

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Coming Next Month](#)

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ENIGMA SHIP

J. Steven York & Christina F. York



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Chapter

1

“U.S.S. Lincoln to Vulpecula, the Arch-Merchanthas dropped out of warp again. Let’s circle back on impulse and see what’s broken this time.”

Second Mate Wayne “Pappy” Omthon muttered a curse and shut down the Vulpecula’s warp drive. The freighter shuddered and the lights on the cramped bridge flickered as it shifted to impulse.

Pappy turned the command chair to face the sensor console and get a fix on Arch-Merchant, wincing at the chair’s squeak. He’d get it oiled as soon as he had time.

The image on the screen was fuzzy, so Pappy slapped it with the flat of his pistachio-green hand, a practiced maneuver that instantly, if temporarily, cleared up the image. He’d earned the nickname “Pappy” by being far younger than the captain and most of the crew serving under him, a point he was still defensive about. But he prided himself on knowing the ship’s quirks as well as any old-timer.

Arch-Merchant was venting plasma coolant. He sighed, ignoring the sensor display which had gone all fuzzy again. "That ship," he announced, without a trace of irony, "is a piece of junk." He slapped the sensor display again, then put in a call to Captain Rivers in her cabin to advise her of the situation.

Rivers was, as he'd expected, mildly drunk. The captain instructed him to use his own judgment, and not to call her again unless there was a core breach. Pappy grunted as the intercom screen went blank, then set a reverse course. It was business as usual.

Both the *Vulpecula* and the *Arch-Merchant* were privately owned freighters operating on the edge of former Cardassian space. The fall of the Cardassian Union and the aftermath of the Dominion War had thrown the region into chaos, creating lucrative new trade opportunities, and new dangers as pirates and raiders moved in.

Federation starships were spread thin and overworked, so freighters often formed small, impromptu convoys for mutual protection and safety. Pappy didn't fear the danger much, but he was just as happy when they were transporting some cargo important enough to Federation interests to warrant a starship to escort their convoy.

On this run, the two ships carried power station components, Cardassian war salvage from abandoned bases now needed to rebuild Cardassia Prime. If Pappy found it ironic that the Federation was paying to ship Cardassian war materials to restore Cardassia, he never would have said so. It was exactly the sort of situation a tramp freighter captain lived for. It was Pappy's ambition to buy the *Vulpecula* from Captain Rivers one of these days. His share of profits from this run would be one more step in that direction.

If they ever got to Cardassia.

"*Vulpecula* to *Lincoln*. How long are we going to be delayed this time?"

One of the secondary viewscreens cleared, and the angular features of a human Starfleet officer appeared. "This is Captain Newport. Shouldn't you be addressing that question to the *Arch-Merchant*?"

Pappy grinned, he hoped not too much. "Since it's my guess your engineers will be doing the repair work, I thought you'd know best."

Newport chuckled. "My chief engineer is putting together a repair party right now. We should know more after they beam over. Tell me, why is it—" He hesitated. "How to put this politely?"

"I won't make you ask the question, Captain. The *Arch-Merchant* is a corporate ship. She looks clean and sharp for the stockholders, but she's lucky to make it out of orbit without shedding a nacelle. We're a tramp, and independent. Our ship looks like the rattletrap she is, but we keep the important systems in top shape, appearances be damned. Most of the time, we're all we've got out here."

Newport nodded. "Well, thanks for being the less troublesome part of this mission." He glanced to one side. "Looks like the *Arch-Merchant* managed to plug the plasma leak on their own. Uncommonly resourceful of them. Now if we can just—"

The screen went blank. No static, no interference, no sign of a problem on the Federation ship. It just went blank. Startled, Pappy glanced up at the main viewer. He could see the *Arch-Merchant*'s plasma cloud, a tiny smudge against the darkness, glowing in reflecting starlight, but the *Lincoln* was gone.

He slammed the intercom panel. "Condition red, all crew to emergency stations. Possible hostiles incoming!" Then, after a moment's hesitation, "Captain to the bridge."

He knew the result of that last command: the captain would at least attempt to sober up first. If he was lucky, he might see her on the bridge in an hour or so.

He hailed the Arch-Merchant. "Did you see what happened to the Lincoln?"

The reply was audio only and crackled with static. The voice was high, tinged with incipient panic. "No, Vulpecula, our sensors are down too. Are we under attack? We can't see anything. We're dead in space! Don't leave us!"

"I'm not leaving anybody, but I'm busy here. Save your questions and send out a distress call for me, will you?" Pappy closed the channel and turned his attention to the sensor screens. No hostiles, no radiation or debris, no cosmic storms, nothing that would account for the Lincoln's disappearance.

He reviewed his own sensor logs, replaying the event. The Lincoln vanished, without violence or explosion. He slowed down the replay, then slowed it again. He squinted. The Lincoln didn't just vanish. It was as though it had run into an invisible rift in space and been swallowed. A wormhole? He shook his head. He should have picked something up on sensors.

He heard the bridge doors slide open. The Vulpecula was highly automated, and the tiny bridge had only two stations. The second was staffed only during shift changeovers or critical operations such as docking. Or during emergencies, so he wasn't surprised to hear someone slide into the seat behind him. He was surprised to catch a strong odor of Saurian brandy.

Turning his head, he caught the captain's eye. "Carry on, Pappy. I took a handful of stims, but she's still your ship for now." She tapped the controls to activate her station. "Just tell me what you need."

That explained the smell. The stims were burning the alcohol out of her system. Pappy tapped at the command console, transferring information to the secondary station.

"The point at which the Lincoln disappeared is on your sensor display. Run a detailed scan on the area in front of it. Look for anything unusual." Pappy ordered all stop, and kept his distance. If something had pulled the Lincoln in, it wouldn't do to be pulled in as well.

The secondary consoles chirped and beeped as the captain entered commands. Finally she looked up at him, her dark eyes red and tired, but sobering by the minute. "There's something out there, a discontinuity, like somebody blew an invisible bubble and the Lincoln just ran into it."

Pappy frowned, his sharp eyebrows drawing together into a vee. "How big a bubble?"

The Captain consulted her displays, rubbed her eyes, then checked them again. "I'm reading a sphere a hundred kilometers across. We just missed running into it ourselves." She sighed. "This is trouble."

"Our convoy partner is disabled, we're facing off with an invisible threat the size of a moon, one that just took out an Intrepid-class starship without firing a shot. Yeah, that would be one definition of 'trouble.'" He tapped the thruster controls.

It was the Captain's turn to frown. "What are you doing?"

“Getting in closer,” he replied. “Somebody may need rescuing.”

* * *

The U.S.S. da Vinci was a small ship. Even with a limited crew of about forty, its interior was crowded and cluttered by Starfleet standards, a situation not improved by the preponderance of engineers in its crew. In general, they were pragmatic about their use of ship’s spaces. It wasn’t unusual to see someone overhauling environmental suits on a briefing room table, storing salvaged alien propulsion components in a corner of the transporter room, or playing Andorian Juggle-ball in the shuttlebay.

Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy could even remember a time when all the corridors of deck six had been briefly converted into a miniature golf course, complete with holographic windmill. The exception to all this madness, by unspoken consent, was the mess hall. Not that it was reserved for eating, not at all, but it was reserved for quiet conversation, reading, social gatherings, and the occasional spontaneous musical interlude. No plasma torches, no alien artifacts, and no extreme sports allowed.

That was why Duffy liked it there, why it was the place he retreated when he needed to work or think, when his quarters became too cramped or lonely. The lights were kept low, the dark maroon chairs were inviting, and the clusters of small tables fostered quiet conversation. It was the da Vinci’s living room, the place he came to bask in the feeling of family, and be reminded why he really liked having one of the few private cabins on the ship.

He’d picked a choice seat for himself near one of the scattered windows, where he could watch the stars, and ordered a quinine water from the replicator. Leaning back in the lightly padded chair, he put his feet on the table and sat back with an oversized design padd propped up in his lap.

He’d just gotten comfortable, opened his work space, and managed to move exactly one line in the display when he sensed someone standing behind him, and a very familiar scent of herbal shampoo. Commander Sonya Gomez leaned into his field of view, looking at the padd.

“What’re you doing?”

He pulled the padd protectively to his stomach. “Nothing. Just doodling.”

Gomez glanced at the table, and Duffy hastily put his feet on the floor. “That was a starship. You’re doodling a starship?”

“So?”

“Pretty elaborate doodle. How long you been doodling?”

He sighed and lowered the padd back to working position. “Six months.”

“That’s some doodle.” She leaned closer, her body nearly touching his shoulder, and this time he didn’t try to hide his work. “I didn’t know you were interested in ship design.”

“Isn’t every engineer on some level?”

“So you’re designing a ship?”

“An S.C.E. ship.”

“We’ve got one of those already.”

The doors opened, and Gomez drew back a fraction. Fabian Stevens and P8 Blue came in. Stevens headed for the replicators, while Pattie scuttled across the floor on all legs, popping to an upright stance only when reaching Duffy’s table. “Greetings. I see you are designing a ship, Commander.”

“So I’ve heard,” said Gomez. “An S.C.E. ship, I’m told.”

“We’ve already got one of those,” said Stevens, who approached the table with two cups in hand. He gave one to Pattie. “Here’s your ‘swamp tea,’ whatever that is. I don’t really want to know.”

“Thank you,” said Pattie.

“That’s what I told him,” Gomez said.

Duffy sighed. “Theda Vinci is a great ship, but she isn’t designed for the kind of missions we go on. No ship is, really. Tugs are slow, short range, and don’t have the shops or crew capacity we need. A general purpose design like this Saber -class is small and maneuverable sure, but it’s too fragile for heavy work, and it also doesn’t have the cargo, shop, or laboratory space we could really use.”

Gomez’s interest was piqued. “So you’re designing a ship with our needs in mind?”

Duffy shrugged. “It’s just an exercise, a dream ship really. Gives me an excuse to broaden my knowledge of ship’s systems.”

“It resembles a Norway -class,” observed Pattie, shoving a second small table next to Duffy’s.

“I used that as a starting point, but see, the engines are uprated, and the whole front of the saucer section opens up like—no offense, Pattie—like insect mandibles, to form a miniature drydock. We can pull things partially inside the ship for inspection or repair.”

Pattie tapped a foreleg at a part of the diagram. “What are those?”

“Heavy tractor beam emitters, for towing.”

“You should add six smaller ones,” said Pattie, “for precision manipulation of objects in space.”

Duffy nodded. “Good idea.”

“And more Jefferies tubes,” said Pattie. “I like Jefferies tubes.”

By now, several other crewmembers had entered the mess hall, including the chief of security, Lt. Commander Domenica Corsi, and the chief medical officer, Dr. Elizabeth Lense, and all of them seemed to be gravitating to the table. Stevens shoved another table over, and sat next to Corsi.

“Idea,” said Stevens. “An industrial replicator, so we don’t have to replicate small parts and put ‘em together into something big. And maybe a second hololab.”

Gomez sighed, and Duffy imagined he could feel the warmth of her breath on the back of his neck. “A second holodeck would be nice. Then it can double for recreational purposes.”

“Holodecks are nothing but trouble,” said Corsi. “We’d be better off without any. More quantum torpedoes would be good though. I’m very in favor of more torpedoes.”

Lense reached across the table and tapped Duffy on the wrist. “Put in a Risa deck.”

Duffy looked up at her. “What’s a Risa deck?”

She shrugged. “Risa in deck form. Sounds good to me.” She saw the look in Duffy’s eyes. “What do you expect? I’m a doctor, not an engineer.”

He looked back at his padd. “You’re not taking this seriously.” He scowled at her, but couldn’t hold it for long. “Besides, I like my Risa in chewable, cherry-flavored lozenge form anyway.”

A faint vibration in the hull stilled the conversation, and all eyes went to the windows, where beyond the nacelle the stars shifted into streaks of light. “We’ve gone to warp,” said Duffy.

Gomez seemed to be assessing the vibration in the deck. “About nine-point-six-five. We’re in a hurry.”

“The inertial dampers need tuning,” said Pattie.

Stevens nodded, touching a bulkhead with his fingertips. “Somebody should check those plasma injectors too.”

Corsi rolled her eyes. “How did I get stuck on a ship full of engineers?”

“Dumb luck?” Stevens said with a smile.

Captain Gold’s voice came from the intercom. “S.C.E. staff to the observation lounge.”

“Right on schedule,” said Lense, taking one last sip of fraktajino before heading toward the doors.

“Showtime, people,” said Gomez, leading the rest of them out.

Duffy sighed and cleared the padd’s display. “One plasma conduit,” he muttered, before following the others into the corridor. “I got to move one lousy plasma conduit.”

Chapter

2

Captain David Gold sat alone at the table in the U.S.S. da Vinci’s observation lounge. Carefully spaced around the long black table stood a full complement of vacant chairs, all Starfleet standard issue, save for Blue’s at the other end of the table. At his elbow was a rapidly cooling bowl of matzoh ball soup, and the grim visage of Captain Montgomery Scott filled the main viewscreen in the wall to his right.

He glanced briefly into the soup, decided the color of the broth was too pale, the sheen of fat on top somehow wrong. He set it on the table to finish its thermodynamic journey to room temperature. No matter how many times he had the crew tweak the replicators, they could never produce even a faint

shadow of his wife's wonderful homemade soup.

Captain Scott seemed to notice the bowl for the first time. "Sorry about your lunch, David. This is one of those instances where seconds could mean the difference between life and death."

Under better circumstances, Gold might have grinned. Captain Scott was a man out of time, an officer from the golden days of two-fisted space exploration. He didn't shy from the dramatic, or even the melodramatic. It was something Gold liked in Scott, even as he found it sorely lacking in himself. "My people are on their way, and we're already en route at maximum warp. It sounds like we should hit the ground running, so to speak."

"Aye, that's the way I see it. Everything we've got on the situation has been transferred to your computers under the heading 'Enigma,' but I wanted to brief you all personally."

The door opened and the S.C.E. crew began to file in, led by Gomez and Corsi.

Gold nodded to acknowledge their arrival. "Warm up your padds, there's work to be done."

"Always is," replied Gomez, pulling out her personal access data display.

Corsi's reaction was different. She stopped and studied the captain, her eyes narrowed. He could see her mind working furiously.

Corsi wasn't an engineer, far from it. Beyond fieldstripping a hand phaser in the dark, or setting a demolitions charge, she steered clear of technical subjects. If the current mission concerned her, she knew there was a threat involved, either to the ship, or the crew. Playing watchdog to a ship full of egghead engineers, often oblivious to their own safety, was her job. She took it very seriously.

