered and running uninterrupted through the whole time, which is rather incredible. Of course, there was a lot of nanotechnology maintaining it and a computer system virtually at AI level. That’s the reason we don’t want to re-power this device now, because we have no idea how the maintenance technology will react.”

“So, there’s no indication why the Brusbankans developed this technology?”

“No. They could build it and hope that it was maintained, so that they could visit their future, for what purpose I don’t know and we’ll probably never know. Technology of this kind could be rather destabilizing on a civilization. It’s one thing to visit the past and learn what came before, but to learn what is to come, by hoping technology you set up will survive, is rather different. The thing is, the people who built it would know how long it lasted pretty well right away.”

“And that would make them curious on why it ended?”

“Probably, but then again, it was the Arosians who made the most of this, not the Brusbankans, as far as we know.”

“I see,” Thorpe remarked. After a slight pause, the captain added, “As fascinating as this is, this is not why I’ve come here. We have to contemplate what we’re to do next.”

“Rumour going around is that our mission could be to learn more about the Yudens.”

“Yes. What I need is all the information that is available on the Yudens from the Arosian battlesphere.”

“You want me to request the information?” Dewuchun answered, knowing that the Arosian battlesphere, a very large weapon of war and the last known functioning Arosian technology, was in Odonan hands. It was not programmed to self-destruct like all other known items of Arosian technology and infrastructure, and the computer storage units on the battlesphere contained a large amount of data on Arosian history, customs and sociology and technology and more. Most of it remained classified, and the Odonans shared it reluctantly, and usually only when some new aspect of the Arosian presence in this space was uncovered.

“Make the attempt.”

“And state what we think are the origins of the Yudens?”

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“If that will convince them to release the information.”

“Assuming that they believe it.”

“Assuming that they don’t already *know*, and that’s why they’re not releasing the information, because that would’ve led to too many questions.” Thorpe wondered about those Odonan researchers who accessed that information, encountered information on the Yudens and could not believe what the information on the xenotype was telling them. They could have had questions on their own, or perhaps there was hints within the data that could have revealed the information that would have answered their questions.

“That’s possible, of course. Who knows what secrets the Arosians had, and what the information on the battlesphere reveals about them.”

“Yes,” Thorpe answered.

“I’ll make the attempt, but that could take time, and not just because of the communications delays given our distance from the Odonan Empire.”

“I understand.”

The *Athena* departed Hollos, leaving behind the bulky components of the Brusbarkan time core, and taking with them the more important central components. Although Thorpe did not receive specific clearance to search for the Yudens and learn more about them, he also had no specific orders otherwise. The ship travelled to a planet that they had unofficially named “Yuden Prime,” without knowing what Captain Rice and his crew had named it. “I could imagine that they would call it Clements,” tactical officer Henrietta Vorwoorts said on the bridge.

Security chief Sal Hakamura added, “That would make me wonder how long the ship survived, and how long they could’ve kept it going without the support of Starfleet maintenance.”

“Hard to say, I guess,” science officer Grace Brigson replied. “They clearly had a lot of work to do, and once they established their colony, it would’ve regressed technologically, and their origins might even be semi-mythical to the future generations. They basically would’ve started over.”

For now, the name was Yuden Prime, and after a twelve-day journey at high speeds, the ship arrived at that planet. Thorpe had the *Athena* travel at normal warp and not using the chronometric displacement mode, so that they could receive the transmission from the Odonans, assuming that they were willing to release the information that they had taken from the Arosian battlesphere concerning the Yudens. However, as the ship made its final approach to Yuden Prime, they had not received any information.

“Coming out of warp now,” Sanjay Indesakar, the pilot, reported from the flight control station. He worked the controls to bring the ship out of warp and then use subspace factorization to slow them down and allow for orbital insertion. The planet soon appeared on the viewscreen, and it was revealed as a normal class-M planet, showing the usual pattern of land and sea with the white bands of the clouds mixed in.

Thorpe asked, “Anything in orbit?”

“Negative,” Brigson replied. “Nothing detected. Also detecting no power sources or electromagnetic emissions.” From their approach angle, about a quarter of the planet was showing the night side, and it was completely dark. None of the lights of cities, such a feature of Earth and the other planets of advanced, space-travelling races, were visible on this planet. Thorpe and the others were getting the immediate feeling that this might not have been where Captain Rice brought the *Clements* tens of thousands of years ago.

Thorpe did order, “Once we’re in orbit, do the usual powered orbit and comprehensive scans.”

“Of course,” Brigson replied.

Bayanhong, in the seat to the right of the captain, said, “This doesn’t look like the planet, does it?”

“Perhaps,” the captain replied, “but it’s also possible that the Yudens no longer exist. I know about our experience in the altered timeline, but even so, it’s hard to know for sure if they are still around. That’s in essence what we’re trying to find out.”

Indesakar guided the *Athena* into an orbit about two hundred and fifty kilometres above the equator, and then used the impulse engines to drive the ship around the planet far faster than they would travel in an unpowered, free-fall orbit. The ship was travelling on a circular course that just happened to have a planet in the middle of it. Brigson, with an assist from Vorwoorts at the central console, ran the usual battery of scans and data analysis, with anything important triggering alerts. A topographic map generated from the scans appeared on one of the secondary screens.

“Anything?” Thorpe asked.

“Well,” Brigson started, “there clearly was something here once. I am picking up extensive ruins, but it’s hard to tell because they’ve been abandoned for a long time, hundreds, if not thousands, of years, and nature has pretty well reclaimed the planet. Undoubtedly, scavengers have picked it over.”

“What sort of life is there now?”

“Plant life mostly,” the science officer reported, “but no animal life.”

“Is it of the Earth xenotype?”

Thorpe knew that from orbit, it would take a bit of time to determine that, since the molecular structure and the composition had to be studied, and to ensure that the information was correct, the routine sampled the plant life from more than one location and also ran several different analysis to confirm the information. Finally, Brigson reported, “It is. The xenotype here is ours.”

“So Rice and the *Clements* came here?” Bayanhong asked.

“They or their descendants. It would be hard to tell. We could get examples of the botany, identify the species and then study the rate of genetic

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change to determine how long ago the separation between our present and the Yudens' beginnings was. However, that would not tell us how long ago they settled here. We'd need to examine the ruins in more detail for that, to see if the oldest ruins correlate with the date of genetic separation."

"A major archaeological undertaking."

"Which we're not equipped to do," Brigson added, still running her hands over the console, checking readings and calling up new scans. "The only certainty is that the planet has been abandoned for a long time, and almost certainly was abandoned before our mapping probes originally detected it. We don't know when it was settled."

So, Thorpe thought as he sat there, listening to this exchange, they could continue to investigate here or attempt another location where Rice might have gone. This had been the most likely location, but it was not the only one possible. Perhaps, he was thinking, Rice had picked a less obvious destination because he suspected that at some point, Starfleet was going to come looking for him. The Yudens just could not be hidden. He decided to wait until they had completed their orbit of the planet to see if there was anything worth investigating on the planet. He watched as the map was generated, and once it was completed, he asked, "Anything that could produce immediate information?"

Brigson answered, "There's very little intact infrastructure on the planet, and most of the subterranean infrastructure in the cities has collapsed. Nature can be pretty effective in reclaiming the land, especially when it has been abandoned for a thousand years or more. The computer is still analyzing the data, and looking for the largest piece of infrastructure that is intact." Several seconds later, some information came over the displays in front of her, as she reported. "This isn't much. There is an indication of some sort of underground vault, or mining area or something."

"That's it?" asked Bayanhong.

"That's it, at least from what the computer can identify."

"Is it accessible?"

"Transporters can reach it. I doubt it has breathable air, but the fact that it still exists suggests that it is stable and safe to enter."

"Well, we're here," Thorpe said, "so we can spend a few minutes and look around..."

Four individuals rematerialized, the brilliance of the rematerialization process momentarily illuminating the otherwise totally dark environment. The four who appeared were wearing environmental suits, because the air had no oxygen in it, just carbon dioxide, nitrogen and various trace constituents. It was at near normal Earth pressure and at a temperature of twenty-three degrees. As soon as rematerialization was complete, the four turned on their helmet lights to get some illumination. The four included Sal Hakamura, who led the away team, along with assistant chief engineer Mark

DeWillis and Ensign Mark Twosen, who was a structural engineer and also specialized in understanding alien engineering. He had been working with the others on the Brusbarakan time core, but now was here to assist in identifying who built this structure, and what it was for. The fourth person in the away team was Carla Chu, the new linguist who replaced the late Gwen Anslott at the start of their current mission.

“Not much here,” DeWillis remarked, as he and the others looked around. Essentially, what they saw was a rectangular-shaped room carved out of the rock. There were some metal supports, which showed surprisingly little sign of corrosion, as well as wiring and cables, all of which were in surprisingly good condition. Whatever power generator supplied power to them was not functional, however. There were tracks on the ground, and they led through smaller openings into tunnels. There were signs that machinery was once on the floor, as there were small holes in the floor and they corresponded to holes in the ceiling. In addition, there were signs of machinery that had once been mounted here but which were removed.

“What was this place used for?” asked Hakamura.

Twosen, who had his tricorder out, remarked, “My best guess is that they used a closed-circuit transporter to remove the ore they found here. The openings show signs of structures consistent with crystal tubes that can conduct a transporter beam and frame the annular confinement beam.”

“Earth construction?”

“That’s hard to tell, since there is not much variation in this technology between races. However, given that we can’t scan any apparent openings into this mine, using a transporter seems the most likely way to get the ore out. Once they stopped using it, they removed the machinery.”

“But who built it?”

“Almost certainly the Yudens,” Chu remarked.

“What makes you say that?” asked Hakamura.

“This.” Her helmet lights illuminated a sign that had been posted on the wall, and though the words were not immediately recognizable, the fact that most of the characters were from the Roman alphabet were. The Yudens just had this particular habit of running letters together to create almost logographic words, though in some cases, the letters were somewhat recognizable.

“Can you read that?”

“I’m trying to,” Chu replied, as she scanned the sign with her tricorder, and linked with the computers on the *Athena* to process the information, or as she explained, “Trying to unscramble the letters.” A few seconds later, the information came back. “It’s Yuden.”

“What is it?”

“Basically safety instructions, to wear hard hats, boots, goggles, stay away from the machinery when it is running, not to cross certain lines, that sort of thing. The language is English, but with some modified grammar. It



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seems improbable that the grammar would change, and I'm sure that the pronunciation of words and even meanings would change."

"But not the writing?"

"It appears that as the letters in a word and the sounds used to pronounce that word became increasingly separated, the Yudens might've lost the connection and then started to run the letters together to represent the word. The *Clements* and its crew would've been an isolated community, and especially in the early days of the settlement, they would have had significant linguistic change. In our world, the overwhelming population, extensive literature and media sources tend to make language conservative as the way it has been written and spoken is considered the correct way and speakers tend to evolve towards that standard. The Yudens would've been free of that, and so the language would evolve more rapidly."

"So when we meet Yudens now, they could be speaking what they think is English and we would not be able to understand them."

"That's likely, and certain individuals have heard Yuden speech and it is unrecognizable to them."

"We would have to ignore information from altered timelines," Hakamura pointed out.

"Perhaps," Chu replied, "but if there are Yudens now, then it seems likely that they would speak somewhat similar to what has been demonstrated. I don't see how a timeline change would alter that."

"But in other words, there's not much that we can learn here."

"Looks that way," Twosen agreed.

On board the *Athena*, the bridge officers went about their tasks, with Brigson keeping an eye on the away team, but they had successfully rematerialized in the underground structure, and did not appear to be in any difficulty. She noticed that Ensign Chu had connected her tricorder to the ship computer and ran some routines, suggesting they had no difficulty contacting the ship. At the same time, Brigson was looking at some of the other data collected, to see if she could spot something that the computer in its analysis had missed. Vorwoorts continued to monitor the sensors and other systems. The alert tone from her console startled her, and others on the bridge. "What?" Thorpe asked.

"Incoming high-density communications transmission... it appears to be Odonan."

"An answer to the request of information from the Battlesphere?"

"Likely." A second later, Vorwoorts added, "Transmission received. It's a pretty small one."

"Can you open it?"

"Yes, standard encryption techniques... opening the data. There's not much here. Basically, it's a list of known and suspected Yuden worlds, and not even saying if there was any contact between the Yudens and the Aro-

sians on those worlds, or any biological data at all. The Arosians, of course, would have no idea of the origins of the Yudens, as to them, they’re just another alien race.”

“Is this planet on that list?”

“Correlating information now... the Arosian data has been linked to the Odonan star map data, but there is not a perfect correlation... linking to our star map data... no, this planet is not on the list. I can’t say whether or not the Arosians were aware of this planet for other reasons, or even if the data is complete.”

“Understood. If necessary, we can check out some of the other planets on that list.” Even before Thorpe got the words fully out, the alert tone sounded again. “More incoming information?”

“No,” Vorwoorts said, with some urgency. “We’re being scanned.”

“From where?”

“Triangulating now... it’s hard to tell... but it’s from the planet.”

Brigson was also working with the sensors, and with Indesakar adjusting the position of the ship, they were able to get a bearing on where the sensor beams were coming from. The science officer reported, “We’ve determined the location... it’s deep underground. The original scans revealed nothing there originally, or at least nothing worth detecting.”

Vorwoorts added, “It’s showing something now.”

“Sensor sweep has ended.”

“That ‘something’ is gone now.”

Bayanhong added, “An underground facility hidden from sensors?”

“Apparently so.”