Lense, Soloman, Blue, Abramowitz, and Stevens quickly followed and took their seats, Blue scuttling across the room and crawling onto her special chair at the far end of the table. Gold noticed Duffy bringing up the rear, a distracted frown on his face.

"Computer, display file Enigma on the main viewer." A screen on the wall lit with the files entry screen, Scott's image shifting to an inset in the upper-right-hand corner.

Gomez frowned as she looked over the file's contents. "This is a search-and-rescue operation? I'd think there were better-equipped ships in the sector for that."

Scott sighed. "Well now, that's the rub. The U.S.S. Chinook is already on station, but they're having no luck getting inside the bloody thing, or even figuring out what in blazes it is. Command has a vital relief mission for them across the sector, and they're going to have to get under way in just a few hours."

"More vital than a missing starship?" Gold asked.

"According to Starfleet Command, this is classified as a salvage operation where the *Lincoln* is concerned. We know the *Lincoln* struck what they're calling a navigation hazard at sublight speed. The object is about a hundred kilometers in diameter, and the *Lincoln* didn't come out the other side. That means it was likely decelerated from two-hundred and fifty thousand KPH to the navigation hazard's speed, about ten thousand KPH."

Gold felt his jaw clench involuntarily as he thought about it.

Shaking his head, Stevens said, “Even with inertial dampers, that should have torn the Lincoln to shreds, and turned its crew into paste. Not something I’d wish on my worst enemy.”

“That’s what Starfleet assumes, Mr. Stevens. There’s also the matter of a freighter crewman who disappeared inside the object under less violent circumstances. Starfleet hasn’t given up on him, but the Chinook’s mission is of planetary importance. They expect you go in, rescue that merchantman if possible, recover any wreckage, and deal with this blasted navigation hazard, but that’s nae the way I think. The crew of the Lincoln is as certain paste as I’m seventy-five years dead on a derelict ship. Until I see evidence of the wreckage and the bodies, we’ll be working on the assumption that those people are alive and in need of our immediate help.”

This time Gold did grin, just a little. Scott had come back from the dead more than once, after all. “If I’m ever in trouble, Scotty, I should have someone like you looking for me. Fine, search and rescue, then. By the book. If there’s any way possible, we’ll be bringing them back alive.”

Scotty’s lined face brightened a bit. “Aye, I knew I could count on you lot. It’s stumped the science types on the Chinook, so I’m hoping an engineering approach will do better. Just don’t forget the main thing is to crack that egg open and get any survivors out. Captain Gold, I’ll stop my meddling and let you get on with your work. Good luck to ye, and keep me posted.”

The screen blanked, replaced by an annoyingly incomplete scan of the enigma object.

Gold turned back to the crew. “We’ll be pulling alongside the object in about eight hours, but we should know what we’re doing when we get there. Comments?”

Blue made a little bell-like noise, her equivalent to clearing her throat. “Captain Scott’s egg metaphor, while gruesome, appears quite accurate. It seems impossible to understand this object from surface observations. To understand it better, we’ll need to find a way to penetrate to its interior.”

Gomez nodded. “That’s what we’ll need to focus on then.”

“Remember,” Gold said, “our immediate goal here isn’t complete or immediate understanding of the Enigma, it’s results. We’ll try anything, and we’ll try everything.”

“It would help,” Stevens said, “if we could see inside the thing.”

“Good point, Fabian,” Gomez said with another nod. “Take the lead on that. Find us a window inside that thing, visual, sensors, probing with a long metal rod—anything that’ll give us some useful information.”

“One more thing,” said Stevens. “This freighter crewman, Wayne Omthon, who’s lost inside? I’m pretty sure I’ve met him. My parents run a shuttle service in the Rigel colonies, and he’s hauled express cargo through there while I was visiting. Apparently Rigel is a regular stop for his ship.”

“It’s a small galaxy,” said Corsi.

“But I wouldn’t want to paint it,” said Duffy.

Gold talked over their banter with the ease of long practice. “Can you tell us anything useful about him?”

Stevens scratched his chin for a moment, considering. “Mom once said he was part-human, part-green Orion. Not sure why that was noteworthy.”

Corsi grinned, as though someone had just told her a secret joke.

Stevens studied her face for a moment, puzzled, then moved on. “He has a good reputation as an engineer. Apparently he’s come up with some innovations to improve the engine efficiency on Profit-class Ferengi-built freighters, which have been widely adopted.”

Gold mulled this for a moment. “You think that’s significant?”

“Reports are he’s smart and resourceful. He may have found, or at least stumbled upon, a way to open a chink in the Enigma’s hide. Maybe if we can figure out how he did it, we won’t have to reinvent the wheel.”

“It’s worth keeping in mind,” Gomez said. “Thanks, Fabian.” She turned her attention to Blue. “Pattie, assuming we can find a way inside the Enigma, we’ll need contingency plans for sending a team inside, and what they’ll do once they get there. I want you working on that.” Her gaze shifted briefly to Soloman, who sat silently, listening intently, and yet contributing little. “Soloman will work with you. Soloman, you’re checked out to operate an EVA pod, right?”

It was difficult to read the little Bynar’s expression, but Gold thought he was surprised. “Commander? Er—I have access to all operational manuals and training materials through the ship’s computers, as well as an accumulated six hundred and thirty-two thousand hours of flight logs—however, in terms of practical experience—”

“Blue,” Gold interrupted, “see to it that Soloman is checked out on the simulator and ready to fly by the time we arrive. They’re so automated, I could train a Denebian mud-monkey to fly an EVA pod. I imagine the finest computer expert in Starfleet should have no trouble.”

Soloman blinked. “May I inquire—?”

“I doubt we’ll just be able to beam into this thing,” Gomez said. “We’ll need our team out there in suits, and I’ll want someone standing by just outside, to observe and provide assistance if necessary. In an EVA pod, you’ll be able to get up close and personal with it, and comfortably stay on station much longer than someone in a space suit.”

Soloman shifted uncomfortably in his seat. It was an uncharacteristically human gesture. “Commander, I do not know if—”

“You can do this, Soloman. You will do it.”

“Yes, Commander.”

“That covers the major assignments. The rest of you provide any support or resources you can. Teams should coordinate and share information. I’ll expect progress reports at least an hour before we drop out of warp.”

Gomez looked at Gold, who gave an approving nod. “Good,” he said, and glanced around the room. “Anything else?”

“Animal, vegetable, or mineral?” Carol Abramowitz, the team’s cultural specialist, asked.

Gold looked at her. “Excuse me?”

Abramowitz shrugged. “Sorry, Captain. Just thinking out loud. That seems to be the fundamental question, the one the Chinook couldn’t answer. Is the Enigma animal, vegetable, or mineral? Knowing which one would give us a better idea what approach to take in breaking it open. But without breaking it open, there’s no way to answer the question.”

* * *

Following the meeting, Captain David Gold returned to the bridge of the *Vinci*, more as a matter of his own comfort than of any necessity. As the doors parted, he basked in the atmosphere of the place: the subdued lighting that reflected his own preferences, the chatter of com traffic, the cool, efficient voice of the computer issuing from several consoles simultaneously, and the focused energy of his bridge crew as they went about their job.

As usual, the tactical officer, Lieutenant McAllan, bellowed, “Captain on the bridge.” Gold had given up trying to break the by-the-book lieutenant of the habit.

He stepped up to the command chair, slid his fingertips across the cool metal of its arm, and settled into the cushions.

It was a comfortable chair, perhaps the most comfortable one he’d ever sat in, yielding where it needed to, and yet supporting his back firmly. When he sat in it, his body naturally fell into the correct posture, both comfortable and alert.

He wished he had a chair that felt this good in his cabin. If they ever had to abandon ship, he’d get the crew off first, then hope there was a spare escape pod for the chair.

“Status report, Ensign Wong.”

Wong swiveled in his chair to face the Captain. It was an annoying habit common to Academy graduates these days. Keep your eyes on the road, thought Gold, but he said nothing. I’m just being an old curmudgeon. The ship can fly itself for a minute.

“On course at warp nine point five, captain. All systems nominal. ETA, sixteen hours, thirty six minutes.”

“Steady as she goes.”

Wong nodded, and turned back to his console.

About time. He smiled at himself. You are turning into a curmudgeon, David Gold. Keep this up, and you’re going to start frightening your great-grandchildren as much as your junior officers. Appreciate what you’ve got here. She was a good little ship, and this was a good chair. Not the most glamorous command in Starfleet, and there were probably those who would look at it with some scorn, but it suited David Gold, and he knew it.

S.C.E. ships didn’t go looking for battles, nor did they seek out strange new worlds. Often enough, those things found them, but that was almost never the plan. Captain Gold believed he spent as much time shepherding his brilliant and sometimes eccentric crew as he did charting courses across the galaxy.

This ship and her crew faced battles of a completely different kind, and together they made discoveries no less profound, no less important. Moreover, everywhere they went, they left things better, things built, repaired, restored, improved. They made a difference.

It was something he wouldn't trade for anything.

The turbolift doors slid open and Corsi stepped onto the bridge. Gold knew from the look on her face that something was bothering her, yet she hesitated to approach him.

"Back so soon, Corsi? Come. We'll talk."

Gold stood, a bit reluctantly, and gestured to the door of the ready room. Corsi followed as he crossed the short distance, and stepped inside.

"I was wondering, Captain, why I didn't receive a specific assignment regarding Enigma."

Gold stood near the doorway. He faced Corsi, her concern clear in her expression. "You're my chief of security, Corsi. You know your job."

"Exactly, sir. We're moving into a threat situation. I should be part of the planning."

"You know your input is always welcome, Corsi."

"I meant a specific part of the planning."

"This mission has potential hazards, yes, but this Enigma object isn't something I'd classify as a threat. It's made no overt hostile moves, demonstrated no weapons capability, nor even the ability to move at warp."

Corsi frowned. Her face was tight, drawn. She worried too much, relaxed too little. Gold wondered if it was his job as captain to try and change that.

"Captain, a volcano isn't hostile either, and yet it can be plenty dangerous."

Gold nodded. "Corsi, I understand how you feel, but this is still an engineering problem, and perhaps I put you in the middle of engineering problems too often. There are times that's necessary and appropriate, but I don't see that this is one of them." He watched her frown deepen. "When you're put in the middle of an engineering problem, Corsi, I sometimes wonder if it compromises the engineering, and if it compromises the security concerns as well. Let the individual teams handle the engineering matters."

"Even when I know they'll be putting themselves in danger?"

"I said you know your job, Corsi. Be watchful, keep them safe, but give them the space to work. You're a professional, but so are they. Trust them as you trust yourself."

"Bridge to captain." It was Lieutenant Ina, at ops. "We have an incoming transmission from the Chinook."

He could still read doubt in Corsi's face, though she'd never question his orders. He smiled reassuringly. "Let's try something different this time. It could be good. You never know."

As Gold stepped back onto the bridge, his smile faded, and he slipped back into business mode. "On

screen, Lieutenant.”

It had been a number of years since their last encounter, but he recognized Christa Otis, captain of the Chinook. He tried to remember the circumstances. Some casual gathering of senior officers on Starbase 96? He was twenty years Christa’s senior, which still made her a seasoned officer by most standards. Still, he felt a certain fatherly affection for her. He briefly considered making small talk, but something in her expression told him this wasn’t the time. Worry lines wrinkled her forehead, and her skin seemed pallid.

“David. I didn’t know they were sending you, but I’m glad. Right now it means a lot to me that I’m turning this situation over to someone I trust.”

“What’s wrong, Chris?”

Her jaw clinched, and she looked away from the screen. “I’ve got orders to get under way to Salem II, David, maximum warp. Unless we can stop the blight there immediately, three hundred million people are going to starve come harvest time. There’s no choice at all.”

“Chris—”

“I’m leaving without two of my people, David. They were setting navigation buoys around the thing when they, and the buoys, just vanished.” Gold could see the effort it took for her to control her anger, in the tight line of her jaw, and her ramrod-straight posture. “It got bigger, just swallowed them up, and there’s not a blasted thing I can do about it.”

Gold glanced over at Corsi, who, despite her best efforts at restraint, was giving him the “I told you so” face.

Chapter

3

“How,” asked Carol Abramowitz, grunting as she slammed a handball off the far wall of the court, “did I get this assignment?”

Dr. Lense dashed to intercept the ball, smashed it with rocketlike power. It bounced off the wall and was past Abramowitz before she could react. Lense recovered the ball and bounced it against the floor so that it snapped back into her hand. “As I recall, ‘this assignment’ was your idea. ‘Is it animal, vegetable, or mineral, that is the question.’”

Abramowitz sighed and wiped the sweat off her upper lip. “I know that, but I’m a cultural specialist. None of those really fall into my area.”

“I’m a doctor, and the captain asked me to assist. That makes even less sense, if you want to think about it that way. I’d say he wants a couple of intelligent people not locked into some fixed technical or scientific viewpoint. This doesn’t fit into any neat categories. Maybe trying to make it fit is what threw the Chinook off.”

Abramowitz sighed again, lifting her short black hair off her neck. “What’s the score?”

“I’m winning,” said Lense.

“I don’t doubt it, but what’s the score?”

“I play to win. I’m winning.”

“But the score?”

“I’m not keeping score, I’m just winning.”

“You’re not keeping score?”

“Don’t need to. If you want to, you keep score.”

“I don’t know how. I’ve never played handball. I swat this ball against the wall until I miss, that’s all I know. Why are we playing handball?”

“You want my help? I think better while breaking a sweat.”

“That makes one of us.” She plopped down in the corner, her back against the glass observation wall.

Lense put her hands on her hips and frowned. “You’re no fun at all.” She waited to see if Abramowitz reacted, which she didn’t. “I’ve got the rec room for thirty more minutes. The computer can shift things around and we can play something else. Racquetball, roto-goal, Bolian squash—there’s a ping-pong table that pops out of the floor.”

“I don’t play any of those, or Aztec basketball either.”

“What? Oh, never mind. What do you play?”

“Golf.”

“Golf?” She looked around the room.

“The walls don’t move that far, trust me.”

It was Dr. Lense’s turn to sigh. She shuffled over and sat down facing Abramowitz. “Animal,” she said.

“What?”

“Animal, that’s my answer. The Enigma is some kind of space-dwelling organism, like the space amoeba.”

Abramowitz looked up and brushed a strand of damp hair out of her eyes. “You’re making that up.”

Lense shook her head. “It’s the subject of many a trick question at Starfleet Medical. In 2268 the Enterprise, A or B or X or something—I don’t remember which one—encountered an eighteen-thousand-kilometer-long space-dwelling amoeba that consumed an entire star system before they could stop it.”

Abramowitz shook her head. "I didn't know that."

"Anyway, Enigma hasn't shown signs of intelligence, and it doesn't have warp drive. It does have camouflage, and it does ingest things, possibly as food. Ergo, animal."

"Mineral," Abramowitz said suddenly. "Or mechanical anyway. It's some kind of probe, or maybe a cloaked ship on autopilot, the crew long dead. They could have lost warp drive in deep space, and couldn't fix it. The crew died of old age, or they just ran out of food and air, but the ship is still going its merry way, running on autopilot."

"So why does it keep swallowing things up?"

Abramowitz took a deep breath, considering the problem. "If it's a probe, it could be taking samples, or collecting specimens. Maybe it's trying to recruit a replacement crew."

"I like my solution better."

"If your 'solution' is correct, then roughly one-hundred and fifty people are being digested by an amoeba as we speak. If my theory is correct, then they may be safe and waiting for rescue. I like mine better. A lot better."

Lense reacted as though she'd been slapped. She slammed the ball against the floor so hard that the crack hurt Abramowitz's ears. "You think I don't? But we have to face the possibility. Get back to me when you're willing to." She got up and stormed out of the rec room.

Abramowitz just sat, trying to figure out what had just happened.

* * *

Duffy pushed a solitary black bean around his plate with a fork. He had been doing so for somewhere between two minutes and an eternity now, and it was driving Gomez, who sat across the mess-hall table from him, crazy.

"Kieran, would you please eat that, or put it out of its misery."

He put down his fork and looked up at her. "Sorry, thinking."

"Thinking is good. Sharing is better. I could use some ideas here."

"What we need is a can opener."

"A what?"

"Can opener. A device to open cans. Didn't they teach Waldport's Principles of Parallel Technologies when you were in the Academy?"

"They taught his theories. The book wasn't required reading."

"Then you know most technological civilizations develop parallel technologies, and Waldport's first example is the can opener. Almost every civilization known develops a system of preserving food in metal cans. The surprising thing is that the device to open these cans, a can opener, often isn't developed

until later, sometimes hundreds of years later. You should read the book. It's one of the foundations of the Prime Directive, the idea that every civilization develops warp drive."

"And every civilization develops can openers."

"Almost."

"Almost?"

"That's Waldport's argument against his own principle. Vulcans never invented the can opener."

"Vulcans?" Sometimes following Kieran's conversational leaps was enough to make her dizzy. As though this assignment didn't already have her going in circles.

"Never developed cans. They preserved food by drying, salting, or a kind of bacterially induced homeostasis. No cans. No can openers."

A pattern was beginning to emerge. "So, you're saying that the Enigma may be a ship of some kind, representing an advanced civilization that somehow managed not to develop the warp drive, like the Vulcans and their nonexistent can openers."

"I'm saying that the Enigma is a big can, and we need a can opener to get inside."

Gomez looked down at her half eaten curry rice, and after a moment's consideration, pushed it away before she started playing with her food, too. "I'd say we know two, maybe three, different ways to crack Enigma already."

Duffy leaned forward on his elbows and raised an eyebrow slightly. "How so?"

"Well, first there's the brute force method. Crash into it at a significant fraction of the speed of light. It worked for the Lincoln."

"Okay, I'm scratching that one off my list right now."

"Don't. We won't want to get in that way ourselves, but maybe there's some way we can use it, to send in a ruggedized penetrator probe, or spear some kind of pipe into the surface for access, like a giant hypodermic needle."

"There's a joke there somewhere. Maybe two or three. But go on, what's the next method?"

She frowned. "Well, that's the problem. We know, but we don't know. This freighter pilot managed to get himself in somehow. So did the two from the Chinook, and they managed to carry a dozen marker buoys with them."

"Well, this Omthon guy was apparently actively trying to get in. It's hard to tell really; the sensor logs from the freighter were of such poor resolution. But we have recordings of the Chinook incident in crystal resolution in every wavelength known to the Federation, and we know they were only fixing a buoy near Enigma, not trying to get in, and were just swallowed up."

"Ah, but that swallowing, that's the only proactive thing that Enigma has done since we've encountered it. I think they, or the buoys, did something to trigger it. If we can figure out what that is, it's like having

the key to the door.”

“The trouble with that is, assuming that any of them are still alive in there—and I am—none of them have come back out. Me, I want to go in, but the coming out part, this is also part of the plan.”

Gomez considered this for a moment. “We need a can opener,” she finally said.

“I think I heard somebody suggest that idea.”

She gave him a look that had stopped strong men in their tracks, but he just shrugged and grinned at her.

“But we need one that also works from the inside,” she continued. “That means we can’t just duplicate one of the methods for entering Enigma, we have to understand how it works before we find ourselves trapped.” She stood up abruptly. “Come on, time to look at those sensor logs again.”

Duffy groaned, loudly. “We’ve been through them a dozen times,” he protested, but he was already climbing out of his chair to follow her.

“Then that obviously wasn’t enough,” she shot back over her shoulder, as she led the way out of the mess hall.

* * *

Soloman stared intently out the viewplate, watching floating debris drift by only inches from his face. “This is entirely illogical, P8.”

“Concentrate on flying the pod,” P8 Blue’s voice came from a hidden speaker. “Besides, you’re a Bynar, not a Vulcan. Stop sounding like one.”

“Computers are inherently logical, and Bynars are a computer-based society.”

“Yes, but you’re a passionate people too, even though you don’t often express it so other humanoids can understand. You delight, you fear, you love. I’ve seen it. Look out!”

A proximity klaxon sounded, and Soloman was alarmed to see an ejected warp core tumbling towards him like a giant baton. He fumbled with the unfamiliar joystick, feeling the pod twist end over end, but the warp core grew ever larger in his view. In a panic, he hit the main impulse thruster, feeling the rumble as it fired just a meter or so under his feet.

The warp core slid out of view beneath the window, but smaller pieces of debris bounced noisily off the hull around him. He flinched as a jagged piece of metal bounced off the window just over his head, but the transparent aluminum held. In a moment, he was clear of the debris field, looking down on the shattered saucer section of the Galaxy-class ship. “Very well then, I fear this assignment.”

P8 made a dry, crackling sound. Soloman suspected the sound corresponded to a human sigh, though he wasn’t certain. Bynars had no exact equivalent to either noise.

“Only a grub is mastered by their own fear. Well, grubs and green males, but that’s another matter. In any case, while you failed to handle that situation the way I would have, it all worked out with only minimal damage registering on the pod.”

Soloman muttered a string of binary code that did not have a direct translation, but could best be rendered in the human tongue as, “Dammit.” “I failed to recover the data core. We will be unable to determine why this ship broke up.”

“The wreckage isn’t going anywhere, Soloman. Safety is always the first concern.”

“Now, but what if the lives of my teammates depend on me?”

“Then I have every confidence you will do what is necessary. Besides, in a real emergency it isn’t likely you’ll need the joystick.”

There was a clunk and a whir, and the EVA pod’s hatch swung open. Soloman blinked against the glare of the Theda Vinci’s shuttlebay, and looked down at P8 Blue, standing on her hind legs just outside.

“Enough simulations for now. We need to work on the mission planning for Enigma.”

Soloman nodded gratefully, and climbed down the steps to the shuttlebay’s deck. Theda Vinci’s two shuttles were parked just a few meters away, leaving little room for anything else in the small bay. He took one last look up into the pod’s cupola, and watched the simulated starfields projected onto the windows flicker and vanish.

Soloman took a step, and nearly stumbled. Bynars were not a strong people, and the session had been taxing. His hands ached from manually operating the controls.

P8 watched him flexing his fingers, and made a comforting sound. “Sorry to push you so hard, but time is short. The simulation programs we have on hand are very advanced, worst-case scenarios that would challenge even an experienced pilot. And I know that operating the controls manually, rather than through direct computer interface, put you at a disadvantage, but that was something you had to learn. Under the circumstances, you did well.”

They stepped through the pressure doors into an interior corridor, and headed toward the workroom where they had set up shop for their part of the mission.

“Thank you.” Soloman still felt uncertain.

“How did it feel?”

“Feel? Do you mean in the tactile, or the emotional sense?”

“In the less tangible sense. Operating a spacecraft, even one this small and limited, is a profound experience, from both a sensory and emotional standpoint. Sometimes the best way to evaluate it is on a nontechnical level. How does the pod feel to you?”

Soloman hesitated. There had been fear, excitement, and exhilaration, but something else nagged at him, some aspect that colored all the rest. “It felt—lonely.”

P8 dropped down to scuttle on all eight legs. “That’s not what I would have expected.”

“Nor I. I thought that since—losing my bond-mate, I thought I had become somewhat immune, or at least numbed, to the feeling of being alone. Yet I have spent most of my time on this ship, surrounded by my crewmates, interfacing with its computers. I’ve not been truly as alone as I imagined. In the pod,

immersed in the simulation, hearing only your voice, without even the pod's pathetically limited computer for company, I was more alone than I think I have ever been, and I know that in a real mission, it would be even more extreme."

P8 stopped, then scuttled around in a semicircle to look up at Soloman. "I am sorry. I didn't see what a personal challenge this could be for you, and I'm sure Commander Gomez didn't either. I will talk with her. I'm sure we can get someone else to go out in the pod."

"No," said Soloman, surprised at his own resolve, "that will not be necessary. I look forward to the mission not with dread, but with anticipation. Flying the mission, operating the manual controls, that feeling of being alone. I felt—empowered."

P8 stood on her hind legs, antennae waving excitedly. "Good for you, my friend! It is amazing what this Enigma can teach us about ourselves. I have heard it said, that when one looks into the abyss, they see only themselves." She turned and walked through the door of their workroom.

Feeling just a little dizzy, not from fatigue, but from amazement, Soloman followed.

Chapter

4

To Captain Gold, the *Vinci*'s shuttlebay seemed like a giant's closet: crowded, and badly in need of being cleaned out. There were two shuttlecraft wedged into the compact space, plus a Work Bee and several EVA pods. Along every wall and in various alcoves, all manner of large equipment was stowed: phaser drills, portable tractor beam emitters, cargo-sized pattern enhancers, magnetic grapples, spools of carbon nanotube cable, color-coded drums of lubricants and plasma coolant, and other tools of the S.C.E. trade.

On most Federation starships, the shuttlebay was a neat and spacious hangar, kept clear of all but a few shuttles and perhaps a visiting ship or two.

Well, Gold smiled to himself as he threaded his way through the clutter, most shuttlebays don't have to work for a living.

He stood before the closed bay doors, and glanced over his shoulder at the observation windows. As he expected, the station was not staffed, and he was alone. Good. "Computer, active force field, open shuttlebay doors."

"Command authorization required."

"Authorization Gold, ten-forty-five."

With a whirl, the doors parted. There were many unusual aspects of the *Saber*-class design: the warp nacelles connected to the outside edges of the saucer, the deep-keeled engineering section trailing aft with the warp-core in the rear, and the shuttlebay doors that opened forward, just under the main bridge.

The doors stood open, and Gold watched the warp-streaked stars passing by, the vastness of space separated from him by no more than a few inches and a force field.

One more thing about this command that he wouldn't trade for anything. The sailing captains of old could stand on the bow of their ship, lean over the rail, and look out at the vast and wondrous sea. So too, could Captain David Gold. He could almost imagine the stellar winds on his face.

"That's dangerous, you know." The voice belonged to Corsi. He heard her sharp footsteps as she walked up behind him. Even in the cluttered shuttlebay, there was a military precision to her step.

"The universe, or just where I'm watching it from?"

"Both. If you weren't the captain, I'd be busting your chops about safety protocols."

"Then it's good to be the captain."

"Would the captain be prepared to accept a lecture on safety protocols?"

"No."

"A reminder?"

"Noted and ignored."

They stood silently for a while, Gold looking at the stars, Corsi contemplating the force-field control panel.

Gold sighed. "You're taking all the fun out of this, you realize?"

"It's my job."

"Well, you're good at taking the fun out of things. You clearly aren't here for the view."

"I had the computer track you down. I wanted to discuss ship's discipline."

"Somebody else's chops you want to bust?"

"Not that kind, Captain. Maybe discipline isn't the word. Mood, maybe even morale, though that isn't my area of expertise."

"Obviously." When Corsi ignored the sarcasm in his tone, Gold said over his shoulder, "Go ahead."

"People are acting strangely, even for engineers. They're acting almost—" She hesitated, as though searching for the proper word. "—almost giddy. I'm even seeing it in my security people. I don't understand it. This is a very serious mission."

Gold nodded. "Close shuttlebay doors."

He turned away from the closing doors and faced Corsi. "It's understandable, Corsi. You've never been on this kind of mission before, have you?"

"What kind of mission would that be, sir?"

“We’re investigating the disappearance of a Federation starship with all hands. Despite Captain Scott’s boundless optimism, we all know, on some level, there’s a chance we won’t be finding survivors.”

“We’ve investigated ship disasters before, much worse than this.” Her tone was puzzled, and a frown creased her smooth brow. “The Beast, Friend, the Senuta ship, those Breen and Jem’Hadar ships during the…”

“Those were alien ships. This is a Federation starship, full of Starfleet personnel, people like us.”

“So was the Defiant,” Corsi said almost defensively.

“Yes, but we knew the Defiant crew was already dead before we even started that mission. I’m not saying that these people value the lives of aliens or non-Starfleet crews any less. But we all come out here, knowing there are dangers, knowing that the universe could reach right out and smite one or all of us. Knowing we may find a ship with all hands lost, is a stark reminder of our own fragility, our own mortality.”

“You’re saying they’re scared?”

“Not at all, not in any pejorative sense, anyway.” Gold clasped his hands behind his back, and paced across the small open space behind the closed doors, his head down and his voice low.

“I’ve been in the fleet a long time, Corsi. I’ve lost too many crewmates and friends, seen wars and disasters, and generally spent too damn much time in the close proximity of death. That’s not unusual in these days. Not after the Dominion War and the Borg. It’s an unhappy accident of history that most everyone on board this ship, directly or indirectly, has had a taste of what we could be facing.”

He stopped his pacing and glanced at Corsi, then looked back at his feet. “What I’m saying is that sometimes the only way to look the reaper in the eye, feel his cold breath on your cheek, and not to run screaming, is to laugh in his face. Trust me, this is only what anticipation of a possible disaster has done to them. If we find ourselves trying to sort body parts out of wreckage, you’ll hear gallows humor that will curl your toes.”

“You don’t have a problem with that?”

He looked up then, and chuckled sadly. “You’ll probably find me in the thick of it, Corsi. It’s human nature. It’s healthy. It’s not your way of coping apparently, but for your sake, I hope you have some way of releasing the tension. You must be feeling it too, and I need my chief of security functioning at one hundred percent.”

She nodded. “Yes sir. Thank you for clearing that up for me.” She turned and headed for the inner door.