A few seconds later, Brigson added, “The composition of the beam is unknown. There’s nothing similar in the recognition database. It’s not Arosian, Brusbarkan or anything remotely similar to our own.”

“Another alien presence, here at the planet after the Yudens left?” Bayanhong asked.

“Perhaps.”

Vorwoorts added, “Captain, Sal’s team has completed their work on the planet and are beaming back. They suspect that the chamber once housed a transporter used to beam ore out of the mine. A notice sign is apparently written in the Yuden writing system, and Carla has partly translated it, so it is Yuden.”

“But this new device?” Thorpe asked. “Is it Yuden?”

“Perhaps.”

“Is the location accessible by transporter?”

“Not the regular transporter, but the subspace transporter can reach it.”

“Is it safe to use it, though?” asked Bayanhong.

“It appears that the location of the sensor device is shielded, and that shielding was shut off during the scan. Analyzing the data now, it appears

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that there is some large enclosed volume there.”

Still, Thorpe knew, he could not be completely sure if it was safe to even use the subspace transporter.

“It should be safe,” Dewuchun said, as he was with the captain at the subspace transporter staging area near main engineering. “The subspace exit effect is highly density-sensitive.”

“Meaning?”

“It can only open into an environment of a lot lower density than the device itself.”

“Like air?”

“Yes. Anything else generates a power loop that exceeds the safety margin. It would require a level of energy above the threshold to actually complete the effect, and that would shut the system down.”

“I see.”

“And I’m volunteering to go,” Dewuchun added.

“Why?”

“It’s Odonan technology, and I’m the best one to operate it.”

Thorpe agreed to let his chief engineer make the trip. Dewuchun had a special sensor array placed inside the subspace transporter chamber, because the chamber itself had limited sensor capabilities. The additional device had a lot more capabilities. Once the preparations were complete, Dewuchun got into an environmental suit, in case he had to shut off the countervailing fields for better sensor access. Thorpe remained in the staging area, where Megan Wilder, the chief transporter engineer, was monitoring the system. Control was actually in the chamber itself, though she could take control of the system should an emergency arise. Through the communications link, Dewuchun reported, “Everything is ready on this end.”

“Same here,” Wilder replied.

“Power self-contained, antigravity field on.”

Thorpe asked, “Antigravity field?”

Wilder explained, “No guarantee that the chamber will rematerialize sitting on a floor.”

“Of course.”

Through the link, Dewuchun added, “Transporting now.” As he said that, Wilder noticed that the console was beeping, indicating that the density requirements of the subspace exit were not met. “Adjusting... transporting now.” Again, the system was interrupted by the same failsafe.

“This could take awhile,” Wilder remarked, looking at the captain. However, as the attempts failed, the coordinates that were being attempted were being mapped and a rough idea of the layout of the target area was being generated. “Rodall,” she finally said, “I believe I have coordinates that will work.”

“Okay, I’ll try them.” A few seconds later, once he inputted the

information from Wilder, he said, “Transporting now.” The system this time did not generate an error message, so the transport chamber simply vanished, its space here exchanged for the space there.

As far as Dewuchun could see, it was like the lights in the staging area suddenly went out. He was surrounded by blackness, and all he could see were the glowing colours on the control column. He used one of those to switch on the lights on the chamber, which illuminated the immediate vicinity. He found that he was indeed floating, about a metre above a metal grill walkway, and he was surrounded by pipes and metal beams forming a rather snug fit. He was surprised that they could find such a space to transport into. He did look around, and found that the space he was in was fairly large, but also filled with machinery, all dark and without any visible lights or control systems. He deactivated the countervail fields and switched on the enhanced sensor capabilities of the probe, and could see on the small screen as it mapped out the volume of space and the machinery within. He could identify power sources, and how the power was flowing, and it was not too hard to figure out what the machinery here was doing. Within a couple of minutes, the scans were complete and Dewuchun came to the conclusion that he could learn nothing more here. He shut off the sensor probe, turned off the lights, turned on the countervail fields and then activated the system to return to the staging area. This time, the blackness surrounding him was replaced by the familiar sight of the staging area and its brightness, which his eyes took a moment to adjust to.

Thorpe approached, saying, “That did not take long.”

“There was not much to learn there,” Dewuchun said, as he took off the helmet from his environmental suit. “What’s there is basically a subspace relay station.”

“A subspace relay?”

“Yes. There’s a geothermal tap to power it, and self-contained maintenance and repair machinery, and the device is active. It is mounted on a series of gimbals and gears that keep the antennae pointed in specific directions, even as the planet rotates on its axis and revolves around the star. It’s a lot newer than what they found in the abandoned mine.”

“Is it Yuden?”

“That I can’t say. However, the design and the focusing is meant to produce a tight beam in a specific direction.”

“So it points in the direction where the messages it relays travels?” Thorpe asked.

“Yes, and the beam is tight, meant to avoid leakage at least for several dozen light years. I’ll upload the information to the computer and we can see what lies along the path.”

It did not take long for the computer to identify the path and the possible inhabited planets that were within four hundred light years of Yuden One. The display in the staging area was showing a star map, with the

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beam path indicated and known systems with class-M planets, as determined by mapping probes, were highlighted. The first of the three planets was one that the Arosians had identified as Yuden worlds, and two that were not on that list. “Could any of them be Yuden,” Thorpe asked, “beyond the first one?”

Dewuchun added, “If the Arosians know about the first one, it likely has been destroyed, but the other two? It’s possible.”

“Then, that’s what we must check out.”

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*“Captain’s log, stardate 56,382.5. We have travelled now about four hundred light years from what we called Yuden One, to examine possible class-M worlds along the path of that communications beam we detected. The first two planets were not likely candidates for a Yuden planet, or at least an extant Yuden world. Of course, I have begun to question the idea that the Yudens exist in any number, and it is possible that they are likely gone now or perhaps small survivor groups have changed into something unrecognizable and with no idea of their history.”*

The *Athena* was moments away from the third planet in their list to examine. Bayanhong was on the bridge already when Thorpe arrived, so she shifted to the seat to the right and let the captain have his usual place. “Are we going to strike out?” she asked.

“Strike out?” Thorpe asked.

“Surely you’re familiar with baseball, three strikes and you’re out. The first planet might have been Yuden, but it’s abandoned and destroyed, and the second planet has indigenous life, though nowhere near sentient, much less warp-capable, and so it was strike two. Now we come to this planet, and does it look promising?”

“We’ll soon find out,” Thorpe remarked.

“And if it is strike three?”

“We’ll begin the long journey home. The fate of the Yudens is perhaps something left for a ship dedicated to archaeology. We’re not that.”

Bayanhong, in a bit more hushed voice, said, “And then when we do return home, you’ll have to deal with Starfleet and explain what happened to the *Clements*, and why they’re not coming back with us.”

“Sometimes,” Thorpe remarked, “history has to play out as it was meant to be. That’s the case with the *Clements*. I’m sure I could make my case. I’ve certainly had enough time to think about it.”

“And if we learn more about the fate of the *Clements*, that could help our explanation?”

“Yes.”

“But this planet does not really seem promising either,” Bayanhong

admitted.

“I know,” Thorpe said softly. He had already been informed that it was not a source of non-natural subetheromagnetic radiation, which was pretty standard for any race with an interstellar spaceflight capability. On the other hand, they might have been avoiding broadcasting non-natural subetheromagnetic radiation because that would attract the attention of the Arosians. Sensors had tracked no ships approaching this planet or leaving it. If there was a presence here, it might not be capable of interstellar travel, and even if they were Yudens or their descendants, they might not be exactly what Thorpe was looking for. There was also the matter of the Prime Directive. If the people on this planet were pre-warp but clearly of the Earth xenotype, and hence descendants of the *Clements* crew, was first contact permissible?

“Dropping out of warp now,” Indesakar said from the flight control console. The streaking star imagery settled down with the stars in the background, and one star ahead that was much brighter than the other. The planet itself was still too far away to be seen distinctly.

Vorwoorts ran the initial sensor sweep, “No signs of any ships in space in this system.”

“What about the planet itself?” Thorpe asked. “Electromagnetic radiation?”

Brigson did those scans, saying, “There is some indication that there is a presence on this planet. I’m reading an energy signature, but no indication that it’s Yuden.”

A few moments later, as the planet, shown as a thin crescent because they were approaching almost in the opposite direction from the sun, grew larger on the screen, Vorwoorts had additional information. “I am picking up something in orbit.”

“What?”

“A subspace transmitter satellite. The technology appears to be consistent with the technology Rodall found in that secret chamber on Yuden Prime.”

“So this was the destination of the signal?” the captain asked.

“That’s possible.”

And still, Thorpe knew, that did not mean the planet was Yuden, or that descendants of the Yuden lived here.

Moments later, the *Athena* entered orbit, staying above five hundred kilometres and remaining on the dark side of the planet so that they could not be seen by reflected sunlight. On the night side, they could see some of the dim glows of the cities at night, perhaps hugging the coasts or the major transport lines. It was clear that a more technologically-advanced society lived here, but they might not be warp-capable.

Brigson remarked, “Starting our sensor sweep now. I’m using the lights as a guide to population, starting in what are likely lightly-inhabited

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sections. So far, there are indications of an industrial society, but I can't determine the level yet." Seconds later, significant information appeared on her displays. "Captain, the xenotype of this planet is of Earth."

"Confidence level?"

"One hundred percent. The vegetation is clearly of the Earth xenotype... and so are the people. They're human."

"Yudens or their descendants," Bayanhong remarked.

"After all of this time."

"I wonder what they know of their origins."

Thorpe asked his science officer, "An estimate of the population?"

"Preliminary analysis indicates between two and two and a half billion, distributed as a human population would be most likely distributed, low concentrations in the polar and equatorial regions, higher concentrations in the mid-latitudes. I'm reading cities, some of which are large, and there are continent-wide transport corridors and infrastructure, and the population is most concentrated along those lines. I am reading large areas that are uninhabited, and with limited biology. There are no animals, or nothing significant. The botany in non-cultivated areas is more readily identifiable, but not so much in cultivated areas."

"Why is that?"

Brigson offered her guess. "The Yudens probably had no bees, and so had to genetically modify many of their food crops with an alternative means of pollination. Even so, I'm still detecting areas without any significant vegetation, and no climate reason why those areas should be barren."

"It's as if the vegetation has not spread over all of the planet yet."

"That's one interpretation. Power generation appears to be distributed, renewable sources like wind and solar, and hydroelectric too. I'm not reading anything that would be a source of non-natural subetheromagnetic radiation."

"Any indication of their development level?"

"It's hard to say. I mean, other than the subspace transmitter satellite—and it does look old—there's nothing in orbit, not even weather or communications satellites. On the surface, the technology level could be early to mid-twenty-first century, but off the surface, there's no technological level at all."

"Curious."

"Perhaps not for a race that wants to hide," Vorwoorts offered.

"Yet we had no difficulty in finding them," Thorpe remarked, "and when it comes to interstellar capability, there's nothing that we have that the Arosians did not have."

"Perhaps they were never present during one of those transmissions, and so had no idea about the hidden communications facility."

With the orbit on the night side complete, Thorpe ordered that they proceed to the day side. There was a risk in that, since the ship illuminated

by sunlight over regions near the terminator could be seen on the surface as a “moving star,” if someone with good enough vision was looking in the right direction. Further into the day side of the planet, they would not be seen because the reflected light would be too dim compared to the blue light scattered in the atmosphere. Once they were on the day side, it did not take long for them to detect something else of interest. “Captain,” Brigson reported, “I believe I have found the ground station for the subspace transmitter. The materials and the technology match, and are consistent with what we found on Yuden Prime.”

“What’s in the vicinity?” Thorpe asked.

Brigson ran another scan, and reported, “Actually... nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“It’s built in the middle of nowhere, in a desert, no vegetation, no lifesigns, and the power level is so low that it’s virtually undetectable. It’s like they don’t use it very often, but there’s no indication that it’s not functional. They probably use it very infrequently and have it in a standby mode otherwise.”

Thorpe did ponder his options. With nobody around, he could send down an away team, although it was possible that the presence of the away team could trigger a method by which the locals would learn that someone was at the site. However, short of broadcasting the presence of the ship and making one of those “take me to your leader” requests, he could not see any other way of learning more about these people and perhaps even making contact. Those who were aware of the subspace transmitter and the ground station had to be aware of the possibility of extraterrestrial visitors, and so those people might be more capable of handling off-world contact than the general population. He finally said, “Sal, you’ll lead an away team, and take just one other with you. I want this initial team to be small. Your purpose is to get more information and determine whether or not the facility is Yuden.”

“Understood.”

A few moments later, two individuals, security chief Sal Hakamura and assistant chief engineer Mark DeWillis, rematerialized on the dry, rocky surface of the unnamed plain where the ground station was located. The sky was clear of clouds, and the temperature was in the mid-twenties, but felt hotter since the sun, high in the sky as the location was equatorial, was beating down on them. A hot wind was also blowing. The ground around them reminded them of a moonscape, but the air was breathable. They looked at the ground station, which did not look like much, the primary dish antenna, some smaller dish antennas and other tower antennas, and a few small structures, all made of dark metal. There were no signs of any roads or landing areas, but in the distance, they saw solar panel arrays and wind turbines. Sensors indicated that power storage systems were located underground.



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DeWillis had his tricorder out, so Hakamura asked, “Any indication that our presence here has been detected.”

“Nothing that I could see,” the engineer replied. “The facility here appears to be powered down, on standby, or something like that.”