“And, Corsi?”

“Yes sir?”

“You’re thinking like a senior officer. I like to see that. You could be first-officer material one of these days, maybe even the big seat.”

“That wasn’t what I was thinking about, sir.”

“Sometimes you choose the seat, Corsi. Sometimes the seat chooses you.”

* * *

Corsi stepped into the corridor and stopped, considering the captain’s words. She was feeling the pressure, the apprehension of what they might find when they dropped out of warp in a few hours. She tapped her combadge. “Corsi to Stevens.”

“Stevens here.”

“Are you busy just now?”

“I’m in my quarters. I was hoping for a few hours’ sleep before we roll up our sleeves and start working on Enigma.” There was a pause. “Why?”

Chapter

5

“Kieran.”

The voice came out of darkness. It was a pleasant voice, a voice he liked. It was the message he didn’t like.

“You’re sleeping, Kieran.”

It was Sonya’s voice.

“Resting my eyes.”

“Well, you snore when you’re resting your eyes. You should have Elizabeth look into that.”

“I’m going to rest them a little longer.”

“Can’t. Captain Scott is returning our call.”

Duffy opened his eyes. He lifted his chin from his fist, which had been propping it up during his “rest,” and looked around the hololab.

Sonya grinned at him, looking rested and alert. He knew she hadn’t slept any more than he had. Where did that woman get her energy?

“Look alive, Lieutenant Commander, the boss is on the line.”

He glanced over at the wall-mounted viewscreen just in time to see the Starfleet logo vanish and be replaced by the image of Captain Scott. “Commander Gomez. Sorry I took so long to return your call. Meetings.” He grimaced, as though the one word explained everything. “What can I do for you?”

“Sorry to bother you, Captain, but our investigation into Enigma has turned up something that requires

your expertise.”

Scotty brightened. “Well, why didn’t ye say so, lass? What have ye found?”

Duffy felt awake enough to dive in. “Captain, we’ve been reviewing the sensor logs from the Chinook and the freighter. The Chinook data hasn’t been terribly useful, but the freighter logs are a different matter. The quality is so bad we’ve had to filter and massage it a dozen different ways to get the resolution we needed, but we think we have something.”

“I’m transmitting a segment of the enhanced and restored visual record,” Gomez said.

Scott’s image on the screen was replaced by the visual playback. A space-suited figure floated in what seemed to be empty space. The suit was orange, an armored shell topped by a transparent bubble, with a bulky backpack studded with thruster nozzles, and a large toolpack attached to the belt. The man inside the helmet was humanoid and looked about thirty, perhaps younger, in human terms. But he was not human. His bright green skin made that clear.

Only when one looked closely was it apparent that something was just in front of the man, a discontinuity, like the edge of a soap bubble the size of a moon. He reached for the discontinuity and his hand stopped against the nearly invisible surface, like a mime touching the walls of a make-believe box. Then he reached into the pouch and pulled out an odd looking tool.

“Computer, freeze playback,” Gomez said. “Do you recognize the tool, Captain Scott?”

“Well, it’s no human manufacture, but I’d say it’s a magnetic probe o’ some kind.”

“Right,” said Duffy, “we think that’s exactly what it is. Probably Andorian from the looks of it.”

“Now, watch,” said Gomez, resuming the playback.

The suited man pressed the tip of the probe against the discontinuity, and twisted a control. The probe began to disappear inside, which was surprising, since, in this case, inside only looked like more empty space. But as it pierced the surface, it began to disappear. The man withdrew the tool, and adjusted the controls some more. The tip of the probe began to glow. He pressed it against Enigma again.

Suddenly, something flared, and a circular opening perhaps two meters across appeared around the tip of the probe. The man leaned forward, looking inside. Little of the interior could be seen, but there was light coming from inside. The man crawled through the opening and disappeared from view, leaving the floating probe in the middle of the opening.

After a slight delay, he reappeared, grabbed the probe and pulled it inside. The opening narrowed as he did, and he could be seen switching the probe off, at which point the opening vanished completely.

Captain Scott reappeared on the screen, nodding. “So y’ think a magnetic probe can be used to get inside Enigma?”

“We hope so,” said Duffy. “But we want to understand how it works before we try it ourselves, and that’s why we wanted to talk to you about the magnetic probe.”

Scott looked puzzled. “What’s to tell? Do you not know all about magnetic probes?”

A sheepish look crossed Gomez's face. "Sir, nobody in Starfleet has needed a magnetic probe in fifty years. We assume the freighter has some systems old enough or primitive enough to make one useful, but we're just not sure."

"Well then, lass, I'm nae sure if I should be flattered or insulted, but I can tell you all you need to know. In my day, we used them to work on the magnetic and force field antimatter containment. I once used one to save the Enterprise when we lost control of the antimatter flow."

Gomez nodded. "The Kalandan Outpost incident. I've read about it in the texts." She shuddered slightly. "The idea of manually shutting down a runaway antimatter drive using a hand tool seems—forgive me, sir—"

Scotty grinned. "Insane? Lass, I would have said the same thing, but it's amazing what a motivated engineer will do to save his ship—as you should know, or have ye forgotten the Sentinel so soon?"

Duffy had to hide a grin of his own at Gomez's abashed look. She had, after all, pulled several stunts during the Dominion War during her time serving as chief engineer of the U.S.S. Sentinel. "In any case," he said, "that's why we called you. This thing was designed for working on magnetic containment, yet somehow it opened an iris in a holographic force field."

Scotty looked surprised. "A hologram, you say?"

"We don't know what's inside Enigma yet, but we're pretty sure the outside is a holographic projection overlaying a regenerative shield system. We've never seen anything like it."

"We knew Enigma wasn't truly cloaked," said Gomez. "Cloaking devices generally bend or transfer electromagnetic radiation around or through a ship. Enigma isn't that well hidden, if you know where to look and look closely enough in the right way. I don't think it's meant to sneak up on people—more like camouflage, a system designed to allow it to go unnoticed in the vastness of space. When we see 'through' Enigma, we're actually seeing a holographic representation of what the stars on the other side look like, not the stars themselves. And the really curious thing is that, while Enigma isn't truly invisible, it's equally difficult to see in most every wavelength and form of energy known. We've tried everything from gravitons to tachyons. There could be thousands of Enigmas wandering through our space, and pretty much the only way we'd ever discover them is by accident."

"Like, say, by running into one," added Duffy.

"So what we need, sir, is the missing link between the magnetic probe and shields. That we don't find in the books."

Scotty considered the problem, idly stroking his mustache with a fingertip as he did. "Tell me, did you ever hear of the Nelscott flip?"

Gomez blinked. "Sir?"

"When I was on the asteroid freight run at Deneva, the lads there pulled a wee trick on me. They used a magnetic probe to invert the phase of the gravity generator under my cabin."

Duffy chuckled.

"Aye," said Scott, "it plastered me to the ceiling until they switched it back again. Some engineer named

Nelscott stumbled on the trick, and they pulled it on every new officer aboard.”

“That makes sense,” said Duffy. “You can’t have shields without gravitron generation, and if you flip the phase, the local fields would repel each other, creating our doorway. We’ve got the ‘can opener’ we were looking for, and now we have a pretty good idea how it works.”

Gomez nodded. “Thank you, Captain. We couldn’t have figured it out without you.”

“Any time, lass. Anything else I can do, let me know. Also, since this concerns holograms, there’s a lad you might want to look up. Top man in the field, or so they tell me.”

“Broccoli!” Duffy said suddenly.

“I beg your pardon?”

“You mean Reg Barclay, right?”

“Aye, that’s the one. He’s at ProjectVoyageron Jupiter Station.”

Gomez smiled. “We served with him on theEnterprise, Captain. He’s actually quite a skilled diagnostic engineer—holography’s just what he, ah, established his reputation with. We’ll definitely get in touch with him, though.”

“Meanwhile,”said Scotty with a dramatic sigh,“I’m due in another blasted meeting. Admirals.” His image flickered out, to be replaced by the Starfleet logo.

Duffy shook his head. “Haven’t talked to old Broccoli in years. Been meaning to get in touch with him ever since he trackedVoyager down in the Delta Quadrant.”

“If I remember correctly,” Gomez said with a smile, “Captain Picard gave a cease-and-desist order on that nickname.”

Laughing, Duffy said, “Like that was gonna stop me. C’mon, let’s put a call in to Jupiter Station. Fabe should talk to him, too. He may have some ideas how to see inside that holographic shell.” He sighed. “Which would help us on our biggest unknown on a list of many. Our can opener should get us in, and in theory, out as well. So if our freighter pilot had the same can opener too, why did he go in, and never come out?”

* * *

Abramowitz sat at her cabin’s small workstation, reviewing reports from the other Enigma teams. It seemed as though everyone was making progress but her. The latest development was from Stevens, who, thanks to his consultation with holographic expert Reginald Barclay, thought he had a way of scanning Enigma for life signs. The technique didn’t promise a great deal of accuracy or detail, but it might tell them something about what they were dealing with.

She pushed her chair back, and stared at Stevens’s report glumly. Just good enough to prove me wrong.

A movement in the corner of her eye made her look up at her cabin’s open door. She liked working with the door open, a habit she’d developed as a student. Dr. Lense stood in the corridor just outside. Abramowitz could see her lips moving. Lense was clearly unaware Abramowitz couldn’t hear her.

Abramowitz waved her inside. Lense looked puzzled, stepped through the door, and immediately jammed her index fingers into her ears.

“Sorry,” said Abramowitz, raising her voice to be heard over the music. “Computer, mute audio!” She hadn’t even been conscious of the music until it was gone. “There’s an audio damping field across the door. Ensign Conlon rigged it up. Probably something to do with her cabin being across the hall.”

Lense glanced at the door. “Imagine that.” She shook her head as though clearing her ears. “Was that drad music?”

“Nausicaan tusk opera. It doesn’t sound a thing likedrad music.”

“Sorry, I’m not a connoisseur of pain. It’s all pretty much ‘ouch’ to me.” She took a deep breath, and shifted nervously from one foot to another. “Look, this isn’t starting out well. I just wanted to—and don’t get used to this, because I don’t plan to make it a habit—but I wanted to apologize, both for walking out on you earlier, and for being less than helpful on this assignment.”

Abramowitz shrugged. “You’ve got other work. I assumed you were getting sickbay ready for possible casualties.”

Lense shook her head. “Not that much to do really, until we know more. I’ve got Wetzel, Copper, and Emmett,” the last being the ship’s Emergency Medical Hologram, “replicating and stockpiling extra medical supplies, but they’re more than capable of handling it.”

She glanced at the nestlike pod where Abramowitz’s roommate, P8 Blue, slept. The cabin was small, like all the others on the *Vinci*, and the alien pod made it feel even more cramped. Without waiting for an invitation, Lense sat down on the bunk. “Fact is, I saw things during the Dominion War that nobody should ever see. I thought I had gotten over it, and in a way, I have. I’m ready to handle the obvious nightmares lurking out there: the wreckage, the casualties, the bodies beyond help, the scattered remains that don’t even resemble bodies any more. All that I’m ready for. I can take it. What I can’t take is the nervous laughter of people about to brush shoulders with death.”

Abramowitz turned to face her. It never occurred to her that the doctor would feel that way—especially after how she handled herself on Sherman’s Planet. “I didn’t mean—”

Lense waved her off. “You didn’t do anything. It’s me. Maybe one day you’ll understand, but for your sake, I hope you never do.”

They were quiet for a while. Then Lense raised her chin and looked up at Abramowitz. “I’ve been thinking about our question, and I think you’re right. This thing is artificial. A probe, a ship, a robot, something like that. If it were an animal, it would clearly have to be a sophisticated one. Even a space amoeba has a ‘flight or flight’ reflex. This thing doesn’t. It’s not chasing food, and it’s not running away. It’s not defending itself. It’s just hiding, just going about its business, hoping not to be seen, not to be engaged.” She grimaced. “I can relate to that.”

“Mineral then,” said Abramowitz, avoiding the personal comment. “A ship, or something like it. But a ship would be ‘animal’ too, it would have a crew.”

Lense shook her head. “Not a conscious one. ‘Fight or flight’ again. Maybe it’s just a probe, but it seems far too big and sophisticated. Too simple-minded even for a robot. Maybe the crew is dead.

Maybe they abandoned ship. Maybe this is a sleeper ship, and the crew is in suspended animation.” She considered her last statement. “Yeah, that sounds about right to me. These ‘enigmans,’ whoever they are, whatever they want, they left home a very, very long time ago.”

Chapter

6

Captain Gold reached the bridge just as the *Vinci* came out of warp. He slid into the big chair. “Put the Enigma on screen.”

The beta shift conn officer glanced back at him. The ensign at the post was new, a Betazoid, having just transferred in from the *U.S.S. Hood*. “It already is on screen, Captain. There just isn’t much to see.”

Gold wondered if she’d simply anticipated the order, or if she was reading his mind. Stop that. He watched her face for a reaction. No, he didn’t think so. It took a lot of restraint for a Betazoid to function well as a Starfleet officer. The concept of private thoughts didn’t come naturally to them.

“Ensign—Deo is it?”

She nodded.

“Deo, overlay a tactical grid on the object, based on our sensor scans. I’d like to at least know where to look.”

She tapped her console. A grid of yellow lines appeared, outlining the shape of the object.

He’d been expecting—well, he wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting. A sphere possibly, or some other geometric shape. Instead Enigma was lumpy and irregular, like a cluster of grapes, or perhaps a bag full of soccer balls. Moreover, even that shape didn’t appear to be static. As he watched, the spherical lumps moved slowly across the surface, even sinking inside to be replaced by others rising to the surface. “Are we getting any sensor readings from inside the object at all?”

“No sir,” said Deo. “We can detect a bit of displacement at the boundaries that allows us to tell where that boundary is, but when we look deeper, all we see is—uh, whatever’s on the other side.”

Gold nodded. Stevens’s modifications to the deflector dish couldn’t be performed while they were at warp. It would be several hours before they knew if his plan to probe Enigma would work.

Deo was still looking at him. Something seemed to be bothering her. “Sir, there is something else. Enigma has a... telepathic component.”

“The *Chinook* didn’t report anything like that.”

“Perhaps they didn’t have any telepaths on board, sir.”

“Can you read it, communicate?”

“No sir. I get a sense that it is reading us in some way, and not much more. I can’t even tell you if it’s

alive, or if we're being read by one consciousness or many. The telepathic probe is passive, inert, and very subtle."

"If you sense anything more, let me know immediately."

From behind him, the beta-shift tactical officer, Ensign Anthony Shabalala, said, "Captain, there's a ship approaching, and we're being hailed. It's the freighter Vulpecula."

"Give me visual."