The two walked towards the structures. They were relatively featureless, made of a dark metal with a matte finish, and no windows. There were some doors, and Hakamura found that they were simple, unpowered sliding doors—and unlocked too. “No security here,” he remarked.

“We’re twelve hundred kilometres from the nearest populated area,” DeWillis said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if the average inhabitant of this planet is not even aware that this exists.” Inside, it was dark, but before the two could turn on their portable flashlights, internal lights came on. That was worrisome, because whatever sensed their presence to turn on the lights could report that back to the authorities on the planet. How long would it take to get here?

Nevertheless, they went inside, even though the conditions were stifling hot. The lights came on, but there was no air conditioning. The structure had two parts, machinery in a back room and some control panels in the front, where the two men were. They saw some of the labeling, and recognized it as the mutated form of written English that turned words into logographs, the writing of the Yudens. “That confirms it,” Hakamura remarked. “This is Yuden.”

“That doesn’t mean the rest of the planet is. This could be a relic.”

“But someone on this planet must know about this place and what it represents.”

DeWillis had his tricorder out, and was scanning the equipment. “That’s interesting.”

“What?”

“This is hardly different from standard Federation subspace communications technology. Even the control systems are similar.”

“I guess the Yudens had no need to reinvent the wheel, so to speak.”

“True.”

Hakamura asked, “Can you operate it?”

“If only I could read the language.”

One display did turn on when the two entered the room. It appeared to be some kind of log, since it displayed lines of text. The two had no idea of what the text was, but even if the writing system had changed noticeably, the means by which the Yudens wrote numbers did not. They were immediately recognizable. DeWillis scanned the text and transmitted it back to the ship, with the hope that Ensign Chu could decipher it. What she had been doing on the voyage through those four hundred light years was to develop a means to “untangle” the jumble of lines and curves that made up the logographs and restore the original letters. That would likely reveal the meaning of the words. When the information came back, the engineer said, “I suspect that

this is a log of activity from the subspace transmitter. This squiggle here comes back meaning “received,” so this is a log of received signals. Unfortunately, I have no idea of their indexing system, or what time and date system that they use.”

“So this last one... could be that transmission we detected from Yuden Prime?”

“Second last one,” DeWillis added.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know what their time and date system is, but that value there...” He pointed to the upper right of the display, “is changing, like a time counter, and the numbers are very close to the last entry. I suspect that is indicating our presence. The one before could be the signal from Yuden Prime.”

“And the text that is accompanying that?”

“I transmitted it back to the ship, and they’re still working on the translation.” A few seconds later, the translation, to the best of their ability to untangle the letters and interpret the meaning, came over the tricorder screen that DeWillis was looking at. “I believe that the second transmission is what we triggered from Yuden Prime.”

“How?”

“The text indicates a ship was detected at Yuden Prime—they call it the ‘source’—and the crew consists of... a word that likely refers to themselves, and one Arosian.”

“Rodall?”

“More than likely.”

“That’s not good.”

“Yeah,” the engineer replied.

Hakamura asked, “Given what we’ve learned, could you operate this system?”

“It would be risky. The layout is not too different, but if the labels are understandable to a degree, I could, but that’s not recommended. We don’t know what security arrangements the locals have put into this, and actually accessing the system almost certainly would trigger some kind of response.”

“Assuming there is one.”

“What do you mean?”

“Could the population of this planet have regressed and so do not know how to operate this facility, or perhaps have no interest in operating it?”

“That’s unlikely. There’s no evidence of automated maintenance here. People are doing what’s necessary to keep this up and running. It might just be a small group, unknown to most of the population and perhaps even to the government, but someone is running and maintaining this place.”

“Then,” the security chief remarked, “we probably have done all we can here and should return to the ship and ponder our next move.”

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“Yes,” DeWillis replied. “I’ve done scans of the equipment here, and I’ve been recording the information on this screen, visually.”

“Very well. Lets get back outside and return to the ship.” The two headed towards the entrance, but when they were about a half-metre from them, something invisible seemed to bounce them back, startling them and causing DeWillis to drop his tricorder.

“Forcefield,” the engineer muttered.

“Damn. They know we’re here.” Despite the presence of the forcefield, Hakamura still tapped his commbadge and said, “Away team to *Athena*. However, he was not hearing any chirp or other response, as if the forcefield was blocking communications. It would certainly block transporter beams.

“And I don’t think turning it off would be that easy, even if all of this is ultimately based on Starfleet technology.”

The change in the situation on the surface was noted on the *Athena* as well. Vorwoorts had just informed the bridge about the translation sent back to DeWillis, and what it likely meant, when an alert tone sounded on the tactical console. “Captain,” the officer said hurriedly, “a forcefield has just appeared around the structure that the away team has entered.”

“Damn,” the captain muttered. “Hail them.”

Vorwoorts tried, but said, “I can’t get through. The forcefield is blocking communications signals.”

“And most certainly transporters too,” Bayanhong offered.

“But not the subspace transporter,” Thorpe remarked. “Heni, have Rodall prepare the subspace transporter for use as soon as possible. I don’t take the chance and have them trapped there any longer than necessary.”

“Understood,” Vorwoorts said, but before she could contact engineering, the tactical console beeped again. “Sir, the sensors are now picking up lifesign readings—human—appearing around the structure. They appeared to have beamed in.”

\* \* \*

The arrival of the locals did not go unnoticed by the two *Athena* officers on the surface. DeWillis could detect them, and said, “We’ve been found out. Some of the locals have beamed in.”

Hakamura could see out through the still-open door, and saw two of the locals, men who were obviously human, although it was hard to pick out a particular race, and they were wearing black uniforms with some body armour, and they had weapons. Both DeWillis and Hakamura had their forcefield belts, and turned them on, just in case. “There was the risk that this would happen.”

“But ultimately, isn’t this what we would want, to communicate with the locals?”

“But not like this.”

Initially, the men who beamed in did not approach the structure, as they were just making sure that those inside could not escape, should they somehow be able to turn off the forcefield. That surprised Hakamura, who believed that the locals had to know that they beamed in somehow, and if they could defeat the forcefield, they could beam out again. However, they were in no position to disable the forcefield, and Hakamura did not think that it was wise to even try.

“What are they doing?” DeWillis asked. “What are they waiting for?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they’re waiting for someone in charge. They probably don’t know who we are, and we would scan the same as them, so perhaps they are thinking we are from this planet.”

“And they can’t scan the ship? We’re not cloaked.”

“I don’t know.”

On the *Athena*, Thorpe asked, “Is the subspace transporter ready?”

“Rodall is just getting it programmed with the coordinates,” Vorwoorts remarked.

Bayanhong turned to face the captain, and started, “Sir, is that the best approach? What we really want is a meeting with the authorities here, and rescuing the away team might not get us the meeting that we want.”

“The away team is at risk,” Thorpe remarked. “We might not be able to track them if they beam out. Their xenotype is the same as the people here, and they could be separated from their equipment, even the forcefield belts. We can’t cover the whole planet. Rescuing them, thus implying that we have a ship in orbit, might convince them to make contact.”

“But we still don’t know if contact is even permissible. This could be a Prime Directive-protected world, even if they are descendants of a Starfleet crew.”

Vorwoorts added, “Captain, Rodall is ready to go.”

On the surface, more individuals beamed in, and at the same time, the forcefield that blocked the exit from the structure disappeared. “Can we beam out?” Hakamura asked.

“I don’t think so. Another forcefield has appeared, further out. Now they are approaching.”

From the outside, one of the men spoke loudly and firmly. The words, however, were meaningless to the two officers. They had only a very preliminary sense of how the language had changed from the way it was spoken on the *Clements* until now. Over time, vowels would shift, consonants could change, syllables could be merged, sounds become silent, meanings change and even the syntax could be different. The universal translator implants they had had been programmed with what they knew already but it was interactive. It was taking the words that it was picking up, applying the sound changes in their environments that were known, and was guessing on what the word was. It then analyzed further sound changes and applied

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them, in an attempt to link a word from how it would sound if spoken by a crewmember from the *Clements* and how it was spoken now by an inhabitant of the planet. The device could do this with sound changes, but it could not anticipate or predict meaning changes.

Hakamura said, "We can't understand them, but can they understand us?"

"Well," DeWillis replied, "if they had scholars in the ancient language, perhaps, kind of like we have people at home that understand Old English—or even older languages like Latin or Sumerian."

"They wouldn't have such people to come and arrest us."

Two of the men, wearing body armour, dark uniforms and carrying obvious weapons, approached the entrance, and one repeated the instructions, and the other added some additional words. The first man spoke again, and this time, the translator provided a couple of words, "come" and "we." Since the Yuden language was still a subject-verb-object language, meaning that in normal sentences, the subject preceded the verb and the object followed, and "we" followed "come," Hakamura had his interpretation. "I think they want us to come with them."

"Is that wise?"

"We have no choice," the security chief remarked. The two officers exited the building, and were surrounded by the natives. One of them produced a small, tube-like device, and swept it over the two. No doubt, it identified the equipment that the two were carrying, and judging by the words that they were using, they detected the forcefield belt—since the translator handled "forcefield"—but could not really understand what it was. Hakamura was pretty sure that the Arosians did not have this technology. As soon as the security checks were complete, the two *Athena* officers and several of the locals beamed out—and DeWillis was startled by that since he had not turned off the forcefield belt. That suggested that the locals were using a more energy-intensive zone transport process.

The change was noted on the *Athena*, as Vorwoorts reported, "Hakamura and DeWillis have disappeared, as have most of the individuals that appeared. They beamed out."

Thorpe asked, "Any indication of where they might have gone?"

"No. I could not trace the transport."

"How is that possible?"

"They might have used a closed-circuit system, which links the ground station with a monitoring station, or whatever, that is closer to the population centres. It might be possible to locate them by the forcefield belts, but we'd basically have to sweep the planet and that could take time. They might also suspect that we're here now."

"Understood... go to yellow alert and raise the shields, just in case."

When Hakamura and DeWillis rematerialized at the other end of the

closed-circuit transporter system, the first thing that they noticed was that most of their devices did not appear with them. In particular, the tricorders were gone. However, the forcefield belts remained, as did their commbadges, as those were underneath the forcefield that the belts generated. Those things, Hakamura realized, could help the ship find them, but they had no idea where on the planet they ended up.

Several of the men in uniform, and technicians, including women, in less militaristic outfits, were discussing the matter among themselves. The occasional word was being translated, and the translation implants were gathering data to attempt to make further translations. However, based on the words that were coming through, Hakamura sensed that they were talking about the forcefield belts and how they could not be removed. Words like “not existence” and “not of us” or “not from us” were coming through, as was “cooperate.” He did say to DeWillis, “As long as we are not being physically threatened, we need to cooperate, because we need to contact some government official at some point.”

“Of course,” the engineer said.

Two of the men, ones with weapons, approached the two *Athena* officers, and spoke to them. A few words, “judgement” and “penalty” among them were coming through. Again, “come we” was uttered, and again, Hakamura assumed that meant they should follow. The two did follow the two escorts, with a woman leading the way, as they made their way through a structure that looked something out of a modern facility on Earth, with overhead fluorescent lighting, walls that looked like duraplast, control panels that were small display screens, and so on. Clearly, Hakamura sensed, this was an advanced society.

After a short walk, the two entered what to them looked like a court room, with DeWillis saying under his breath, “Some things never change.” At the rear of the room was a raised podium and a desk, where a man who was wearing a different sort of uniform was seated. The woman that led them here spoke to the man behind the bench, undoubtedly a judge, again, some words came through, “magistrate” and “penalty” and a new word, “trespass.” Another phrase came through, “not of we.” To Hakamura, that sounded like they knew that biologically, he and DeWillis were of the same xenotype as the locals, but the locals knew they were not native to the planet.

The person behind the bench spoke again, and the translator picked up more words, including “identify of you.” Assuming that he was being asked for his name, the security chief remarked, “I’m Sal Hakamura, and this is Mark DeWillis.” He said those words hoping that perhaps there was some recognition of the names, that their distant ancestors on the *Clements* had encountered the crew of the *Athena* and would somehow remember the names by some means. They might have preserved the information because of the possibility that they might encounter those people again. Perhaps that was so, somewhere else, but this judge did not have access to that informa-

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tion and so to him, they were just individuals with strange names. Did all the descendants here have last names that could link back to the *Clements* crew, Hakamura wondered.

The judge spoke, and was making the assumption that the two standing in front of him were locals, as he could not conceive of individuals like himself from another planet, even though they were found at the ground station for the subspace relay satellite, and there was no obvious way for them to get there. Hakamura was finding it strange indeed that the people on this planet—or at least this judge—did not know there was a starship in orbit around their planet. Instead, most of the words the judge said were not handled by the translator, though “fail” came through, as did something like “town of born,” which he assumed was his hometown, and “be in not place,” which Hakamura thought might have meant “being in a place you are prohibited from being.” If the judge was asking for an explanation for why Hakamura and DeWillis were where they were found and what they were doing there, those words did not come through the translator. As a result, the two were ordered to “jail.” That word was translated.

Hakamura was pretty sure that they were put into some kind of holding cell and not a jail cell meant for long-term occupation. The cell was in the basement, and consisted of bare cement walls and floor and ceiling, with a single light in the middle of the room, which was about five metres by four. There was a bench to sit on but no bed, and there were washroom facilities behind a partition. The one wall facing the other cells and the guard desk consisted of bars, which Hakamura thought was fairly quaint and traditional. The jail cell did look to be on the primitive side, but based on what he had seen so far, he was pretty sure that this culture was not primitive. It was fairly advanced, but did not have a presence in space, perhaps by choice.