The woman who appeared on screen was human, in her fifties, and looked like she hadn't slept in a long time. Her eyes were red-rimmed with fatigue, and her close-cropped gray hair stood out at odd angles.

"Captain Gold, I've been expecting you. My name is Dee Rivers, captain of the Vulpecula. After my first officer disappeared, and those people from the Chinook disappeared, I didn't know what to expect from that thing, so I pulled the ship back a few million kilometers to wait."

"Thank you for staying on station until we arrived."

She sighed deeply, and dug at her scalp with nervous fingertips. "Captain, that's my first officer in there. Pappy's a damned fool to have tried rescuing those people, but I'd like him back anyway, if you can manage."

"We'll do what we can, Captain Rivers." Pappy? he wondered, but didn't ask aloud.

"We're a for-profit ship, Captain. I've loitered here longer than I can afford, and certainly longer than was safe. I've lost my convoy partner, my Federation escort, and there are a lot of raiders between here and Cardassia. I can't wait here to see how this turns out, but we'll stop back by after we drop off our cargo."

Gold nodded in a manner he hoped was reassuring. "I understand. If necessary, we can arrange transport to return your Number One."

"He's my retirement plan, Captain."

"Excuse me?"

"He's saving to buy this ship from me, and I'm counting on that to set me up for my declining years, a nice little hut on a beach somewhere. I really need him back."

"I see." Gold felt his tone turn chilly.

Rivers had turned away from the screen, as though she was about to disconnect, but turned back to look at him. Her shoulders sagged, and something in her seemed to melt, revealing a profound sadness. "He's a fool, but a good fool, Captain. Bring him back to us. Please."

Before Gold could respond to the pain in her voice, Rivers's image blinked out.

* * *

Duffy pulled the gauntlet over his hand and flexed his fingers experimentally in front of his face. "I love

this part.”

Gomez glanced at the panel on her left wrist, punched in the commands to start a space-suit self test, and looked up at Duffy. Like her, he now wore a complete environmental suit, minus the helmet. “Putting on gloves?”

“Putting on a space suit. Makes me feel like an ancient knight preparing for the joust.” He squirmed his shoulders and arms, testing the fit of the suit.

She pointed at the rack in the locker room wall behind him. “Excuse me, Sir Talks-a-Lot, but you’re standing between the fair maiden and her lovely helmet.”

He stepped aside as she plucked two helmets from the rack, handing one to him, and putting the other over her head, twisting it until the molecular seals engaged. She tapped the wrist panel again. “You hear me, Kieran?”

“Loud and clear, milady.”

She tapped again. “Gomez to Soloman. Communications check.”

“I—” Soloman seemed distracted, but not, as she had feared, distressed. “I hear you well, Commander. My module is checked out and ready to fly—I believe.”

Just then, P8 Blue scuttled through the outer door into the locker room. She stood up on her hind legs, and made an annoyed clicking noise. “Aren’t you ready yet? It must be very bothersome being so sensitive to vacuum.”

Pattie’s exoskeleton allowed her to endure vacuum with no special gear. All she needed was a special communicator with a pickup inside her breathing cavity, some safety gear, and she was ready to go.

Gomez grinned. “Not according to Lt. Commander Duffy. He likes the outfit.”

That annoyed sound again. “Clothing, also something I find difficult to fathom.” She strapped on a simple equipment harness. “I find this confining enough.”

The locker room had two outer doors. The right-hand one led directly to service airlock two, the other to the shuttlebay. Duffy followed Gomez through the left door.

One of the Augmented Personnel Modules had been rolled up to the doors on its service stand. The module’s hatch was closed, and Duffy could see Soloman through the cupola windows in the top, his bald head reflecting the blue interior lighting. The module was spindle-shaped and about three meters tall, with a control cupola at the top. The wide midsection was ringed with specialized work arms, the narrow base surrounded by maneuvering thrusters, and tipped with the orange glow of a tiny impulse drive. The module was more spacecraft than space suit.

Pattie tapped a wall panel, activating the force fields across the main doors. A warning klaxon sounded as the outer doors slid open, revealing the stars beyond.

Duffy stared, trying to decide which of those stars was real, and which was the holographic surface of Enigma. He couldn’t be sure, but he trusted the module’s instruments would get them where they needed to be. He could see Soloman working inside the control cupola, then a series of grab-bars and footholds

folded out from the module's smooth sides.

Pattie's voice sounded over everyone's comm. "Everyone attach your safety lines." She climbed onto the side of the module.

Duffy let Gomez go first, then climbed up himself. The force clamps made the footrests feel slightly sticky as he moved his feet. He snapped his safety line into an attachment socket. "I'm secure."

"I'm go," Gomez said.

"Secure and ready," said Pattie.

"Away team toda Vinci," said Soloman. "We are ready to disembark."

B.J. O'Leary, the engineer on duty at the control gallery, replied, "Ready."

As they waited, Duffy could only hear his own heart and breathing, the whirl of the suit's fans, and his comrades' voices in his helmet speakers.

"Disengaging artificial gravity," said O'Leary.

Duffy felt his stomach jump, and fought the instinct that said he was falling. He looked down to see the tractor beams lift the module from its cradle and sail it smoothly out of the shuttlebay.

"I still don't see why we didn't just beam out," P8 said over the link. "It really makes much more sense."

Duffy managed to catch Gomez's eye, and winked, though he doubted she could actually see him. "I suppose we could have," he answered. "But where's the fun in that?"

"Lt. Commander Duffy." Soloman's voice was tight, a little strained. "I really do not see that a discussion of 'fun' is appropriate at this time."

Duffy knew when he had pushed far enough. Pattie was right. They could have beamed out, instead of riding the module through the force field. But the sensation of his suit pressurizing as it passed from the atmosphere of the shuttlebay to the vacuum of space was a rare experience, and not one he would pass up easily.

With Enigma almost impossible to see with the naked eye, Duffy's gaze was drawn back to the Vinci. The shuttlebay opened the front of the saucer section like a misplaced grin, the two shuttles just inside reminding him of teeth. The Vinci, which seemed so small from inside, was huge from out here. The saucer swept out on either side of them, and he could see the warp nacelles and the engineering hull trailing away from them in the distance.

They climbed above the plane of the saucer section, and he looked down at the bridge, suppressing the urge to wave.

"You're doing very well, Soloman," said Pattie.

"This is much easier than the simulation," replied Soloman, his voice calmer now that the tractor beams had released them and he had control of the module. "Nothing is exploding. Nothing is trying to crush us. None of my systems are undergoing cascade failures. My direct computer interface is working."

“Better to be overprepared,” said Pattie, “than underprepared.”

Duffy and Gomez shared a chuckle, and he glanced over at her, her face just visible inside the bubble of her helmet. She grinned bright enough he was sure they could see it back at the ship. She’s loving this too.

“Stevens to away team.”

“Gomez here.”

“Commander, the deflector modifications are done, and we’re ready to take a picture of Enigma.”

Duffy saw Gomez’s eyes widen. “I thought you wouldn’t be ready for another two hours, or I would have delayed the mission. Should we head back to the shuttlebay?”

Stevens chuckled. “Somebody named Scott once told me to always pad my repair estimates. Anyway, no need for you to return to ship, the neutrino flux is harmless, and the direct EM burst from the torpedo will be very localized. In fact, this times out pretty well. Just pull back a couple kilometers and enjoy the show.”

“Soloman,” ordered Gomez, “get us out of the line of fire.”

“Yes, Commander. Firing main thruster.”

Duffy felt a slight push down onto the footrests, and the module began to accelerate away from the *Vinci*. The ship grew slightly smaller for several minutes, until they rolled over, and the module braked to a stop.

“Gomez to Stevens, we’re standing by at a safe distance.”

“Stand by, we’re almost ready to launch.”

“Explain to me again,” said Pattie, “what this ‘X-ray’ is?”

“Sure,” said Duffy. “It’s an internal imaging technique we used to use on Earth. Radiation was directed through a solid object onto some kind of sensitive receptor or film that could create a shadow image. It was used to test metals for cracks, even image people for medical purposes.”

“Bombarding living beings with radiation just to examine their insides? My people never developed such a thing.”

Duffy chuckled. “Not likely you would. All your bones are on the outside where you can just look at them. Anyway, Doc Lense mentioned this to me, and that gave me the idea on how to take a peek inside. See, the problem is that Enigma’s broad-spectrum holograms fool all our sensors. They seem to know when they’re being scanned and increase their resolution. The closer we look, the more realistic their holograms. Our sensors are too good. We hope if we take a big, crude, fast, shadow picture of Enigma, it will overwhelm their ability to cloak themselves. Instead of radiation, though, we’ll use a torpedo modified to produce an intense burst of neutrinos, and we’ve modified our deflector dish to be the image pickup.”

Duffy looked up as he spoke and saw the port over the *Vinci*’s forward torpedo launch slide open.

“They’re getting ready to fire.”

“Stand by,” Stevens’s voice came through his speakers. “Fire torpedo on my mark.” A pause. “Mark.”

A bright object, the torpedo all but hidden behind its own thruster flare, shot from the tube, running in a straight line only long enough to clear the ship, then curving around the bulk of Enigma. They couldn’t see the hidden ship, but the curve of the torpedo’s course, for the first time, gave them a sense of its size. Duffy found himself whistling.

Intellectually, he had known it was big, but that was much different than having a feel for the thing. It reminded him of the time he’d first walked the wooden deck of the restored Brooklyn Bridge in New York, back on Earth, and imagined building those stone towers using nothing but steam and muscle. Then, as now, Duffy had suddenly felt very small.

He was surprised that he could tell when the torpedo crossed Enigma’s “horizon” and continued around its back side. At that point, something about the torpedo looked different in a way he couldn’t define. Perhaps the speed and brightness of the torpedo were already overwhelming Enigma’s holograms in some subtle way that the eye, an amazingly sophisticated instrument in its own right, could detect.

Then came the explosion.

There was no sound, of course, and his helmet visor automatically compensated for the glare. But the flash was brief, and his visor almost instantly reverted to a normal view. In that moment, he could swear he saw the stars behind Enigma shimmer slightly, as though the hologram had momentarily become unstable. Then it was gone, and Enigma was hidden in its cloak of secrecy. Almost.

“Away team,” said Stevens, “we’ve got good data on the dish over here. We’re analyzing it right now. Getting some gross readings. There’s a lot of Starfleet-issue duranium alloy in there, consistent with the mass of the Lincoln.”

Duffy felt a tightness in his chest. Of course the duranium was in there, but in what form? The seconds ticked by.

“Away team, we’re—She’s intact! The Lincoln’s still in one piece!” In the background audio, Duffy could hear cheers. He surprised himself by letting out a whoop and pumping his fist at the stars. He surprised himself even more when he leaned over and gave Gomez an awkward hug. More surprising yet, she hugged back, laughing all the while.

“What,” said Pattie, a puzzled tone in her voice, “was all that about?”

“Elation,” said Soloman. “A release of accumulated emotional tension. A human thing, perhaps, but I felt some of it myself. Our comrades are quite possibly alive.”

P8’s pickup transmitted an odd, tinkling sound. “Our orders were always to proceed on that assumption.”

“Sorry, Pattie,” said Duffy. “Humans can’t just be ordered to be optimistic. There’s hope, and there’s justified hope, and most of the crew just crossed from the former to the latter.”

“Gold to away team.”

Duffy was surprised to hear the captain's voice. He quickly let go of Gomez's waist and tried to put himself back into professional mode.

"You heard the man," the captain continued. "If there was ever a doubt, this is now definitely a rescue mission. Get us inside."

"Aye, sir," responded Gomez. "Soloman, take us in."

Chapter

7

Dr. Lense leaned over Stevens's shoulder and stared at the console. "How much do you trust this data?"

Stevens shrugged. "I'm guessing maybe seventy percent accuracy. All our information is inferred, and Enigma was trying to mask our pulse."

On a viewscreen to Stevens's right, a tall, nervous-looking officer with a high forehead looked on. Lense understood that his name was Barclay, and he was some kind of expert on holotechnology.

Barclay shook his head in wonder. "A neutrino hologram. I—I wouldn't even have thought it was possible."

Stevens looked up at the screen and smiled wryly. "They haven't seen anything like this in the Delta Quadrant, Lieutenant?"

"Voyager has encountered some amazing things. But nothing like this."

"So you're saying Enigma represents a more advanced technology than ours?" Stevens said.

Barclay seemed hesitant to commit. "In some ways, but there's no sign of warp drive. You're familiar with Principles of Parallel Technologies?"

Stevens nodded. "It's already come up several times since this mission started. You think this is exception that proves the rule?"

Barclay's eyebrows lifted. "Technically, the exception can never prove the rule, but it's possible this is an exception of some sort. Waldport thought the urge to explore and to seek simulated experiences, through storytelling, or more advanced technologies like holodecks, were interrelated. Perhaps that might lead the occasional civilization down a different—different technological path."

Lense squinted at the readouts. "I'm not an engineer, but how different are they? I mean, the ship hypothesis is mine, but shouldn't there be more metal in there?"

Stevens shrugged. "Given the resolution of this method, we pretty much had to know what we were looking for, so there could be lots of nonduranium alloys inside there that aren't showing. But we do show plenty of carbon-organic signatures, and only a small number of them correspond to the Lincoln crew. If we assume those are living creatures, and not corpses or somebody's food supply, then it still

looks like a ship.”

“There’s—there’s something else that’s bothering me,” said Barclay. “You said that Enigma showed some sign of—telepathic capabilities?”

Lense nodded. “According to our Betazoid crewmember, yes. Why does that bother you?”

“If we assume the crew have some telepathic abilities she’s picking up, then probably not. But if it comes from the holographic systems, possibly. Starfleet Intelligence, years ago, did some studies of a telepathic hologram feedback system. A system like that is capable of showing a viewer exactly what they expect to see, and that feedback can be quite—powerful.”

“Holodiction,” said Lense.

The very word made Barclay squirm in a way Lense found intriguing. She’d have to ask Gomez or Duffy, who served with him in the past, about his background sometime.

“No, not holodiction—though it could lead to that, I suppose. What we’re talking about is an absolute suspension of disbelief, about hyperreality. The mind providing the source of the illusion is hypnotized—seduced by the illusion, until they find it almost impossible to accept as reality.”

* * *

P8 Blue looked up from her tricorder, antenna waving excitedly. Her voice sounded over Duffy’s com-link. “I think I have an idea how the Lincoln survived the impact.”

Duffy, who floated at the end of his safety line several meters away, grunted in response. His attention was focused on the magnetic probe they’d only recently replicated, based on seventy-year-old Starfleet blueprints. Of course, they’d added some modifications: a long-duration power supply, extra field strength, and a whole suite of telemetry sensors that would provide data to the highly modified tricorders that they also carried. Still, some small part of his mind was listening to Pattie. “Do tell,” he finally said.