“Now what?” DeWillis asked. “We’re in this jail cell.”

“Our words are probably being monitored and recorded,” Hakamura remarked. “We should watch what we’re talking about.”

“It’s unlikely that they understand us. We can’t understand them. I mean, they’re speaking English with several millennia of evolution to it, so it’s pretty well a different language now.”

“We can’t assume that. They might have knowledge, somewhere, of the old language. They might have experts who know it, like we have people on Earth who understand languages like Sumerian or Latin, and they could translate the recordings.”

“But we do have the commbadges and the forcefield belts. We could probably beam out of here.”

“Assuming there is no forcefields around this place. Don’t let the basic look of the cell fool you. Besides, we need to retain that advantage and be sure that the *Athena* can actually reach us. We could be anywhere on the planet, and the ship would have to carefully search for us, without giving

itself away.”

“That’s what I find strange,” DeWillis remarked. “They don’t seem to know that the ship is in orbit. I mean, those people that beamed into that remote site, they have to know. They have access to more advanced technology and would have to know. I’m surprised that the judge did not.”

“Maybe he did, but we just couldn’t translate enough of his words to figure out what he is saying or asking.”

“So what do we do? Do we just wait?”

“For now, as long as we’re in no immediate danger, we should just stay here. If there are people on this planet, aware of the history, aware of where they came from, and aware of the language as we speak it, they are probably being consulted now and could be on their way. It just takes time.”

DeWillis did ask, “What kind of society do you think they have here? I know about the lack of a presence in space, but beyond that? Is it advanced, or primitive? This cell and that judge says primitive, but the ground station and transporters and forcefields suggests otherwise.”

“My guess is that there is probably a small unit of people, under the government or some oversight structure, with some access to more advanced technology, but I believe that the people here, the majority of them going about their day-to-day lives, do not have routine access to such things.”

“It makes me wonder what they know about their origins, and their history. They must have been here for thousands of years, and in that time, they could have advanced greatly. Imagine our culture given a few thousand years.”

“On the other hand, the people here would have had a long-term culture of hiding from the Arosians. We had seen evidence that planets closer to Arosian space had been found and destroyed, so on this planet, their aim was to remain hidden. Do it for any length of time, and it becomes part of society. Even though the Arosians are gone now—and I do wonder if the average person on the street knows that—their society could not really change too much. We would be relying on a small number of people who know their origins and so on.”

DeWillis said, “And I wonder if the ship is looking for us.”

“Probably, but there’s a whole planet to search.”

The *Athena* was in orbit around the planet, remaining about five hundred kilometres above the surface, where Thorpe was pretty sure they could not be seen except if somebody was accidentally looking in their direction through a telescope. They were searching for Hakamura and DeWillis, using either their commbadges or the transponder codes in the forcefield belts. Even if the two officers were captured, Thorpe found it unlikely that the belts had been removed, and if the belts were still functional, the commbadges were protected. Thorpe also was surprised that there had been no active scans of the ship, and if the locals were aware of their presence, it



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would have been by passive means only.

“Perhaps,” Bayanhong explained, as she and the captain returned to the bridge, “the locals here are still nervous about the Arosians. They have no spaceflight capability and so no real way to know that the Arosians are gone, unless someone comes and tells them.”

“And would they be believed?” Thorpe asked.

“That’s hard to say.”

When the two returned to the bridge, the second-shift officers were on duty. Lieutenant Lorne Hathson was at the tactical console, while Lieutenant Chad Derrickson, normally the ship’s astrophysicist, was handling the sensor and science console to get some bridge hours. “Any sign of the away team?” Thorpe asked.

“No,” Hathson remarked. “We have broadcast precise signals to trigger the transponders in the commbadges and the forcefield belts, but to avoid giving ourselves away, we have to limit the power. We’ve detected no response yet.”

“Suggesting?”

“Either the signal is blocked or they are not where we have already searched.”

Derrickson added, “However, through passive sensors, we have determined that there is some kind of planet-wide transport system in use here.” He tapped at his console, causing a map of the planet that had been generated to display on one of the secondary screens. It was overlaid with a population density map, and the areas of high population density were connected with lines shown in various shades of orange to yellow and to white. The science officer explained, “It looks like intercity travel is conducted exclusively through these transport channels, as we have found no evidence of surface connections between the population centres except for some little-used roads, and no aircraft of any kind. We have been able to detect, passively, the power flows through those channels and have mapped them. Some of them are heavily used, and given the population densities, I’m suspecting that the majority of the traffic is just people going about their routines.” He tapped at the console again, causing a flashing icon to appear well away from any of the population. In all directions, for hundreds of kilometres, the population density was zero. “That’s the ground station, where Sal and Mark went. You can see a very faint channel from that location back to the populated areas, but given that there are hundreds of node points, perhaps thousands, tracing the paths from that point would not likely increase the chances that we would find the two.”

“So what now?” Bayanhong asked.

“I think we have to keep waiting,” Thorpe remarked. “We can hope that the two are in no immediate danger, and that the locals want to learn more about them, where they came from and what they’re doing here. These are descendants of Starfleet officers, and perhaps the ideals and so on from

their ancestors have somehow been preserved in these people.”

“We can hope.”

“Yes,” Thorpe answered. “Lieutenant, as there been any attempt to hail us, or even scan us?”

“Neither, no communications, no scans, nothing. It’s hard to believe that they don’t know we’re here.”

“They probably do know we’re here, but they’re acting as if they don’t want us to know. They don’t know who we are or what we’re doing here.”

“Sometimes,” Bayanhong added, “I’m still wondering if the people here should be under Prime Directive protection, because they’re not warp-capable.”

“By choice,” the captain replied, as he finally sat down. “They are doing what they can to remain hidden from the Arosians, and that means no spaceflight capability at all.”

“Yet that subspace satellite would give them away.”

“I know. I’m not sure if they have the capability to hide it or not. I’m not sure if they know the Arosians have been destroyed or not, and if they do know, they really don’t know how to adjust, what the significance of that would be. Their society for so long has been geared to remain hidden that once the need to remain hidden is gone, they really don’t know any other way.”

“Which would seem to imply,” Bayanhong replied, “that this world does perhaps require Prime Directive protection.”

“That doesn’t solve the immediate problem.”

“Getting the away team back?”

“Exactly.”

\* \* \*

Hakamura and DeWillis were not in the jail cell for all that long, not even long enough to get a meal, before the guards in black with the body armour returned. The cell door was opened, and the lead guard spoke again. The phrase “come we” was translated while the rest was not, and that phrase seemed to imply that the two *Athena* officers were to follow them. DeWillis got the nod from Hakamura to comply, so the two left the cell and followed the guards through the building, rising from the dungeon-like lower levels to the more modern upper levels. What they saw were more of the signs with the tangled writing turning words into logograms, and in most cases, what the words once were was incomprehensible, though Hakamura was getting the feeling that as the language changed, the spelling did not, and as the connection between letters and sounds was lost, the letters began to merge into tangled symbols representing the word, not its sounds. Learning to read and write in this environment would not have been easy.

The two were led into the same courtroom that they had been in

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earlier, and faced the same judge. Hakamura was actually hoping that they would meet someone else, perhaps someone with more knowledge of what was going on and perhaps access to the older forms of the language. Instead, the magistrate asked the same sort of questions that had been asked earlier. The translator picked out “town of born.”

“What does that mean?” DeWillis asked his fellow officer.

“Our hometown?”

“I doubt that they would’ve heard of Cooperstown.”

“I haven’t heard of Cooperstown. Where is that?”

“In New York State, in the United States nation on Earth.”

“Well, I presume you’ve heard to Abydos.”

“On Philentrophia? How can we forget?”

The judge was patient with the two because it was clear to him that the two strangers were not familiar with the language and were discussing among themselves what was being asked. However, he did get their attention again by repeating his request, which included “town of born.”

Hakamura finally said, “Abydos, Philentrophia.”

DeWillis added, “Cooperstown, Earth.”

Both answers puzzled the judge and those around them. It was clear that they were recording every word that the strangers were speaking, and they were analyzing those words. Those who were doing the analysis spoke among themselves, but too softly for the two Starfleet officers to hear. The judge then had another question, which had many similar words that were not translated, and one phrase that was, “affinity of clan.”

“What does that mean?” DeWillis asked.

“I’m getting the feeling that in the language of these people, verbs are used as nouns without change and nouns that modify them follow in phrases with ‘of’ leading. Thus, ‘town of born’ means ‘born town’ or the town you are born in, and ‘affinity of clan’ could mean the clan you have an affinity for, or an affiliation with.”

“The clan we belong to?”

“Yes.”

“How can we answer that?”

“Starfleet?” Hakamura offered.

“Would that have any meaning to them?”

Before the two could debate an answer, several of the people who had been analyzing the words spoken by the strangers talked to the judge. He said several things to them, with one set of words coming through, “four name not be found,” and then another, “they be found where.” In other words, this planet had no placenames like “Abydos,” “Philentrophia,” “Cooperstown” and “Earth.”

“They are other worlds, other planets,” Hakamura started. “We are not from this planet. We travelled here on a starship. We encountered a planet we suspected you lived on, but found a subspace transmitter instead.

We tracked the signal to this world.”

When the security chief stopped speaking, DeWillis said, “I don’t think that they understood a word that you said.”

“I think that they did. They have to remember the older stages of the language. The more we speak, the more they are learning, because someone, somewhere knows what we’re saying.”

“Then why can’t they translate their language into ours?”

“I don’t know.”

The magistrate spoke again, and more words were coming through the translator, including “not be possible” and “same be of gene type.” There was also “one from not this world” and “same not be of gene type” and “difference large be of gene type.” Hakamura was inferring that the magistrate was saying that it was impossible that he and DeWillis were not of this world because they had the same genetic structure, the same xenotype, while aliens from other worlds would have different genes. That was true, but the inhabitants of this world did not originate here, and he was surprised that this was not general knowledge, or at least among the mythology of this planet.

Hakamura said, “The origin world of me, and Mark and all of you is Earth. You are the descendants of the crew of the *Clements* that went way into the past for reasons we don’t know.” As soon as he said “*Clements*,” Hakamura noticed a change in the expression of the magistrate and those around him. It was as if that word had some significance to them, and Hakamura could understand why.

However, if Hakamura hoped that word changed the course of the conversation, he was mistaken on the course that he was hoping. The magistrate spoke up, and among the terms translated was “one year” and “labour and work that be hard” and “island of exiles.” In other words, he realized, they were being convicted of the crime of “be in not place.”

DeWillis also got the gist of what was said, as he remarked, “We got convicted... and sentenced to a year of hard labour. What is ...island of exiles.?”

“The problem is that words could change their meanings, and ‘island of exiles’ could mean some sort of prison.”

The magistrate was not finished speaking, and he added further instructions, which again included “town of born” and “affinity of clan” and “reveal not,” followed by more “labour and work that be hard” and “time of indefinite.” That seemed to imply to Hakamura that they would be sentenced to an indefinite sentence at this prison colony if they would not reveal a home town or a clan affiliation that was from this planet. On the other hand, if they went to this prison colony, perhaps they could contact the ship and flee this planet. They were no longer going to get a chance to meet someone who had a more fuller understanding of the situation beyond this planet, or at least an understanding of the past.

The guards escorted Hakamura and DeWillis from the courtroom,

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and took them to another location in the building. They entered a room that they had seen earlier, or at least a smaller version of it. This had a platform along one wall, with several separate sections. People were rematerializing on one platform and departing from another the same way. Operators in booths facing the platforms were controlling the machinery, and getting instructions on where each group was going. Displays on the walls behind the operators suggested that this was a primary transport system on this planet, as people were simply beamed where they needed to go, at least to stations such as this, and then they walked or used more local means to get around. A map was displayed around the smaller displays, and it showed all the various conduits around this city, and the lines flashed to indicate a particular line in use.

One of the guards conferred with one of the booth operators for several minutes, while the other gestured for the two officers to get on the platform. Once the booth operator was satisfied with the arrangements, the guard stepped back. The transporter process started up, using a zone transport system perhaps because that was the most efficient at least in terms of setting the targeting parameters. When the process ended, the two found themselves standing in a similar facility, but with just a single platform and a single operator, although here the console was not in the booth but in the open. Nobody was manning it, but two guards, dressed similar to the guards Hakamura had seen earlier, were present in the room. One of those guards stepped forward, and said, among the words being translated, “possess name of” Sal Hakamura and Mark DeWillis, and there was “one year” and the familiar “come we.”

Their “island of exiles” turned out to be an island, a barren, rocky island somewhere on the planet, an island that had no vegetation but had lots of sand. The sand was fine and white and seemingly pure, and produced magnificent beaches along the length of the island. It looked like some kind of idyllic vacation paradise, and it even had warm winds and sunshine as well. On the other hand, all of that bare rock meant that the sun bearing down on them turned the place quite hot. The only shelters were the barracks-like cabins, where the prisoners slept in bunk beds, which each cabin holding about twenty of the double beds. There were not all that many prisoners either, with about twenty percent of them women, who had bunks in separate cabins. They were all lightly dressed, in shorts and teeshirt-like garments, and certainly were not overdressed like the Starfleet officers. In fact, Hakamura and DeWillis were offered similar clothing and basically told to put them on.

“Can the forcefield belt fit underneath?” DeWillis asked.

“We can try,” Hakamura replied.

“But such things are not allowed, I’m sure.”

“They can’t take them away.”