“The interstellar medium is rather thin out here, but Enigma is still sweeping a wide swath through interstellar gas and dust. I’ve observed several microparticle dust impacts while you’ve been working. Enigma doesn’t sweep them away with a deflector, like a Federation starship, and there’s been no energy release consistent with an impact. I believe Enigma uses some combination of force fields and gravity control to gently brake objects it encounters. Meanwhile, it should leave a ‘hole’ in the interstellar medium which would be possible to follow, but it does not. That means that it’s leaving a trail of dust and gas behind as it moves.”

“Like,” said Gomez, “soldiers covering their tracks to avoid detection.”

“Exactly,” said Pattie. “But the composition has been subtly altered. Enigma is using the objects and gas it collects as raw materials, and ejecting waste products.”

Duffy frowned. “You think the Lincoln will be cut up for raw materials?”

“Possibly,” said Pattie, “but perhaps not. In any case, there is a mechanism that could have ‘collected’ the Lincoln without substantially damaging it.”

Gomez leaned back. “Did you copy that, da Vinci?”

“We did,” said Corsi’s voice. “We’re monitoring you very carefully.”

“Thanks, Mom,” said Duffy. “We promise not to leave the yard.”

Duffy thought he heard a slight growl, but it was hard to tell. Corsi’s voice returned, crisp and professional. “Are you sure you don’t want a security team out there with you?”

“No,” said Gomez, before Duffy could reply. “Nothing Enigma has done so far seems to constitute aggression. Having a bunch of goons with phasers waiting around might be seen as provocative. It would only put us in danger.”

“My people are not ‘goons,’ any more than yours are ‘grease monkeys.’”

Gomez chuckled. Foley, one of Corsi’s security people, had let the “grease monkey” quip slip a week earlier, and Gomez was milking it for all it was worth.

“What,” asked Corsi, “is taking so long?”

“We’re being methodical,” answered Gomez.

“That’s ‘safe’ in security speak,” said Duffy. “Besides I’m almost”—there was a click, and the end of the magnetic probe began to glow a soft blue—“ready.”

“Be careful,” said Gomez, “that you don’t depolarize your own suit seals.”

“Careful, careful,” Duffy replied in a sing-song tone. He pushed the probe closer to Enigma’s nearly invisible surface. There was no question this time. The stars imaged near the probe began to shimmer and swirl like runny watercolors.

“Check your safety lines,” warned Pattie. “If we pierce the field, atmosphere could vent from inside.”

Duffy tugged at the line, and braced himself as he turned up the probe’s gain and pushed it against the force field. Suddenly the image melted back, shimmering waves moving outwards from a hole that seemed, literally, to appear out of empty space. “It’s working!”

As the opening reached half a meter or so, Duffy reduced the gain and allowed it to stabilize. There was light inside, and he got an impression of a large space.

Gomez checked her tricorder. “I’m getting a reading from inside. There’s a breathable nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere, with enough residual force field to keep it inside. It’s like the fields in the shuttlebay. Radiation flux is above background but nothing we’d need to worry about in the short term, even without our suits.”

Duffy leaned closer to the opening. He could see large machinery inside, dun- and gold-colored metals, pinstripes of silver and black, and glowing blue panels that pulsed with energy. “Will the force fields keep us from getting inside?”

“It shouldn’t be a problem. Try pushing your hand through.”

“Wait,” said Corsi.

Duffy grimaced. They had a ship to rescue.

He plunged his hand through the field before any superior officer had time to reformulate that thought into the form of an order. There was a slight, springy, resistance, like punching through a thin sheet of rubber. He only stopped when he was up to the shoulder in Enigma. He wiggled his fingers experimentally. "Still attached," he announced.

"Guys," Stevens's voice cut into the circuit, "Corsi is turning all red. For your own safety, I recommend not returning to the ship right away."

"We will," Corsi's voice was slow and controlled, "have a talk about this later."

"Gomez." It was Captain Gold's voice this time. "What do you see?"

"It looks like some kind of mechanical space, Captain. Possibly a power generator or an engine room, though the technology is unlike anything I've seen before. No sign of crew. Everything appears automated."

"Captain," said Duffy, "we have to go inside. We can't tell much about Enigma from out here. It's also possible that once inside, we might be able to get a message to the Lincoln, either with our combadges or through an internal communications system we can tap into."

"Captain," Corsi's voice rose in warning.

"Stand by, away team."

The bridge circuit was muted. Duffy exchanged glances with Gomez. He wondered what the proverbial fly on the wall would be hearing right now.

"Commander." It was Corsi. "I'll be monitoring the situation from here. I have a team suited and ready for immediate beam-out in case there's trouble."

"It'll be fine," said Duffy. "There's a duplicate magnetic probe on one of Soloman's manipulator arms. The module has enough power to hold the breach open indefinitely, which our portable model can't do. Soloman can monitor us from outside and provide a communications relay."

"Very well," said Gold, "permission to enter the Enigma ship is granted."

They withdrew the portable probe, and replaced it with the one on Soloman's pod. With the increased power available from the pod's mini-fusion reactor, Duffy felt comfortable upping the gain to give them a two-meter opening. Gomez insisted on going first, but there was no shortage of volunteers. They were all eager to examine Enigma's mysterious workings.

There was an operational gravity field inside Enigma, roughly half a standard gravity, and it was oriented so that the opening dropped them onto an angled wall. A towline from the module was fed through the opening first, to allow them to climb down to a level deck about eight meters below. Duffy watched, feeling a slight bit of disorientation, as Gomez lowered herself down.

She waved. "Comm check. Do you read me out there?"

“Signal gain is down seventy percent,” reported Soloman, “but I still read you fine, and I’m relaying a clear signal back to the ship.”

P8 Blue was next in. She bypassed the line, her eight legs allowing her to scurry directly down the wall in the reduced gravity.

“Wish me luck,” said Duffy, as he waved at Soloman in his cupola and climbed through the opening.

“Despite considerable effort on my part, I still do not understand the indeterminate nature of luck. I wish you success, not failure.”

Duffy chuckled. “Close enough.” He felt the gravity field grab him as he passed through the force fields, and climbed hand over hand down the line. He dropped lightly to the deck—it was a little like his first walk on Mars—and joined the others in looking around.

The space was dimly lit, and their hand-lights helped them pierce the shadows. A large cylinder, covered with glowing blue panels along its length, stretched from one end of the space to the other, a distance of perhaps fifty meters. Duffy was drawn to this device, while P8 scrambled inside a large copper-colored piece of machinery at one end of the room. Gomez focused on some illuminated wall panels that might be controls or readouts. With the oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere confirmed, both Duffy and Gomez took off their helmets to conserve their suits’ respective air supplies.

Duffy walked along the length of the device, feeling the pulse of power from inside as his glove slid along its mechanical supports. He knew instinctively it had to be some kind of engine. He stopped occasionally to take a tricorder reading, then moved along. He’d traveled the full length of the device before coming to a conclusion. “I think this is a space drive, a caterpillar.”

Pattie’s head popped out of an opening in the top of the device she was examining. “Excuse me? That last part can’t possibly have translated properly.”

Duffy laughed. “I wasn’t talking about one of your family members, Pattie. It’s a kind of theoretical reactionless drive. Inside this cylinder, a bit of space is being pinched, kinked. The drive then uses that kink to pull itself forward. Once the kink has been pulled through the length of the engine, it’s released, a new one forms at the other end, and the process repeats itself.

“It’s like an inchworm crawling along—again, no offense—or one of us climbing that line hand-over-hand. It’s a perfect stealth drive, no exhaust products, no radiation, no thermal emissions, just a few stray gravity waves that these people apparently have the technology to mask. Thing is, this kind of drive should require a lot of power.”

“Two things,” Pattie said. “One, you really don’t need to apologize every time you make a metaphor to an Earth-based insectoid or vermicular life-form.”

“Sorry.” Duffy grinned.

“Secondly, I believe that this device I am studying is the source of that power. I believe it may be a zero-point energy collector.”

Duffy whistled softly. “Literally energy from nothing. The Federation’s never been able to make that one work, though we’ve had the theory for centuries. Couple this drive to that collector, and you’ve got about as close to a perpetual motion machine as you’ll ever see.”

“I’m not having much luck making sense of these panels,” said Gomez. “For all I know, I’m trying to decipher a decorative wall hanging. But there’s definitely control activity behind it. If I can find a way to tie in a hard connection for Soloman, maybe he can access their control circuits from outside.” A puzzled look crossed her face as she studied her tricorder. “Is anyone else getting unusual readings?”

Duffy stopped what he was doing. “What kind of readings?”

“These tricorders are modified to be especially sensitive to photonic force fields. Kieran, can I borrow the magnetic probe?”

Puzzled, he unhooked the tool from his belt and handed it to her.

“My readings are inconclusive,” she explained. “This is the only way to be sure.”

She activated the probe to a low gain and pushed it through the lighted panel.

Duffy looked around the room, as though seeing it for the first time. “This is all a hologram.”

Gomez nodded. “A much more sophisticated one than we’ve ever seen, but yes.”

“Look at this,” said Pattie, gesturing at a series of flashing green panels along the wall. “These lit up when you pushed the probe through the panel. You may have disrupted something.”

The flashing lights reminded Duffy of something. As he thought of it, he became aware of something else, a tone at the high end of his hearing range, pulsing in time to the lights. “This is an alarm of some kind,” he said.

Just then, a bulkhead at the end of the room irised open, and a floating ball of light passed through.

Corsi’s voice sounded tinnier even than usual over the com-link. “Away team, get out of there. We can’t get a transporter lock with you inside. Move closer to the opening.”

The ball of light stopped in front of Duffy and changed shape, dimming as it did, and taking the form of something froglike, upright, and only vaguely humanoid. The frog-thing considered him with wet, yellow eyes. “This is a class one service area,” it said. “You can’t be here.” It reached out to Duffy with a webbed, many-fingered hand. “Good-bye,” it said.

Duffy faded out of existence.

Chapter

8

Captain Gold paced the length of the observation lounge. “I want options.”

Stevens leaned back in his chair, fingertips pressed together. “I can send out more ‘pinger’ torpedoes. The pulse should be detected by the modified tricorders the away team has.”

Gold stopped and looked at him. “What does that do for us?”

“Well, they already know we’re here, and we’re looking for them. It should allow them to get a fix on the pulse. If they’re lost inside and trying to find their way out, it might help.”

Gold nodded. “Sounds good. How long?”

“I’ve got a second torpedo in the tube, two more on the fabrication bench. I think a shot an hour indefinitely.”

“Do it. Pulse every hour, on the hour, ship’s time. A logical schedule will make it easier for them to find the pulses if they need multiple fixes along the way.”

Corsi looked at Gold, her expression dark. “I should have had a team in there with them.”

Gold glared back. “I’m looking for options, not ‘I told you so.’ If your people were in there, we’d be looking for them, too.”

“Options then,” said Corsi, her posture ramrod-straight. “Stevens replicates a half-dozen more of these magnetic probes and shows my people how to use them. Then I lead a team of my people inside that thing, and we start poking holes in holograms until we find our missing people and bring them out.”

Lense cleared her throat. “Enigma has an interior volume of just under half a million cubic kilometers. You could be looking a long time.”

“Then,” said Corsi, “if we can’t find them, we’ll find someone or something that knows where they are.” She scowled at no one in particular.

Gold knew her anger was directed more at herself than anyone else, but that conversation would have to wait. He shook his head. “I think that’s out of the question unless we have some idea where to look.”

“The easiest way to do that,” Abramowitz cut in smoothly, “would be to ask them. Have we learned anything else that might let us communicate with them?”

“Actually,” said Stevens, “some of their tricorder readings from inside Enigma were relayed back to us. Data transmission was slowed by the intervening force fields so we didn’t get everything, but I’d say in those few minutes we learned more about Enigma than the Chinook did during its entire study.” He licked his lips. “I think we can punch a comm signal in that they could translate through their modified tricorders.”

“We need more than a signal.” Corsi was like a belligerent dog with a bone. “We need intelligence. Can you improve the images you have of the interior? Maybe find our people, or at least the Lincoln?”

“We’ve been reviewing the data from the first imaging pulse, but I don’t know there’s much I can do to improve on it. We have a mass of duranium we believe to be the Lincoln. We have various other scattered duranium traces, none of which add up to a hundred-kilometer ship, or anything remotely like it. We have organic concentrations that we believe to be life-forms.”

Gold stopped his pacing, and stared hard at Stevens. “How many, Stevens?”

“Somewhere in the neighborhood of thirty million.” Stevens looked grim.

Corsi's mouth fell open. "Thirty million people in the crew, and nobody is answering our hails?"

Stevens shrugged. "They could be unconscious, or dead for all we can tell. We could be reading farm animals, or the occupants of a zoo. They could be some other kind of biological concentrations entirely—trees or bioreactors full of bacteria. We just don't have the resolution to tell. However—" He seemed reluctant to continue.

Gold crossed his arms over his chest. "Spit it out, Stevens."

"During the first burst, we observed some minor disruption of the holographic matrix. Given that, and our success with the modified magnetic probe, it's just possible I could come up with a special torpedo to disrupt at least their outer holograms. It might be only be temporary, twenty minutes or so while the fields regenerate, but it would give us a look at what we're dealing with. It might let us get a direct comm signal in, or beam our people out."

"How long?"

Stevens punched at the screen of his padd. "We'll need to run some more analysis on the data. More scans next time we pulse Enigma. Design and fabricate the weapon. Maybe thirty hours."

"Make it twenty," said Gold.

* * *

Duffy looked down at the surf sloshing around the boots of his space suit. "I am definitely overdressed, for this beach."

He, Gomez, and P8 Blue were standing on a sandy coastline under a sunny, pink sky. Pattie—smaller, lower, and generally more vulnerable to the waves—scuttled up the sandy slope away from the water. Thirty meters beyond, a cliff made of dark, volcanic rock reared up into the sky.

Gomez looked at him. "Any idea how we got here?"

"Felt like a transporter to me."

"Where," asked Pattie, "do you think we are?"

"Still inside Enigma, I'd say." Duffy took out the magnetic probe and looked around for something to test it on. He could have simply tried it on the sand, but the environmental suit made it difficult to bend that far.

Ten meters to his right, a black outcropping of rock the size of a shuttlecraft rose up out of the sand. He trudged over, activated the probe, and shoved it against the outcropping.

To his surprise, the probe didn't penetrate, but neither was the surface entirely solid. Instead, it gave slightly, like wet leather.