“At least until the power cells run out. It might be a good idea to use

them only when necessary. The clothing has pockets, and we can put the commbadges in there. Once we’re outside, we can attempt to contact the ship.”

The two dressed into their prison garb, putting the forcefield belts on underneath. Fortunately, the garments were loose-fitting and the top portion was long enough to hide the belt and the power pack attached to it. Once they were dressed, the local guards, with the word “supervise-man” coming through the translator implant to describe them, showed them what “hard labour” meant here. They were turning the sand into glass, using a mix of more primitive technologies when it came to forming glass, and more modern ones in terms of what the heat source was, looking like some sort of furnace driven by a fusion reactor, connected to the administration building, where the transporter platform was located. DeWillis found it hard to believe that the glass they were producing was of any value to the society as a whole, as clearly they had more efficient and modern manufacturing techniques to produce the glass that they needed. Perhaps this was glass being used for artisan purposes, and indeed, in some cases, they were making bowls and glasses and what could only be described as decorative items. However, the implication made to them was pretty clear, the amount of food they would get was proportional to the amount of glass that they could produce. The men and women that they saw looked to be rather slender in their physiques, and in some cases, it was hard to tell how old they were. Hakamura and DeWillis soon learned something else about the people here; their skin did not sunburn, as if there was a genetic protection against the rays of this planet’s sun. It was protection that the two *Athena* officers did not have.

DeWillis did say, “At least that could confirm that we’re not from this planet, that our genes are somehow slightly different.”

“But do you have any idea how painful sunburns can be?”

Thinking back to his youth, the engineer said, “Actually, I do.”

However, being outside on the beach, with a cart with pails they had to fill with sand, using a shovel, they were isolated enough that they could try their commbadges. Hakamura got his out and tapped it, saying, “Hakamura to *Athena*, do you read?” He tried several times, but had no response.

The engineer tried too, using his commbadge and saying, “DeWillis to *Athena*, come in.” He too got no response, so he said, “They’re either out of range or something is blocking the signal.”

“Just our luck.”

“I know.”

Not a lot of work was done on the first day because sunset soon came, and on this planet, the darkness of night was total since there was no natural satellite, no moon, and the levels of illumination were minimal, and located along the pathways that connected the various parts of the compound. After sunset, the place seemed to come a little more active, as people were moving around, and the women were entertaining the men. Hakamura found this

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rather unusual, because it was the case of the prisoners seemingly running the institution at night. “Where are the guards?” he asked.

DeWillis asked, “Perhaps they don’t stay here at night. Their jobs are over for the day, and they go home, using the transporter network. Imagine, you could live in one place, and go home anywhere in the planet, and any location is perhaps as easily reached as any other.”

“But wouldn’t there be a night shift?”

“Maybe not.”

“Without guards, is this really a prison? Could we not escape?”

“How?”

“The transporter.”

“I’m sure that they have the administration building and the transporter locked down pretty tight.”

“By boat?”

“With what?” the engineer asked. “There’s only rocks here. It’s pretty hard to make a boat out of rock, or glass for that matter, and this island could be remote.”

“Or not.”

“What do you mean?”

“How would they maintain the transporter conduits if this island is hundreds, much less thousands, of kilometres off any coast?”

“I don’t know, but clearly they have the knowledge and ability to build and maintain this system. It’s probably more complex and thorough than any I have seen on any other planet.”

At night, the other inmates were curious about the newcomers, as they could sense that they were not from any location that they were familiar with. In particular, Hakamura encountered a woman whose name came out as Inadara Chin, and a man whose name was Nesero Ore. He was pretty sure that the *Clements* had crewmembers with the last names of “Chin” and “Ore.” Chin spoke to him, and naturally had to contend with the fact that communications was not easy. Some words were coming through, such as “difficult be of understand” and “no one not know language.” As far as Hakamura could tell, the entire planet used one language, and given the transporter system and how everywhere was basically “local,” people mixed readily and separate languages, and perhaps even dialects, were not developing. Now the locals had encountered two people who did not fit that pattern.

Hakamura answered, “We’re not from this planet. We come from another world.”

Ore then mentioned something about “skin become red” and “thing not see then,” meaning that they had no experience with sunburn. Hakamura just nodded, and hoped that the gesture was understood. Ore continued speaking, and words coming through the translator included “planets far away” and “people live planets,” which Hakamura took to mean “live on”

those planets. Ore added words to the effect that he always knew such things existed.

Chin said something where words like “device” and “have you” and “on body” came through, as if they could tell that they had the forcefield belts, and were assuming that since they had them while in prison, they were somehow necessary for them to survive. Then she asked a question that untranslated sounded like “you be fob” or “you be fil,” and she repeated the phrase several times, until Hakamura said, “I don’t know what ‘fob’ and ‘fil’ means. I can’t relate those words.”

And so Chin, with an assist from Ore, haltingly explained what the terms meant, and as they spoke, the translators were picking up more and more of the words. Unfortunately, the locals had no such advantage and could just hear the strangers speak in what was to them a very ancient and archaic language, if they even knew that. The fobs, Hakamura learned, were the technophobes, those that feared technology and preferred to live in a more primitive manner, because technology only brought trouble to the world. He could interpret that to mean that advancing technology too far made the planet vulnerable to an attack by the Arosians. It was strange to think that the people here lived without technology given the transporter network that existed here, but on the other hand, perhaps the “technology” that they referred to was primarily the technology of space travel. The fils, on the other hand, were the technophiles, the people that respected the technology and actively maintained it and developed what was needed to keep the technology going. When Chin talked about “technology” in this part, it seemed to be more than just the space-going technology, such as the subspace transmitter in orbit, and any space-capable vessel capable of accessing it. Hakamura also learned that most of the population, including the government, were fobs, while the fils were a small group but still essential to the operation of the planet. No wonder, he realized, that the judge found it difficult to comprehend what he and DeWillis were offworlders and that such things were possible. He was probably a fob.

Chin and Ore were also interested in where these off-worlders who were like them in many ways actually came from. Chin knew already that Hakamura and DeWillis were not from here, and so wanted to know where they did come from. At least, that was what Hakamura assumed they were asking, so he answered, “We come from a planet called Earth. Well, I was not born there myself, but that is where ultimately we came from. Our home is Earth. Does that word, Earth, mean anything to you?” The two natives exchanged glances with each other.

DeWillis remarked, “They don’t understand much of what you’re saying.”

“It seems that the word ‘Earth’ doesn’t mean much to them either.”

“I wonder what their story of their origins is. Clearly they would know that they did not originate on this planet.”



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Perhaps some of the words that the *Athena* officers spoke registered on the two, and Ore started to speak, with some of the words getting through the translator. “Same be us physique,” came through, as did “not from world of we.” Hakamura assumed that meant that the locals knew that he and DeWillis were physiologically the same as they were, but were not from this world. Still, they must have picked out something from what they said, as Ore added, “world of you be... Earth.”

Hakamura answered more in the syntax of the locals, saying, “Yes, origin world of we be Earth. It be origin world of you too.”

“We know not,” replied the man, or at least those were the words that translated. Another phrase that came through was “origins of we.”

“Then what be origin of you?”

Ore and Chin discussed it among themselves, and based on the words that translator picked up, they were determining that the strangers wanted to know the story of their origins. Hakamura spoke up, saying, “yes, you tell we that story.”

Hakamura and DeWillis heard the story, and from what the translator implants picked up and interpreted, the origin story was in a way what they had expected. They were expecting something in a highly distorted manner that resembled the arrival of the *Clements* and forming a colony of some sort. At the beginning, the story seemed distorted as it started with two gods, the male god Lema and the female god Aden, coming to the world when it was free of life.

DeWillis did say, “Do you think that “Lema’ could be *Clements*?”

“But then,” Hakamura added, “that would make “Aden’ like *Athena*, and that did not happen.”

“At least it hasn’t happened yet.”

“Don’t say that. The idea that some of the people on this planet might have my genes is not what I want to contemplate.”

In the next part of the story, as told by Chin, the two gods brought life to the barren planet, producing all the trees and the grasses and the food plants and more, and they gave those plants a means to reproduce. Then again, Hakamura was thinking, that could have been something the *Clements* crew and their early descendants might have done, genetically modifying the plants they did have so that they could reproduce and spread out without the need of pollinators like bees. It was quite clear that this world existed without animals, but animals were in the legends. “The gods have possessions, possessions move like the gods move and eat like the gods eat and make more like the gods made.” That was a weird thing to say, but it suggested that whatever animals were on the *Clements*, maybe some lab rats, perhaps some pets, did not last too long in this new environment. It also sounded like the gods reproduced like people, suggesting again that the people descended directly from the gods, and that the crew of the original ship might have been interpreted as two gods, male and female, that gave

birth to the whole population.

According to Ore, the gods not only produced the people, but also educated them and provided them with technology, or at least that was what the translator was picking up, as Ore said, “fils then be many by number” and “people desire-be fils.” That seemed reasonable, Hakamura thought, as the colony of the *Clements* crew descendants would have access to all the technology on the ship, and there was no reason not to use that technology and perhaps to even further advance it. That led to what Ore said was a “society of machines,” or some sort of highly technological society, and “ships of sky and stars.” The gods actually limited the number of “ships of sky and stars” that the people could have by denying them the “glowing essence.” In other words, Hakamura thought, the descendants of the *Clements* crew did not have access to a lot of dilithium, and without that, could not really power their ships or have too many of them.

But the society of machines did bring a problem, as it “create attraction of demons,” and “demons then come to world of us.” That sounded like the Arosians found out about the Yudens and came for them. The technology brought misery and death and probably an evacuation from one world to this one, but Chin and Ore did not mention that directly, except by saying, “demons stop at a time the fobs made rules and the fils listen” and “society of machines left in back.” The Yudens either abandoned the technology, or the planet where the technology was found. Ore mentioned that the “class of wise ones” told them that they could never again be a society of machines because the demons wanted the machines and would come for them and destroy all that stood in the way. Ore added, “then the gods protect we” but that was only temporary, “gods not protect we now, we protect we.”

Then Chin made a remark, with the translated words that came through saying “fils tell story will be different.” In other words, the technophobes won the day and as victors got to write the history or the mythology, while the technophiles would have a different story, perhaps one that was more accurate or detailed, although from what he heard, Hakamura was able to get an idea of what happened, and in truth, it was not that different from what he expected, beyond the idea that the earliest Yudens, those closest to the crew of the *Clements* were almost god-like, in the opinion of those that came later.

There was only one disturbing part of this. “This goddess Aden,” DeWillis said, “sounds too much like the *Athena*.”

“But how could we possibly get into the story?” Hakamura said.

“The only thing I can think of was that Starfleet does not want Captain Rice to go deep into the past and create a new society, and might have ordered Captain Thorpe to pursue him into the past, and somehow he failed. Alternatively, something we might find out here might compel the captain to take the *Athena* far back into the past.”

“How could we possibly find exactly how far back in time the

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*Clements* went?”

“Maybe another recorder buoy, giving more precise information.”

“But yet, that would not explain how we became part of the story.”

DeWillis said, “Something happened and we could not return.”

Hakamura then remarked, “It looks like if the captain gets that order from Starfleet, he can’t carry it out. If he does, these people, these Yudens, aren’t only the descendants of the *Clements* but of the *Athena* too.”

“And if we somehow don’t go back, history will change again.”

“What we know—or suspect—is not good.”

“No kidding,” the assistant chief engineer remarked. “Somehow, we’ve got to get off this island and get back to the ship. We know that the guards seem to abandon this prison island at night, but can we get into the administration building?”

“We can check it out. If we get inside, could you possibly hack into the transporter and get us off the island?”

“If I had my tricorder and if the system is ultimately based on Starfleet systems, possibly, but without the tricorders, not likely.”

“What about communicating with the ship?”

Hakamura added, “We have our commbadges. All we need is some way to attract the attention of the ship, to get them within range. What could we rig up?” He looked at DeWillis, and added, “You’re an engineer, so you should be able to come up with something.”

“Perhaps.”

On the *Athena*, Captain Thorpe was starting to get impatient. The ship continued to orbit the planet, and they were scanning for the transponder codes from the forcefield belts that the two members of the away team were wearing, but they were doing it in such a way as to not attract too much attention. It was not working, as the various tactical officers on duty had said. Now it was the first shift again, and Vorwoorts was on duty. “Still nothing,” she said.

Bayanhong asked, “If the belts are on, would the transponder codes still be detected?”

“Yes,” Vorwoorts replied. “The problem is that there are a lot of people here, and too strong a signal could attract attention, and perhaps even trigger something unanticipated.”

“Our failure so far to find them means?”

“Several things, that the two are somewhere that our signals cannot penetrate, which is possible because the Yudens know that the two have forcefield belts that they cannot remove, or they are simply not where we have scanned, or the Yudens have technology that could neutralize the belts. There is a lot of people on this planet, and it’s a pretty advanced world.”

“I’m still wondering why the ship has been ignored.”

Brigson replied, “This might’ve been a tactic that the Yudens used

should the Arosians appear. They could, somehow, sense we have an Arosian on board—sorry, Rodall—and so would ignore us. Perhaps in the past, if the Arosian ship had been ignored, it would move on, the people of the world not knowing of their existence and all of that.”

Thorpe spoke up, saying, “Somehow, we must get in contact with the government, and learn what happened to Sal and Mark. Surely, the government here, some unit within it, must have protocols and procedures for situations such as this.”

Dewuchun, at the engineering console, added, “Perhaps even a method, passed down over the years, to determine that the vessel is Starfleet, and thus not an enemy ship.”