There was a rumble, almost subsonic, so deep and loud Duffy felt it in his ribcage as much as he heard it. "Ouch," said the universal translator, in the very generic voice it reserved for the most extremely alien of languages.

A few meters to his left, a flipper the size of a man lifted out of the sand, traversed a five meter arc, and dug into the sand. With a grunt, the “outcropping” laboriously pulled itself a few meters farther up the beach.

Duffy staggered back, then turned and ran from the behemoth. He managed ten meters or so in the clumsy environmental suit before looking back.

The thing wasn’t chasing him. It labored to move on land, and he could have kept ahead of it at a slow stroll. “Did that turtle just talk?”

“Do not mock me, small visitor,” said the behemoth. “No turtle am I. Rogendera Godo-click, I am, far-traveler, brave adventurer, home from the stars after many seasons’ travels. Home to lay her eggs in familiar sand, and tell her children tales of distant worlds. Home to stay am I.”

Gomez stepped closer. “You’re a space traveler?”

“I was, as you must be. Strange is your form and speech. Never your like have I seen before, not in all the travels, mine.”

“We’re space travelers,” said Duffy, “but we’re a little lost.” He considered a moment. Whatever this thing was, it was real, and it didn’t seem to know it was on a ship. “In your travels, did you at some time collide with some unseen object?”

“This happened, on the four-hundred-and-sixth day of the twentieth season of our voyage through the black ocean. We were trapped for a time, but we escaped and after many adventures on the black ocean, returned here, to these fine sands.”

“Kieran,” said Gomez, “maybe we shouldn’t talk about this with the ‘locals’ till we know more.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right.”

“Friends,” said Pattie, “we are not alone.”

They turned to see a bright ball of light emerge from the cliff face. As it approached, it dimmed and changed form, into something more humanoid this time.

The being was shorter than Duffy, with caramel-colored skin, its head owl-like and topped with short brown feathers. The eyes were yellow, which surprised Duffy not at all. “This isn’t your story,” said the owl. “You must not interfere.”

Duffy turned to the behemoth. “Nice meeting you, but I think we’ll be go—”

* * *

“—ing.” Duffy staggered as the gravity changed.

Clouds of dust blew past him, kicked up by elephant-sized beasts that marched single file through the marketplace, cargo carried in slings tied between the tail of one animal and a blunt horn on the nose of the next.

One of the beasts contemplated him with a blue eye the size of his fist, a gaze suggesting intelligence, if not sentience. Then it snorted and moved on.

The plaza was crowded with thousands of people representing dozens of races, none familiar to Duffy. Open-air stalls sold goods of all kinds: food, artwork, and items of unfamiliar, yet obviously advanced, technology.

The first impression had been of a primitive market, but Duffy realized this might be an illusion. The primitive aspects might be recreational, or perhaps ceremonial.

Certainly, everyone seemed to be having a good time. He had the impression of a vast party, or a fair.

He, Gomez, and Pattie stood close together, earning no more than the occasional curious glance in the sea of races. This was obviously a place used to unfamiliar visitors.

“I believe,” said Pattie, “we have been sent somewhere where we can do the least harm.”

Duffy nodded. “That light entity was real, and he was clearly upset we were interfering with the alien’s ‘story.’”

Gomez looked around. “I wonder how much of this is real? Not much, I’d wager.”

“I agree,” said Duffy. “This was created for someone else’s benefit, and it could be only a few of the thousands of beings here. Maybe only one of them.”

Gomez pointed towards a largely empty seating area. In the middle was a large platform with an elaborate machine on it, constructed of brass and glass pipes. It might have been a sculpture, or a musical instrument on a stage, it was hard to tell.

“Since we aren’t likely to find anyone real to talk to, I suggest we sit down and assess our situation.”

There were benches and perchlike rails, in a variety of sizes. Duffy found one that looked right and sat down, Gomez taking the seat next to him.

Duffy reflected on their situation, and nodded his head in amazement. “The Lincoln can’t be the first ship to get trapped inside Enigma. There must have been dozens, hundreds maybe, and nobody escapes because they think they already have. They continue their voyages, go home, even die of old age, never realizing that they’re living in a holo-simulation.”

“Agreed,” said Pattie. “This obviously has been going on for a long time. None of these species are familiar to us.”

“Based on its course,” said Duffy, “Enigma just crossed the Ronde void, a region almost devoid of stars. The area beyond it is unexplored by the Federation. All we know about it is from scattered reports purchased from the Ferengi. I bet that’s where these species came from.” He watched as a turbaned vendor draped a jeweled chain around the neck of a skeptical customer. “But we’ve got no way of knowing if all of them are really present, or if they’re simply re-created from someone’s memory.”

Gomez watched another of the “elephant trains” pass by, this one carrying egg-shaped gondolas full of passengers.

“What I don’t understand, is how anyone could not know they’re in a simulation, after they’ve seen the kinds of things we did.”

P8 reared up on her back four legs, her antenna waving. “We did not enter Enigma on a colliding ship. Our experience may not be typical.”

Duffy shrugged. “She’s right. Maybe there’s an automatic response to a ship collision, and they just end up in simulated space until a more complete simulation can be created.”

Gomez nodded. “Of course. They wouldn’t need a simulation until the colliding ship was supposed to reach a planet.”

Duffy frowned. “I have one other concern. If we do find our way out, how do we know we’ve found our way out? We could end up like the rest of these prisoners, passengers, whatever you want to call them. We could be back on the *Vinci*, happy as pigs in blood, when we’re really still in a simulation.”

“The difference between all of them, and us,” Gomez said, holding up the magnetic probe, “is that we have the key to reality.” She activated it, and pushed it through the metal bench.

Pattie made one of her contemplative noises. “The light entity—do you think it is part of Enigma’s crew, or some aspect of the ship’s automated systems, or its holoprogramming?”

“Maybe part of the program,” said Gomez. “It seems pretty single-minded.”

“I am not so sure,” said Pattie. “If all these other beings can survive here, there’s no obvious reason the crew shouldn’t be alive as well.”

Duffy looked up at a nearby vendor’s tent. “Maybe we should just ask. Here it comes.”

They turned and watched as the ball of light approached. It changed form; this time it was fully humanoid, Bolian to be exact, and it wore a Starfleet uniform. “You don’t belong here,” it said, “but now I know where you do belong.”

“We’re from the Federation Starship *Vinci*,” said Gomez, standing and showing her open hands. “We mean no harm to this ship. Are you part of its crew? We need to speak with the crew.”

The pseudo-Bolian looked puzzled. “I am a keeper of order. I keep the stories on their paths. You don’t belong here. You take me from my own story, and I wish to return to it.”

“Please,” said Gomez, “are you real?”

She reached for the magnetic probe again, activated it, and extended it towards the Bolian.

He shimmered, and for a moment, Duffy could see what was underneath—a floating machine a little bigger than his torso. On top of it, a small creature looked out at him with intelligent, yellow eyes.

Then the Bolian was restored, an annoyed expression on his face. He pushed the probe away, seemingly no longer affected by it. “That device interferes with the story. It disrupts the experience. You should not use it.” He frowned. “You don’t belong here.”

Gomez’s eyes went wide. “Kieran, helmets, now!”

Duffy affixed his helmet to his head, just as the Bolian image reached out a hand, and his stomach lurched—

Chapter

9

They were floating, floating among stars. Duffy was relieved to see that his helmet's seals were intact. A quick glance over to Gomez showed that hers was also.

Gomez, meanwhile, looked at their Nasat companion. "Pattie, are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Like you, Commander, I anticipated this and closed my breathing passages before our transport."

Duffy looked around. "Is this really space? The stars look right."

"That doesn't mean anything," said Gomez, "but there's nothing to test with the probe. If it's real space, though, where's the da Vinci?"

Duffy activated his suit's communicator. "Away team toda Vinci, do you read? Can you get a transporter lock on us?"

"Stand by," said an unfamiliar voice, "we're homing in on your signal."

Duffy saw something moving at the edge of his vision, and turned to face it—a bright, moving, dot that quickly grew larger in the distance.

"It's a Federation ship," said Pattie, "but it's not the da Vinci."

As Duffy watched, the dot resolved itself into the sleek shape of an Intrepid-class starship. He could just read the markings U.S.S. LINCOLN across its bow when the transporter effect enveloped him.

* * *

Fabian Stevens put down his molecular welder and looked up over the torpedo casing on his workbench.

Across the hololab, Soloman sat bolt upright in a chair, looking straight ahead, unmoving. Only the furious flashing of the lights on his belt-mounted data buffer hinted at how hard he was working.

"Thank you," said Stevens, "for your help on programming, Soloman. This is well beyond my humble computer skills."

Soloman turned his head slightly towards Stevens. "Thank you for asking me. The construction of a narrow-bandwidth, data-redundant, self-installing message worm to operate in the limited environment of a tricorder is a stimulating challenge. It is good to have function, to participate in the rescue of my crewmates. I feel"—he paused, as a rapid burst passed through the data buffer—"responsible for their

disappearance.”

Stevens shook his head. “Now that’s just silly, Soloman. There was nothing you could have done. If you hadn’t been standing by, we might not even have been able to warn them.”

Soloman blinked rapidly. It reminded Stevens of the lights on the data buffer.

“Lt. Commander Corsi had me beamed from the module immediately after their disappearance. If I had been on station, I would have been in a position to be of more assistance, to observe the situation directly and provide data necessary to their rescue.”

“Beaming you back was Corsi’s call, and Captain Gold’s, Soloman.” Stevens retrieved a relay from the parts replicator. “The module is still out there, operated from the bridge. It’s keeping the breach open, just in case, and relaying sensor readings. I’m not sure what else you could be doing out there.”

“If they should return, they will need me to pilot them back to the ship.”

Stevens bent over the torpedo casing, and fitted the relay into place. “They can be beamed back, or the module can be flown home by remote control.”

Stevens glanced up as the lights on Soloman’s data buffer abruptly went dark, and he turned to face Stevens. “They will need someone—to be waiting there for them when they return.”

Stevens considered this for a moment. He couldn’t argue. Part of him wanted to be out there, too.

Soloman broke the silence. “We Bynars, we are aware that we are—unusual among humanoid species; that some species look upon us with disfavor.”

Stevens blinked in surprise, the relay momentarily forgotten. “What do you mean?”

“We are small. We are physically weak. We are linked closely to computers in a way that some humanoids find disturbing, or even repulsive. Even our aversion to ambiguity is disturbing to some. Yet we have always reached out to other species. We are a curious people. But some say we are not brave.”

“Soloman, I don’t think anyone on this ship questions your courage—”

“I wonder. What if Lt. Commander Corsi beamed me back in anticipation that this was my wish?”

“Trust me, Soloman, she would have done the same for any of us.” Stevens chuckled dryly. “She’s protective of us crazy engineering types. I think that’s why the captain pulled her back a little this mission, to remind her we need room to work.”

“Yet I have noted that she will place herself, and her security people, in danger.”

Stevens nodded. “When the situation calls for it, yeah. But that’s what they’re trained for, and she trains them hard.” He waved a hand in the direction of the corridor. “Haven’t you seen them working out down at the court? When Lense isn’t playing handball, anyhow. When we pull into a starbase, while the rest of us are taking shore leave, Corsi is rotating her people down so they can run combat simulations on a real holodeck.”

“I do not like uncertainty,” said Soloman. “I do not seek danger. Yet I would prefer to be out in the

module, waiting for my crewmates. Do you know what the Klingons say of my people?"

"No."

"They say 'a Bynar never stands alone.' I gather they mean great disrespect in this. Yet when my friends disappeared, I was as alone in that module as I have ever been in my life, even more alone than when 111 died. Yet I did not wish to return to the ship. I wished to fulfill my duties, to be of service to my shipmates. I would be there still, if I could."

Stevens grinned. "You've come a long way, Soloman. You can watch my back anytime."

Soloman blinked, then turned away. The data buffer began to flash again. "I will take that as a compliment, Fabian, but I do not consider your back to be especially interesting."

Stevens laughed and picked up his tools. "Let's get this done. We have a message to send."

* * *

It's good to be out of the space suit, thought Gomez, adjusting her fresh uniform, even if it made her a little nervous.

She half expected the "Keeper of Order" to appear through the wall of their assigned quarters at any moment and transport them somewhere else, but logically, that wasn't going to happen.

Whatever force controlled their fate on Enigma, had decided they belonged on a Federation vessel. This was likely their final destination.

Large windows lined the curved wall. To all appearances, the Lincoln was under way at warp speed.

A set of doors opened, and Duffy emerged from an adjoining bedroom.

They'd been assigned to a large guest suite, and even with three of them, it was luxurious by the standards of the da Vinci. Even Captain Gold's quarters weren't this big.

"Interesting that we got VIP quarters," she said. "But I'd feel a lot better about it if there weren't a pair of armed security officers standing outside."

The cushions on the couch under the windows stirred, and Pattie emerged from where she'd tunneled in to rest. "I feel much refreshed," she said.

"Good," said Gomez, "I wish I'd had time for a nap myself. We need a clear head here."

Duffy looked puzzled. "We were looking for the Lincoln, and we've found it. If our situation isn't perfect, it's much improved. Moreover, this ship is real. We've tested it."

She nodded her head towards the windows. "But is that real? We assume not, but we can't be sure."

"If it is a simulation," said Pattie, "then whose simulation is it? We know Enigma's holographic systems have a telepathic capability they use to create their simulations. In this case, would it base the simulation on the thoughts of the entire crew, or perhaps just one individual?"

“Judging by those guards outside,” said Gomez, “we don’t know what we’re dealing with here. Clearly somebody, probably Captain Newport, is suspicious of us. If the simulation is based on his thoughts—Well, remember what Reg warned us about. He may not want to know this is a simulation.”

The door slid open, and an Andorian security officer leaned in. “The captain will see you now.”

The three of them followed her to the elevator, and three decks up to the captain’s ready-room off the ship’s bridge.

Captain Newport sat behind his desk, the top empty except for a three-dimensional chess board in the center. A green-skinned man dressed in civilian clothing sat in a chair to his right. They appeared to be in the middle of a game. From what Gomez could tell, the green-skinned man was winning.

Both men stood as they entered the room. The green-skinned man seemed to study them with special interest.

The captain put out his hand to Gomez. “I’m Captain Newport, welcome to the Lincoln.”

“I’m Commander Sonya Gomez, first officer of the U.S.S. da Vinci, and this is my second officer, Lt. Commander Kieran Duffy, and one of our engineers, P8 Blue.”

He gestured at a trio of chairs arrayed around his desk. “Please sit down.”

Gomez and Duffy took their seats. P8 climbed into the chair, but it wasn’t designed for her, and she perched awkwardly on the arm.