“They might not be clear on the concept anymore,” Bayanhong added.

“But again, you would think that there would be a small group of people who would know, a small elite group, passing down certain knowledge from generation to generation. Societies like this, second generation ones, would have such a thing.”

“Not necessarily,” Dewuchun said. “Odonan society had no such thing.”

“That’s different, because the originating society was destroyed. Captain Rice and his crew knew that the originating society was not destroyed, so he likely would have put in place something to prepare the descendants for the possibility of contact with the originating society. “

“But such a small group with that knowledge would be aware we are here,” the first officer continued, “and they would somehow contact us before we could make our presence known to the wider population. We’re pretty sure this is not the world the *Clements* crew colonized, but a later world the survivors fled to to avoid the Arosians. Perhaps in that transfer, that small group was somehow lost, or could no longer fulfill its role or pass on its knowledge.”

“Assuming that the group is still active, we need a way to attract their attention without alerting the regular people, who perhaps should be under Prime Directive consideration.”

“How?”

“We’ll send down additional away teams, but unlike Sal and Mark, they’re not going to penetrate alien structures and the like. They’re simply going to walk through the streets, observe what they can and learn what they can. They’ll be acting more or less as tourists, checking out the sites.”

Bayanhong was not particularly convinced that was an approach that would work, but she could not immediately think of another that would work without many of the ordinary people finding out. She asked, “If we send down the away teams, to where?”

“The larger cities.” They had already mapped the planet on the previous orbits, and so had a population-density map and an idea where the larger cities were. They noticed that there were large areas of the planet that

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were uninhabited, and the various population centres were connected by the intercity closed-circuit transporter system. Smaller population densities were in the outlying areas, and they seemed to be mostly agricultural societies, and the sensors had noted small clusters of people, including one on a remote island, that were likely located where they were to get rare resources. “It’s easier to go unnoticed in a larger city.”

“Very well.”

Bayanhong naturally found herself on the away team, and she was joined by Lieutenant Edward Chan as the security officer and Lieutenant Connie Lee as the third member of the team. The ship had picked up some broadcasts from the planet, which seemed like entertainment broadcasts, and Lee had studied them to get clothing styles and the like, and the translation routines were using the data to improve the quality of the translations, mostly by deconstructing the changes in the pronunciation of the words, since sound changes tended to follow set rules across the language. Their procedures also attempted to figure out words that had changed their meanings. New words were harder to interpret, except in context with other words. Lee and others also studied the fashion designs and replicated clothing that was similar, and by picking a city that was in a cooler location, they could replicate looser clothing that was less revealing and could hide forcefield belts and the rest. Another thing that they did notice was that the people on this planet did not wear their hair long, and if anyone had longer hair than shoulder-length, it was bundled up into a bun. That was Bayanhong had to do because of her long hair, and though Lee’s hair was not as long, she had to do likewise.

The three, in costume, gathered in the transporter room. They were wearing loose-fitting pants and ankle boots, as that was the style, and women had wool-like sweaters in dark blues and blacks, while Chan had on a gray sweater with larger, looser sleeves than he would have liked, but that was the style. Ger Psakolaps, the chief medical officer, was there, saying, “We have programmed the transporter biofilter to remove whatever pathogens are in your system, because you could be carrying diseases that the locals have no protection against. Unlike most other situations, you’re beaming into a location where the population is of your xenotype, so they are vulnerable to your diseases.”

“What about their diseases?” Chan asked. “We have no immunity to them.”

“Upon the return, the biofilters will remove them. Now, this planet has no animals, not even insects, and those are the usual reservoir of diseases, where existing diseases could mutate into something new. This could be a surprisingly healthy population, and it would be a vegetarian society as well. Even so, if you feel not right, or somehow sick, we can abandon the mission and return to the ship.”

“Of course,” Bayanhong said. “Lets proceed.”

Transporter chief Megan Wilder had scouted locations in one of the larger cities, and perhaps an important one if not the capital, judging by some of the monumental buildings that had been detected. She had found a suitable location where the three could beam down with a high likelihood of not being detected. “We’re ready,” she said.

Bayanhong, Chan and Lee took their places on the transporter platform, with the first officer saying, “Energize.” A few seconds later—longer than usual as the biofilters did their extensive work—the three rematerialized in what looked like a back alley. The air was cool, around ten degrees, and humidity was low. The local time was early morning, but they had no idea how the Yudens broke down the day and how important they considered the late morning.

The three slowly emerged from the alley that they had beamed into. They did stand for a moment and looked at the scene around them. The buildings here were built of stone and/or metal, with no wood. They did not see any trees, although the sensors did indicate there were forests. The vehicles were small, but electric and moved about quietly. People were on foot, their clothing styles similar to what the away team was wearing, so they did not stand out. Bayanhong did notice that the people were slender, often tall and they looked fit. They also appeared to be young, or at least young in appearance. There were some children around, but no identifiably old people.

Chan said, “It’s like we’re beaming into an alien society, and yet, these people are all us, our xenotype and everything. I had no idea that a lost colony of humans was possible.”

“And,” Lee added, “it’s a lost society that’s a lot older than ours.”

“And yet not particularly advanced. What’s this, late twentieth, early twenty-first equivalent?”

“No doubt by choice, as they would want to appear that there’s no chance they would learn of the existence of the Arosians by going into space. Somehow, they had managed to keep their society technologically static.”

“And it would be socially static too,” Bayanhong added. “There’s no advancement here, no need to improve things. Their aim would be to maintain the status quo, but usually a society that attempts to do that would start to deteriorate. This one got around that.”

“Well, knowing that advancing too far would lead to their doom might be a motivating factor to maintain their current status, and after awhile, they might get the hang of it. I would not be surprised if a lot of this society is hierarchal, so you do what your parents and your grandparents did.”

“Which could lead to a highly stratified, class-riddled society.”

“We have no evidence that is not the case here.”

Bayanhong added, “And to maintain a static society, there could be a heavy religious element here, a need to ‘fix’ society at the level that it is at because that is what their god or gods would want.”

Another reason why this particular city was selected because it ap-

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peared to be the site of a large gathering, and it was possible that it was somehow related to the government. While the three were standing around or moving slowly, Lee worked with her tricorder, conducting some scans. “Some of these people actually scan as older.” She pointed to a woman who had emerged from one of the buildings, and had been talking to someone. “She scans as somebody in their mid-seventies.”

“She doesn’t look it,” Bayanhong replied, “more like someone in their thirties.”

“This planet is the Fountain of Youth?” Chan asked.

“Not likely. It’s thousands of years of carefully considered diet, and with a digestive system that probably could not handle meat or even dairy or eggs. They had grains and vegetables, and that is it. Without pollinating insects, they basically have to create seeds in a facility of some sort, perhaps with some genetic engineering. A lot of this society is probably geared to food production.”

“We have already assumed it’s pretty static,” Lee added. “There’s no disease here, and perhaps there is some means to keep down conflict and the like among people. There might even be a quasi-religious approach to the population here.”

What they did see was that there were a large number of people on the street, and most of them were middle-aged adults, or at least looked like middle-aged adults. There were some children, but fewer than Bayanhong thought was reasonable for a society such as this, and as had been noticed earlier, there were no identifiably older people. Chan asked, “Would you want to live in this society?”

“No,” Bayanhong replied. “I’m kind of used to all that our society can give us, even travelling hundreds, if not thousands, of light years from home to see places like this. The people here will have none of that.”

“But they could, because the Arosian threat is gone now. They might not know that, but it’s gone and there’s no benefit to remaining stagnant or hidden any longer.”

“It’s hard to change a society as old as this one, and as stable as this one. Change could be extremely disruptive, especially if we introduce it to them. It’s something that these people would have to do themselves. About all we can do is somehow let them learn that the Arosian threat is gone. There is no longer any fear of annihilation from above.”

“So in essence, the Prime Directive applies here?” Lee asked.

“Yes.”

“And so even informing the people of their origins is not something we should do.”

“Exactly.”

The trio, looking like any other group of Yudens, speaking among themselves only when separated from the locals, made their way to a large square found in the centre of the city. They saw that at one end was a large

and elaborate building, likely the government building for those that ran at least the city, and perhaps more. There were fountains and some statues at one end of the square, and in front of the fountains was what looked like one of those continuously-burning flames in a cauldron. People were standing around that, though the three *Athena* officers were not exactly sure what they were doing. Along the periphery were restaurants, often with outdoor seating areas, and there were stands where people were serving food, such as vegetables and fruits and dishes made from those, as well as breads and pastries of various descriptions. What Bayanhong noticed was how the people paid for their purchases. Each of the sellers had a small tablet device, and the purchaser would tap against the tablet a narrow rod, about six centimetres in length but less than one in diameter, though with a thicker band in the middle. These rods came in silver or gold, and were attached to keychains, or attached to a belt or some other part of the clothing with a chain.

Seeing that, Chan remarked, “Electronic money. It’s not like we can make some coins or cash and use that here.”

Bayanhong replied, “Clearly, there are examples of technology, and those closed-circuit transporters would certainly suggest that, but it remains hidden. It’s not obvious.”

A stage had been set up in front of the fountains, and musicians were playing. The instruments were vaguely recognizable, but the music itself was not. There was no singing, and occasionally, others on the stage were talking, sometimes using bullhorns or something similar. Most of the words were not being translated, but a few were, such as “sins” and “repent” and “festival of redemption.” Lee did ask, “What is happening here?”

Bayanhong answered, “It’s almost like a religious festival. They’re throwing pieces of paper into that cauldron with the fire.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, beyond that could be a method the people could use to ask for forgiveness of sins. It does appear that a religious revival is occurring here.”

“It seems... primitive.”

“It also appears that this society is a mixture of primitive and advanced elements. They have some advanced technology, but it looks like they are actively resisting advancing any further, and one way to do that is to encourage a more religious approach to society. Somebody, somewhere wrote a holy book and they strive to create a society based on that in order to preserve their society.”

“Somehow,” Chan added, “I doubt that this is what Captain Rice and the crew of the *Clements* would’ve wanted.”

“Those that found a society rarely have a say in the long-term evolution of that society and probably would not recognize what they saw. If it was the *Clements* before its time travel mission that came to this planet, I doubt



that anybody on board that ship would recognize what they would see here.” What Bayanhong was watching was people filling out pieces of paper and tossing them into the flame. The fire would catch the paper, and as it lit up, it would rise momentarily into the air before being consumed. In some cases, the flames that erupted in the paper were different colours, such as green and blue. The first officer wondered if there was any significance in that. Bayanhong added, “I’m sure that Captain Rice and his crew really intended to prevent the destruction of the Arosians by preventing them from becoming what they were.”

“And he failed there.”

“Clearly. This society was the result of that failure.”

“History played out as it was meant to.”

Bayanhong knew that it would have been better if they had not talked so much when they were surrounded by the natives like they were, but she surmised that a planet such as this one and given the time span would have evolved many different languages. Over thousands of years, any language would change and split and mutate and develop until one dialect was completely incomprehensible to another. That was how languages evolved on Earth, and how a language such as Proto-Indo-European would split into many quite different languages. If the English she knew could be considered Proto-Yuden, the modern Yuden languages could show as much diversity as the Indo-European languages, if not more. Thus, the people here should not be surprised to hear people speak a language that they would not know themselves.

But someone did recognize what Bayanhong and the other two were speaking, even if it was not strictly “Proto-Yuden” in their minds.

Two men faced Bayanhong and the other officers, and spoke to them. The words that came through the translator included “old language” and “speak” and “used not anymore.” The second man added other things, and some words came through the translator, such as “should not use” and “used by” with a word that did not translate, “fils,” and “go island.” He emphasized the words, “if you speak old language, you be fils and go island.”

Bayanhong gestured for the other two to follow her, as they gradually moved out of the square and its festival of redemption, so that they were not among so many people. “What was that about?” asked Lee.

“Someone recognized what we were speaking,” the first officer replied, “even if they did not understand all we said.”

“What’s a fils?”

“I don’t know, but the implication is that a so-called ‘fils’ speaks the old language—what we speak—and they end up on the island.”

“What island?”

“I believe that the sensors on the ship picked up an island remote from the land where there was a population...”

\* \* \*

At night, the guards and the other workers left the island, and apparently abandoned the structures on the island. Not only were they abandoned, they were basically left unlocked and accessible, which Hakamura and DeWillis found surprising. Their fellow prisoners had entered the building but beyond the transporter system, there was nothing of value to be taken. However, for Hakamura and DeWillis, the transporter system was the only thing of value that this island had.

“I’m really surprised,” DeWillis remarked, “that the guards and the administrators would abandon this place at night.”

Hakamura answered, “There’s no natural light, no satellite in the sky, and the artificial light is limited, so they must feel that the prisoners can’t get around too easily.”

“They seem able to.”

“They are perhaps searching for food and the like.”

The two locals that they had encountered earlier, Inadara Chin and Nesero Ore, were with them again, as was a third man, Chorolon Quinlin, who had experience entering the administrative building. Conversation between Chin and Quinlin suggested that the newcomers wanted to get into the building, and that they might “understand it better.” Quinlin knew a back way in, and they entered through a basement entrance. The power had been turned off, but the man knew how to operate the battery-powered emergency lights. He turned them on and led the two *Athena* officers and the other two natives into the large room in the basement where the transporter was. Unlike everything else, it had a separate power supply and was still active, likely, Hakamura, reasoned, so that the guards and the others could return in the morning.

DeWillis looked over the console and the platform and what machinery that he could see. The security chief asked, “Can you make this work?”

“If I had a tricorder, I probably could do it, but without it, I’m not sure,” the engineer answered. He was again looking over the console with its unfamiliar layout and the unfamiliar words. About the only thing he recognized was the map that showed the shapes of the land masses and where this particular unit led to. It had a number of connections to the mainland. “Just pushing buttons and the like randomly is not the answer.”

“Is it possible that you could, at least, signal the ship that we’re here, and they can pick us up?”

“Make this thing broadcast a comm signal?”

“Something like that.”

While DeWillis was looking over the console and the rest, Quinlin spoke to Hakamura, and some of the words did get translated. “Make work” and “leave island” came through.

“I don’t know if he can make it work,” Hakamura answered. “If he

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can, we want to leave the island.”

“Why?” That word came through.

“This is not our home.”

Quinlin continued to talk, and some of the words did get through the translator, terms like “home of we now” and “government of fobs” and “fobs need fils” and “no fils and then fobs cannot be government” and “if fils follow the fobs then they able to stay on land” and “fils that fail to follow come island.” Some other scattered phrases got through, giving Hakamura the implication that society was run by the technophobes and they did what was necessary to stay in power and control society, but they needed the technophiles to keep the technical infrastructure, such as the transporter network, running. It was as if the “fils” were expected to fill a role and nothing more, and those that got out of line ended up here, on this island. If that was true, Hakamura realized, why could they not make this technology work? They had a better chance to understand it than the majority of the people that were “fobs.”

DeWillis did come back to Hakamura, and said, “Without a tricorder, I can’t do it. I really can’t start to play around with this and assume it’s a Starfleet-standard layout, because I’m pretty sure that any tampering would be detected at the other end and that would bring the guards back here rather quickly.”

“I figured as much,” Hakamura remarked. “If there was only some way to signal the ship with this.”

“I know...”

In the city, Bayanhong and the other two were somewhat away from the locals, but she was worried that their exchange with those that recognized them speaking the “old language” would not go without consequences. The people here seemed devoted to their religious practices, with people sampling the foods and writing their sins on pieces of paper that then caught fire and having no idea of the wider universe out there. However, the piece of information that she received about “the island” was something that should be passed to the ship. In a more secluded location, she undid some buttons on her jacket and reached inside to tap her commbadge. “Bayanhong to *Athena*.”

“*Athena* here,” came the response, from the captain himself. “What have you learned?”

“Well, it seems that there is a class of people here, called ‘fils,’ that have some understanding of the ‘old language,’ what we speak, and those people tend to end up on an island. If there’s any location where Sal and Mark could be, it could be that.”

“An island?”

“One scanned earlier which we noticed had a population on it.”

“Of course, but if they’re on that island, they’re out of transporter

range. We need to keep the ship over your location. We’ll have to send the runabout.”

“Okay.”

Chan got the attention of Bayanhong, saying, “Commander, I think we’ve been found out, somehow.” He gestured to several men that were observing them, men who were wearing what looked like military uniforms, in black with what seemed to be body armour, and they had communications devices.

Bayanhong saw them too, and muttered “Great, just what we need.” She tapped the commbadge to shut it off and then subtly removed her hand from the jacket. “Lets keep walking and keep it natural.”

“We’ll have to elude them if we want to beam out,” Chan replied.

“I know. Lets just move and be non-threatening.” Bayanhong and the other two started walking in the direction that they had come. They had forcefield belts, and underneath the clothing, hand phasers, but they would use them only if absolutely necessary. Again, Bayanhong was thinking that this world was really under Prime Directive protection, and she and the other officers knew what that meant. Sometimes, if the decision was between violating the Prime Directive and violating the standing order to not leave anyone behind, not doing the former was more important. Every away team in this situation understood that.

Vorwoorts was the pilot of the ship’s runabout, the *Styx II*, and with her was Lieutenant Pa’o Ha’iakwa, the assistant chief of security, and Lieutenant Richard Yplensky, who was another transporter engineer, who worked under Wilder. Ensign William Drell, another security officer, rounded out the group. As the *Styx* rose out of the shuttlebay, Vorwoorts said, “We’ll attempt to see if Sal and Mark are on the island, and if so, if it is possible to recover them.”

“Prime Directive considerations remain,” Ha’iakwa remarked.

“I know that,” the pilot replied, as she steered the *Styx* away from the ship and headed almost halfway around the planet, where the island was located. “How we’ll approach this depends on what we find there. If they’re isolated, we can attempt contact and beam them up.”

“Explaining their absence can be difficult.”

“And also not our problem. If it’s a prison island, then there are escapes... and sometimes escapes are successful.”

It did not take long for the *Styx* to approach the island, which was surprisingly remote from the rest of the populated land masses, and yet it was connected to the overall closed-circuit transporter system. Ha’iakwa was in the copilot’s seat, and ran the sensors. As the island came into view, the first sensor sweep gave an estimate of the population. “There’s about fifteen hundred people there.”

“Send the transponder codes,” Vorwoorts ordered.

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Ha'iakwa entered the necessary instructions, and got an immediate response. "I'm picking up the codes for both of their forcefield belts. They're there... and lifeforms are associated with each of them."

"Are they alone?"

"No... three other lifeforms are with them."

"That eliminates just beaming them out."

"Now what?"

"We can wait... for now... to see if they can get away from the locals."

In the city, Bayanhong soon realized that they were being followed by what she assumed were the local equivalent of the police. Worse, their course seemed to have been anticipated, as if they had been observed earlier and almost immediately identified as outsiders. Perhaps this city was not a location where people from all over the planet gathered and so outsiders, even from elsewhere on the planet, were noticed. More of the uniformed men appeared, and suddenly they were surrounded by them. They also produced what Bayanhong surmised were weapons, and though they were likely ineffective against the forcefield belts, their presence meant that she could not contact the ship and request an emergency beam-out. Instead, she gestured to the other two that they should cooperate.

One of the black-clad men said, speaking a version of the language old enough that a lot of the words were translated. "We demand you accompany we. You be outside of here. Hierarchy demand you answer questions of they."

"We will not resist," Bayanhong remarked. Right now, she felt she had no choice, since she did not want to reveal to them that they were off-worlders.

The men in black escorted the three around the large square to a small building adjacent to the more magnificent structures that likely housed the local government offices. The small building was likely a police station associated with the square and the surrounding structures. The three were escorted into the basement, and put into a room that, more than anything else, reminded Bayanhong of a dungeon, dark stone walls, a door with bars on it, and not a lot of light. For a moment, they were left alone, prompting Chan to suggest, "We could beam out now."

"Assuming there's nothing to prevent it," Bayanhong answered, "but we're not doing that right now."

"Why?"

"Now's our chance to get answers."

On the *Styx*, Ha'iakwa said, "I don't think that they'll get away from the locals any time soon. Perhaps we could just beam them up."

Vorwoorts answered, "I don't believe that we have authorization to do that."

Drell suggested, “What if we beam down, away from where the others are? It appears there are five of them, our two crewmembers and three locals, in a large building that is otherwise empty. If we beam down and somehow get their attention without the locals noticing.”

“I’m not sure that would work.”

“But it seems that the Sal and Mark are working with the locals,” Yplensky added. “We haven’t done intensive scans, but it certainly seems like that structure contains the transporter terminal for the closed-circuit system. The locals might be helping them leave the island. If they do, finding them again might be more difficult.”

Vorwoorts did see on the sensor display what the engineer was referring to. It seemed that the *Athena* officers had managed to establish communications with some locals who could operate the transporter device. She was not sure why the people were on that island or why Hakamura and DeWillis had ended up there, but she was thinking that perhaps Yplensky was right and if they could operate that transporter terminal, they could escape and return to the mainland and be lost again. She could simply hail them through their commbadges, but she was thinking of Drenn’s plan as well. “Very well,” she said. “I’ll go down.”

“You?” asked Ha’iakwa.

“Just one person needs to go down.” She got a tricorder from the equipment storage and downloaded the layout of the building and other important information, and then selected a location away from the others and had Yplensky beam her down.

Bayanhong, Chan and Lee did not have to wait long before a couple of men came into their cell. One of them was wearing the body armour and carrying a weapon, similar to what they had seen earlier, and the other was a man dressed in more civilian clothing, or at least that was the impression that Bayanhong got. She was not sure of the clothing conventions on this planet, nor was she sure what the age of the individual was. He seemed *a bit* older than the other man, but he could have been in his sixties or seventies, as far as she knew. He was also the one who spoke, and the language he used seemed different than the language that she had been hearing in the city, and it was more archaic, and so more of the words were coming through the translator. It was as if this man knew that the *Athena* officers were not native to the planet and he had an idea of where they came from.

The older man started, “You have been observed in the city, during the Festival of Redemption, and you were observed speaking a language that the city dwellers do not understand. Our devices also indicate that you have on your possession unknown technology, which is in prohibition of our laws. Clearly you are not from Stanbula.” Bayanhong assumed that “Stanbula” was a placename, perhaps the name of the city, or the larger administrative unit the city was in, or perhaps the name of the planet itself. The man asked,

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“Who are you and where do you come from?”

Bayanhong decided to test her theory, and answered, “I’m Julia Bayanhong. With me are Connie Lee and Martin Chan.” Giving names was not threatening, as the locals no doubt had names, and some of those names could have been similar. “What is your name?”

The man decided there was no harm in providing that information, “My name is Ischard Donnolly.” That did register to Bayanhong, as the last name was the same as the first officer of the *Clements*, Renee Donnolly. He might have been a direct descendant, and even after all of these years, the families of the senior officers might have been high-ranking in this society. Donnolly asked, “You have not stated where you are from.”

“We are from Earth,” Bayanhong replied, but for some reason, that name did not register, perhaps because “earth,” or its derived forms, was now a common noun referring to dirt and soil and the like. She tried another term, “We are from the *Athena*. It’s how we came here.”

“The *Athena*?” Donnolly remarked, speaking almost in reverence. It was as if that term meant something beyond what it meant to Bayanhong. “You are emissaries.”

“Well, not really.”

“Emissaries of the gods.”

“What?”

The other man with Donnolly said, “We must inform Joen of this.”

“Of course. It all fits together now. They have returned.” With those words, the two left the dungeon-like cell and closed the door, leaving the three *Athena* officers inside.

“What the hell was that about?” Lee asked. “Emissaries of the gods?”

“Well,” Bayanhong replied, “I can’t imagine that it would be the name of the ship. It’s unlikely that they would have any clue of a Greek goddess named Athena. About the only thing that I can figure out is that when Captain Rice took his ship back in time, he might’ve anticipated that we might someday come looking for him and what he left behind, and perhaps over the millennia, the idea of the *Athena* returning would’ve been misinterpreted into something religious.”

“We should return to the ship,” Chan suggested.

“No. We need to meet this Joen person. I’ve got a good idea what his or her last name would be.”

“Rice?”

“Yes, given that the man we just met was the descendant of the first officer, Renee Donnolly, so if that name survived, then so did Rice, and if anybody knows what is going on here, it would be a descendant of the captain.”

“But how long do we have to wait?”

“Well, given the planet-wide transporter network that they have here, no matter where this person is, he or she can be here in no time.”

“I hope so. This place is pretty damp and unpleasant looking, and probably ancient too.”

The main room where the transporter terminal was located was fairly large, with a large platform where the passengers and the cargo would stand, and areas off to the side where goods could be off-loaded and people could gather to come or go. Behind each of the long walls of the terminal room were access hatches that led into the machinery that was used in the system. Vorwoorts could see on her tricorder that two of the natives were standing off by the side, while Hakamura and DeWillis were working with the third native. They were at one of the wall panels and had managed to get it off and were looking at the machinery within. Vorwoorts slowly made her way into the room, which, she noticed, had a number of what looked like guard posts or something similar to her. Inside the booths, she saw controls marked in the local writing and a display screen, which was not operational. She was studying the two *Athena* officers and was trying to devise a method to get the attention of one of them without making it obvious. She noticed that DeWillis and the native were looking at the machinery, while Hakamura stepped off to the side and approached the transporter control panel.

Hakamura said, “You sure that this would work?”

“I think so,” DeWillis replied. “It’s usually easier to make something stop working than to get it working again. Without the transporter operational at this end, the guards can’t return.”

“And they can’t bring food or anything else. Chorolon said that they would have to talk to us. There’s no other way to reach this island, at least in a reasonable time frame. Check the console. Is there something?”

Hakamura thought he noticed movement, and looked around. It was as if they were not alone in this room. Did some of the guards remain behind? Did they let the strangers into this room to see what they were upto, but would spring into action should they actually attempt to damage the equipment? The movement came from one of the guard booths near the entrance, and when Hakamura looked again, he saw a familiar face. Before he could react, he saw Vorwoorts put a finger to her lips, a universal gesture to be quiet and not give her away. The ship had found them, he realized, but they were in the presence of the natives. He had to think fast.

DeWillis asked again, “Is the panel showing anything?”

“I can’t tell, but there’s a new problem. We’ve been found out. We’ve got to get out of here.”

“Some of the guards are still around?”

“Something like that. Get Chorolon to get the other two out of here, and tell them we’ll be right behind.” DeWillis was looking at Hakamura as he said those words, and in the process, he could see the guard booth, but he could not see Vorwoorts, who had ducked out of the way. He did look around but saw no one else, and yet had to trust Hakamura. He was a security



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officer with the training to spot potential threats and see things that others might not see so readily—and he was the ranking officer as well.

DeWillis did his best to explain to Quinlin that he had to get Chin and Ore out of the room, because they could be in big trouble otherwise. Quinlin knew the way out, and DeWillis said that they would be right behind them. The three did leave, and the two *Athena* officers were a bit slow to follow. “What’s going on?” he asked the security chief.

“The ship found us.” He pointed to the security booth, where Vorwoorts revealed herself again.

As Bayanhong had predicted, the wait before more people came to their dungeon cell was not long. They had barely any time to get hungry or thirsty, or have other bodily needs, before the door opened again. They also had no contact with the ship, which suggested to her that perhaps their commbadges were blocked. No doubt, the captain would be worried about having two away teams captured by the locals, but he would not attempt another rescue mission, at least not yet. The door opened again, making a rather loud creaking noise, and four people walked in. One was a male, and another was female, the latter a little on the short side and with long, straight brown hair, which she found unusual on a planet where the people tended to have shorter hair. She was also carrying a case that contained something. The other two were more of the guards, with the body armour and the weapons like those the officers had seen earlier.

“One of them is Joen,” Chan remarked, in a soft voice, to the first officer.

“No doubt.”

The man, speaking the more archaic form of the language that the translator could handle, spoke first, saying, “We have reason to believe that you have come to our world on the spaceship that is currently in orbit around the planet.”

So they could detect the presence of the *Athena* afterall, Bayanhong thought. She admitted, “Yes.” They probably had a way to detect the ship that was not overt, but somehow passive, and they had decided to ignore any ship that was in orbit so that the ship would ignore the planet, assuming the ship was Arosian.

“There is a secondary vessel that has departed the main ship and headed elsewhere, to a location where two other strangers like you were sent. Were they part of the crew of the ship?”

Assuming that he was referring to Hakamura and DeWillis, Bayanhong answered, “They are.”

“They are possibly creating a problem at their location, by damaging or disabling the transporter device. They need to be stopped.”

“If you let us communicate with them, we can stop them. We can, in fact, leave the planet entirely.”

“Yes, I understand that.”

Now Bayanhong had her own question for the man, asking, “Are you Joen?”

“No,” the woman spoke up. “I am Joen.”

“Joen Rice?”

The woman hesitated for a moment, before she answered, “That is correct.” She put down the case she was carrying on the table in the room, and opened it up. Within was some fabric that was wrapped around something. She unwrapped the fabric, and revealed a book, a very old book, one without labelling on the cover and which looked like it had originally been blank. It looked fragile, and Rice handled it with extreme care. When she spoke, she did so in a language even more archaic—and so archaic that it was the English that the crew of the *Athena* spoke, but her accent and careful diction indicated that it was a language she had learned and which she had little reason to use. “I am a direct descendant of Edmund Rice, the original leader of Clemens.”

“Clemens?” Bayanhong asked.

“That is the name given to our world, in the language I speak now, but in the modern language of the people, it has been reduced to Lema. It is the world gifted to us by the gods, one of the two worlds.” At first, Bayanhong thought that the other world would be Earth, but Rice said instead, “The other is Aden. When I heard mention of the name of the ship that is in orbit about the planet, I knew that the moment had come. I had been prepared for this moment, because of events that had transpired.”

“What moment?”

“The moment of your return.”

Lee said softly, “This does not sound good.”

Rice opened the book, and Bayanhong could see that the text on those pages was written by hand. If Captain Rice had written that, she was surprised that it had survived all of these centuries. Then again, using a replicator, it was possible to create paper and other materials that would be durable and not deteriorate as long as they were cared for properly. “The descendants of the original leader have been entrusted with this book,” the woman continued. “It contains the true story, and included in that story was the day when the society that our ancestors have created would be destroyed by the return of our kin.”

“Your kin?” Bayanhong asked.

“When the sky fell silent and the evil was no more, when the advisory was no more, we became prepared for this day.” Bayanhong assumed that Rice was meaning the Arosian Empire, and it was possible that the Yudens had a means to detect non-natural subetheromagnetic radiation from the empire. Once it was destroyed, all of that ceased, and they would know that because Captain Rice had written down that it would happen. “For the people, there was great celebration since we had always feared the evil and

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feared that they would find out our true nature and do what they had done to so many others. Then, when the word arrived that the evil was gone, there was great celebration. However, this book prophesized that the evil would disappear, but we knew there was no celebration to come. We were waiting for another sign, and just recently, we received it. We detected the signal from the other site, the location of the subspace transmitter around the original planet.” That, Bayanhong thought, would be Yuden One, the name the *Athena* crew had given it. “We detected the signal, and identified what had caused it and what it meant. When there was a representative of the great evil on board the ship, we knew the moment had come.”

“What is she talking about?” asked Chan.

“The *Athena* was scanned and identified, with most of the crew on board identified as the same xenotype as the Yudens, but with one who scanned as Arosian.”

“Rodall?”

“Yes.”

Rice continued, “We know that the representative of the great evil on the ship was in fact not from the great evil, since the great evil was destroyed. Like the great evil, we know that we did not originate on the world we now inhabit, but we came from another society that is a great distance away. The people believe that the gods somehow brought us here, created life for us here and said that we would be safe here, at least until the time of the reproachment, and the redemption... and the great dying.”

“What?” Bayanhong remarked, shocked at that turn of phrase. “I don’t understand.”

Vorwoorts stepped out of her hiding place when she saw that the three natives had left the area, and she gestured for them to follow her. Hakamura said, once he reached her, “Why did you not just hail us with the commbadges?”

“You were in the presence of the natives.”

DeWillis added, “You’re an odd choice to come down to meet us.”

“That’s because we’re on the *Styx*. Captain Thorpe wants to keep the ship over one of the cities, where there’s another away team that has been captured.”

“Great,” Hakamura retorted. “Now we have to go and rescue *them*.”

“Something like that.” By now, the three had left the transporter terminal room and were in a more secluded area. Vorwoorts tapped her commbadge and said, “Three to beam up...”

In the dungeon, Bayanhong had just heard the descendant of Captain Rice talk about the great dying, and how they had somehow prophesized that the *Athena* would one day find them, or at least Captain Rice had thought about that and written it down in his book. He assumed that both the book

and the civilization his crew founded would survive. If it did, then this day would come, he thought. But what was this “great dying?” The first officer asked, “What do you mean?”

Rice answered, “The problem is that you are biologically the same as we are. We are the same species. However, the diseases that affect you are absent from us, and we have no immunity for diseases that are endemic in you, and which we have had no exposure for generation after generation. Whatever immunity our original ancestors had would be long gone now.”

“We anticipated this,” Bayanhong answered. “Our transporters have devices called biofilters, which remove any cell that is not biologically part of us or essential for us. Disease cells, such as they are, had been removed.”

“And yet your body itself is an ecosystem,” Rice continued. “There are microbes and other fauna on your body which are not dangerous, and in fact are essential to the operation of your body, such as the microbes in your digestive system. Now, we have similar fauna in our bodies too, but given the separation between us, those microbes could’ve changed a lot. The ones in your system could become dangerous to us.”

“And vice versa,” Bayanhong remarked. “If what you say is true, then the opposite is true too. The microbes in your system could be dangerous to us.”

“The difference is that you are limited to your ship, and if the equivalent of the great dying were to happen on your ship, then it would not infect the rest of the people on your home planet. However, here, the diseases you bring could spread to the whole planet.”

“You have no proof of this,” Bayanhong suggested.

“But my ancestor, the original founder of our society, was worried about that, and feared that could happen. If he believed it was possible, then we have to believe him. We have learned of how the Arosians had disappeared, because they were separated from their originating population, leading to two populations of biologically similar people, the Arosians and the Odonans. Something that the Odonans had infected the Arosians and led to the downfall of their civilization.”

In other words, Bayanhong was learning, the Yudens did in fact know that the race that they were hiding from was no longer extant, or at least some elite among them knew that. The general population was kept in the dark. Even so, Bayanhong knew there was no correspondence between the two events, as she explained, “There is one fundamental difference. The disease that destroyed the Arosians was a biological weapon, which also destroyed almost all of the predecessor culture. Only a small minority that had immunity survived, and they became the Odonans. The disease was endemic in them, but that was a disease engineered to be deadly, not beneficial fauna that became deadly to another group after a long separation.”

“Even so, the risk is there.”

“But if the risk was there, why were we not contacted? You have the

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subspace transmitter in orbit. If you know that the Arosians were destroyed, then clearly you've been monitoring the data coming in on that satellite. You knew we were coming, so why no contact? If we were warned of this danger, we would've stayed away."

"The problem is that the government is run by the fobs, and they do not listen."

"What is a 'fob'?" asked Bayanhong.

"The majority of the people on this planet, who choose to live in a more technologically primitive state, with few exceptions. We have the transporter network and use it for transport, but we don't have a space presence. We limit the use of computer technology to prevent issues with artificial intelligence, and we limit the use of robots and androids, and avoid weapon development. The government has deemed this a better way to live. They do not want anything to do with technology such as the subspace transmitter. We—we are the fobs or technophiles—cannot get them to listen. They do not accept that the Arosian threat is gone, perhaps because that would end the justification for their grip on power."

Bayanhong then said, "If you fear our presence here, then the best thing to do would be to let us return to our ship and then leave the system. We need to also retrieve the other two who are on the planet."

Rice answered, "That's one of the reasons we took the risk in capturing you, once we realized you were on the planet, and in this city, one of our largest, where you exposed yourself to large numbers of people. The two were on an isolation island, but we have grown worried that they could interfere with the transporter terminal there and prevent our people from accessing it. If they damage or interfere with the device, that would prevent resources, such as food, from reaching the island. We have no other way to reach that location in reasonable time."

Chan remarked, "That confirms that Sal and Mark are there."

"I suspect that the ship already knows that. They would've checked." To Rice, she said, "I need to contact my ship. Is communications blocked?"

"No, but they are monitored."

Which, Bayanhong thought, would be pointless since the commbadges encrypted the signals that were exchanged. She tapped it and said, "Bayanhong to *Athena*."

"*Athena* here," came the response, with Captain Thorpe speaking.

"We have confirmation that the first away team is on that island."

"That's been confirmed, and in fact, they have already been retrieved by the *Styx* and are on their way back."

"Very well. Stand by." She tapped the commbadge to put it in standby mode, and said to Rice, "That situation there has been resolved. The two on the island have been removed."

"They may have contaminated those on the island. We will have to approach cautiously."

“We can transmit whatever information we have on the beneficial fauna in our bodies so that you can understand them and use that information for treatments, detection and the like.”

“That’s not necessary,” Rice remarked. “All of that information is in the Original Computer.”

“The ‘original computer?’” the first officer asked.

“The data brought here by the original settlers, our ultimate ancestors.”

In other words, the computer core from the *Clements* still existed, after all of these years. Of course, the elemental memory core was as durable and stable as protons and electrons and stable isotopes of common elements, so it was no surprise that it could still exist, but machinery to read the computer core was something else. “Very well, if the others have been removed, then it would be in your best interest if we were to leave too, so that we would not risk contaminating more people.”

Rice thought about it for a moment, and Bayanhong had the feeling that she might not have the authority to release them. She was a fil, and so was in the minority in this society and the fobs might not want to release these strangers, because they did not understand the risk. However, the woman did say, “Very well. I will turn my back... and not hinder what you can do.” With those words, Rice and the others turned and left the room.

Chan asked, “Do you think that the risk she mentioned is real? Could what is harmless, and even beneficial bacteria to us, be deadly to them, because of how these things would evolve, given thousands of years of separation?”

“It’s possible, but not certain. Evolution could make them useless to them as much as deadly, but I also don’t think that in our limited amount of time, we have lost too much of those microbes and the like.” Reaching for her commbadge again, she added, “We should take the opportunity of them ‘turning their backs’ and beam back to the ship.” Tapping the commbadge, she said, “Three to beam up...”

*“Captain’s log, stardate 56,411.6. We have remained at this planet, which we have called simply Lema, the native term for it, for five days, and have monitored their broadcast signals for any indication that the ‘great dying’ that they fear is in fact happening. We have seen no signs of it, no alteration in the use of the transporters and no reports in the broadcasts of mysterious sicknesses or other unexplained events. The translator systems have gotten pretty efficient in translating the broadcasts and the like, and there is nothing to indicate that the fears of the descendant of Captain Rice are coming true. We are preparing to depart, but we might come this way again—or another ship might—to make sure that nothing happened.”*

“So far, nothing,” Bayanhong remarked, as she met with the captain

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in the ready room. “There’s no indication, by any means we know, that there is a new illness, a new plague, spreading on this planet. On the other hand, Dr. Psakolaps has said that problems caused by strange gut fauna and the like might take time to manifest itself.”

“That’s what I fear too.”

“On the other hand, if they do have problems, it might not be nothing more than a round of diarrhea, as their immune systems fight them off. What we have seen, though, is that the population is very healthy and seemed to have altered the aging process. They look more youthful than their years.”

“Natural evolution or genetic mutation?” Thorpe asked.

“We have no idea.”

“Of course.”

“We are ready for departure. Do we begin the long journey home?”

“Yes,” Thorpe replied, as he leaned back in his chair.

She did look tentatively at the captain, and said, “And... no urge at all to perhaps track down this Aden, a planet where *our* descendants live after *we* went back in time?”

“I don’t believe it exists,” the captain answered. “I don’t want to believe it exists. I don’t want to know what circumstances sent us back thousands of years, to stop Captain Rice and his crew in the past. I don’t want to hear orders from Starfleet Command to that effect. Whatever we do will fail and history will play out as it meant to be played out.”

“Even if it leads to this alleged Aden?”

“Yes, even then.”