Gomez turned her attention back to the green man. She became aware of a curious smell, a little like sage and cinnamon. It wasn’t at all unpleasant. “You must be Wayne Omthon, first officer of the Vulpecula.”

He smiled nervously. “Ex-first officer, actually. My former captain and I had a falling out. That’s why I’m still on the Lincoln. They’ve made me their guest until we meet up with a ship headed back to Orion.”

Gomez tried to hide her puzzlement. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Newport’s eyes narrowed. “If you don’t mind my asking, how do you know his name, and how did you come to be floating in mid-space, six light-years from the nearest star, and conveniently right along our course?”

Gomez glanced at the others, uncertain what to say next. Well, try the truth. “Well sir, we were sent to rescue you after a collision you had with an object we call Enigma.”

Newport still looked serious, but he laughed. “If you’d hoped to rescue anyone, you might have brought a ship.”

She studied the room casually, trying to get some sense of the officer she was dealing with. A collection of antique gunpowder-and-bullet firearms filled a glass case behind his chair. A small shelf of old-style paper books was displayed in a glass case with an elaborate lock, on the wall to his left. She could only just see the title of one of them, *The Spy Who Loved Me*. It appeared Newport had an interest in espionage.

“We did, sir, an S.C.E. vessel. In fact, we sort of expected them to pick us up, not you.”

“You said you’re from the *Vinci*. We show that vessel in transit to Deep Space 7, nowhere near the so-called Enigma object.”

“Yes sir,” said Gomez, “that was our course before we were called in to investigate your ship’s disappearance, but we diverted in response to the *Chinook*’s call. You never left the Enigma, sir. This is all an illusion.”

Newport’s face started to redden. “You’re not the first to try and sell me that bill of goods. This is no illusion. This is a Federation Starship.” The captain stood so abruptly his chair nearly fell over. “I want to know what’s going on here, what’s affecting the minds of my crew. Even Mr. Omthon was confused when we first brought him aboard, though his mind has since cleared. Just what are you? Telepaths? Changelings? Section 31?”

Gomez noticed Mr. Omthon looking at her with an odd expression; not threatening, but pained, almost apologetic. Something in his eyes told her confronting Newport wasn’t the way to go.

She also wondered about Newport’s grip on reality. Telepaths were a semi-reasonable paranoia, but all the shape-shifting Changelings that ruled the Dominion had gone back to the Gamma Quadrant after the war, and Gomez didn’t even know what a “Section 31” was.

“Sir, I’m telling you what I believe to be true. I will admit that, since leaving our ship, we’ve been feeling some, uh, confusion. Disorientation. Perhaps your doctor should take a look at us.”

Newport’s expression immediately softened, and he looked hesitant. It was almost painful to watch a Starfleet officer in this condition. Clearly this was his personal simulation, and he was deeply locked into what Reg had called “hyperreality.”

Newport took a deep breath, slowly released it, then sat heavily back in his chair. “Understand, Commander Gomez, I’d like to believe you. Our scans tell us you are what you claim you are, though we know scans can be fooled. All of your identification data match the Federation database, and we do show you assigned to the *Vinci*. But you must understand, we escaped this ‘Enigma’ days ago, with the help of Mr. Omthon here and the aid of the *Chinook*. We’re now three and a half light-years away from your Enigma, and your story doesn’t make a bit of sense.”

* * *

Gomez looked over her shoulder, at the guard who now held their tricorders and the magnetic probe. They were being led down a corridor, and this time the security officers had their phasers drawn.

They were being led to the brig, not the VIP quarters.

Newport had been conflicted about giving the order, but he seemed to be sinking into a paranoid fantasy, finding spies behind every bulkhead.

She wondered what it was like, to have almost godlike power over events and your surroundings, and to have no idea it was happening. To have no idea any of it might, or might not, be real.

For Newport, the universe was exactly what his unconscious mind expected it to be. It was no wonder he was intoxicated by the experience.

Enigma was a trap from which so many had never escaped, and Gomez could understand, with frightening clarity, exactly why.

The tricorders, both clipped to the guard's belt, began to chirp a warning tone. The guard stopped and stared at them suspiciously, then pulled one out and flipped it open. "What's this?"

"I have no idea," said Gomez. "I didn't leave mine running." She looked at Duffy, who shook his head.

The guard stared at the screen, licking his lips nervously, then turned the tricorder around so that they could see it. Gomez read the text there.

"WILL ATTEMPT TO SHUT DOWN ALL ENIGMA HOLOGRAMS AND FORCE FIELDS, 2100 HOURS SHIP'S TIME. BELIEVE WE WILL SUCCEED. WILL ATTEMPT TO LOCATE AND RESCUE THEN. THIS IS OUR ONLY TRANSMISSION TILL 2100. MAZEL TOV.—GOLD."

The guard looked worried. "What does this mean?"

"For us," said Duffy, "it's great news. For the countless other beings I suspect are on this ship, it means an ugly death in the vacuum of space."

Gomez nodded grimly.

Pattie looked up at them. "Then we have all reached the same conclusion."

"Enigma is not a ship," said Gomez.

"A ship, perhaps," said P8, "but not as we know it."

"More of a self-sustaining holographic construct," said Duffy, "pretending to be a ship. If the da Vinci actually has found a way to shut it down, everyone on board not protected from space by a ship, suit, or," he nodded towards Pattie, "their own physiology, will be killed. We could be talking about millions of sentient beings."

The guards all looked concerned and confused, but nobody was insisting they continue towards the brig. The crewman holding the tricorder shook his head in confusion. "What are you all talking about?"

"What I've been trying to tell you all along," said Wayne Omthon, stepping out from an alcove where he'd evidently been hiding. "None of this is real. It's some kind of illusion, and we're all trapped inside."

Duffy nodded. "You weren't dumped directly into this simulation either, were you? You saw enough of the rest of Enigma to suspect this wasn't real."

"And to suspect that the S.S. Vulpecula that came to pick me up wasn't real either. This ship, this crew, are the only things I know for sure are real, so I picked a fight with my captain, or her simulation, to contrive a way to stay here. Fortunately, Newport and I have become chess buddies."

He grinned, and somehow Gomez felt compelled to grin back, despite the dire situation they were facing.

“Being good enough at chess to be a convincing loser has its value,” he continued. “He hasn’t been in a huge hurry to get me off the ship, and I’ve managed to build a level of trust.”

The security guard reached a decision. He glanced at his fellows, to confirm they were in agreement, then handed Gomez her tricorder. “We’ve got to get out of sight. In here,” he said, leading them into a service area, and pulling the cover off a Jefferies tube.

They all climbed inside, crawling through the low tube. “I’m Lieutenant Roth,” said the guard with the tricorders. “These,” he gestured at the other security officers, “are Chen and Vaches.”

“Okay, my turn to ask what the heck is going on,” said Duffy.

They reached a service junction where there was room for them all to stop and talk in secret.

“I never thought I’d be saying this,” said Roth, as he handed Duffy and Pattie back their gear, “but this is mutiny. We’ve all known the captain was acting strangely, and Mr. Omthon has been trying to tell us we’re trapped in some kind of simulation that’s somehow affecting the captain’s mind.”

“It’s not his fault,” said Gomez. “The simulation is being created from telepathic scans of his subconscious, and it’s much more realistic than any holodeck. It’s almost like he’s intoxicated, or hypnotized. He isn’t responsible for his actions.”

Roth sighed. “None of us could dismiss it, but we weren’t reluctant to embrace it, either. Then Mr. Omthon here showed up, and the pieces started fitting together.”

“The first officer is with us,” said Omthon, “but he’s under too much scrutiny to act directly. I think we’ve got maybe a third of the security force, several of the senior staff, and I’ve managed to convince most of engineering, but this could get ugly.”

The youngest of the security officers wiped his mouth with an unsteady hand. “That message. It sounds like we could just sit tight. In a few hours we’d know. For sure. The captain would see too.”

“We do that,” said Duffy, “and millions could die, starting with—” He blinked. “The away team from the Chinook, where are they?”

Roth looked surprised. “They beamed back to the Chinook. Last I knew they were headed into Starbase 12 for resupply.”

“I’m afraid the Chinook is on its way to Salem II,” said Gomez, “without those two crew members. The ship they beamed aboard is a holographic simulation, one that’s going to blink out of existence at 2100 hours and leave them floating in space. It’s barely possible that the Lincoln or the da Vinci can find them and transport them aboard before they die, but there will be too many to save.”

“Other ships,” explained Pattie, “have become trapped here. This may have been happening for centuries.”

“Mutiny,” said Roth, seemingly just trying out the word, but every time he said it, he made a face as though he’d tasted something sour.

“Wait,” said Gomez, grinning, then laughing. “Maybe we don’t need to mutiny. You saw what happened when we challenged Captain Newport’s vision of reality? What if, instead, we give him exactly what he

wants?”

Duffy looked skeptical. “We’ve got just a few hours to pull a con on the captain, and find a way to get a message toda Vinci.”

“We can do it, and try to pick up the Chinook away team while we’re at it.” Gomez felt a surge of adrenaline. It was a risk, a huge one. But it was their only chance.

Duffy shrugged. “You’re insane, but I’m game. What choice have we got?”

“None,” replied Gomez.

“One problem,” said Pattie, “can we get to Starbase 12 before 2100 hours?”

Omthon shook his head. “This is a fast ship, but not even at maximum warp.”

“If this were real distance, in real space,” said Gomez. “It isn’t, so we’re just going to have to change the laws of physics.” She looked at Duffy. “You ever hear of something called ‘Section 31’?”

“Never.”

“Me either, which is funny considering we’re about to join.”

Chapter

10

Gold stood in the shuttlebay, hands clenched behind his back, gazing out into the unmoving stars. Here, in the darkness of deep space, he could clearly see the colors, a red giant here, a yellow dwarf there, a glowing stellar nursery looking like luminous cotton candy.

It was beautiful.

It was false.

He knew he was looking at Enigma, that it filled a sweep of sky that encompassed his entire view, but his eyes told him otherwise. He could just make out the flashing formation lights on the Augmented Personnel Module, still standing vigil at the gates to Enigma, but otherwise, the sky seemed empty.

He held up his hand near the force field, feeling the tingle of energy, and perhaps only imagining he could feel the bite of bitter cold.

He heard a footstep behind him. Some senses, at least, were still trustworthy.

“Come to lecture me, Corsi?”

The security chief stepped up beside him, and looked out into the star-flecked darkness. “Not at all, Captain. I was hoping you wouldn’t mind some company.”

He said nothing, and neither did she. Finally, after several minutes, she broke the silence. "It's hard, isn't it? Knowing what orders to give, what decisions to make?"

"It's very hard. Especially when people's lives are on the line, and people's lives are always on the line. There's never enough time, never enough information, never enough certainty."

He shrugged toward the flashing lights of the module. "He's back out there. Soloman. He asked to go back out and wait, and I gave permission."

He paused to see if Corsi had anything to say. She remained silent.

"Sometimes," he continued, "you just have to trust people, that they'll do the right thing, that they'll make things work. When you have a good crew, that's the best thing you can do. Just don't get in their way."

Corsi chuckled slightly. It was a startling sound coming from her. "You think I need to learn not to do that, don't you sir?"

"You should let them run, Corsi. The trick is, you shouldn't let them run too far."

"Is that what happened this time, sir?"

He smiled sadly. "That's the hardest part about making decisions, Corsi. Sometimes, you make the wrong ones. But you can never be certain until it's all over."

"And now?"

"Now, we see what happens."

* * *

Captain Vince Newport, exhausted and vaguely troubled, stepped through the doors into his quarters. It was dark inside.

"Lights," he said, and took two more steps before realizing nothing had happened.

"Lights," he said again, more forcefully this time.

"Lights," said another voice, "reduced intensity."

The lights brightened slowly to a soft glow, revealing a woman sitting on the couch under the windows. He recognized Commander Gomez, casually holding a phaser on him. She smiled at his look of surprise.

"I believe," he said stiffly, "I sent you to the brig."

"We didn't like it there, Captain, and we simply don't stay where we don't want to stay." She shrugged. "We're very resourceful people. It's a job qualification for our line of work."

"You are Section 31. I knew it."

Her smile faded. "You don't know anything, Captain, and if you do know anything, you should forget it." Her voice was harsh. "Who we are is on a need-to-know basis, and frankly, you just don't need to

know.” She looked down at the phaser. “I’m sorry about this, Captain, I just wanted to make sure we had time to talk uninterrupted. Do I have your word, as a Starfleet officer, that you’ll hear me out?”

“My word,” said Newport. “You have it.”

Gomez lowered the phaser, placing it on the cushion next to her, still within easy reach. “Be assured, Captain, our interests in the current situation are the same. We work for the security of the Federation, and that security is threatened.”

Newport nodded, as she continued.

“As you suspected, your ship has been under a subtle kind of attack, and it all centers on the Enigma object.”

He chuckled. “You’re not going to tell me we’re still trapped inside again, are you?”

“No, of course not. We were testing you. Your resolve. How easy it is to deceive you. You passed, Captain, which is very, very good, because we need you right now. The landing party you returned to the Chinook were not the same personnel that left that ship. They were alien imposters, and it is vital we get them into custody and onto this ship before they have a chance to act.”

Newport’s eagerness quivered in his voice. “The Chinook is at Starbase 12. We could be there in just over a day.”

She laughed. “That will be too late, Captain. But I did say we were resourceful. Perhaps you’re wondering where my comrades are? They’re covertly making certain modifications to your deflector dish and warp drive. These modifications would be much easier with your cooperation.”

“What kind of modifications?” He licked his lips, and Gomez suppressed a triumphant grin. She had been right.

“The hand-held device we arrived with, you saw it?”

“You said it was a magnetic probe.”

“Yet it doesn’t look like any magnetic probe in your database, does it?” She rose in a single swift motion, retrieving her phaser and holding it lightly at her side. She wouldn’t need it, but it was part of her masquerade. “It looks just enough like one to obscure its real purpose. It’s a warp slipstream overdrive module, secret technology obtained from salvage of an experimental Jem’Hadar strike ship. With it, the Lincoln can reach Starbase 12 in less than three hours. Once there, it will be up to you to arrange for the transfer of the false personnel to your ship. I’m confident you can handle the assignment.”

Newport squared his shoulders, pleased with her endorsement.

“They shouldn’t give us any trouble,” she said. “They can’t without exposing themselves.”

“You need my help.”

“The Federation needs your help, Captain, and your pledge of secrecy. Can we count on you?”

A smile crept across Newport’s face. “You bet you can. I’ll talk to my chief engineer, arrange full

cooperation.”

“Thank you, Captain Newport.” Gomez started for the door, anxious to make her escape.

“What should I do next?” Newport asked.

She turned back, her expression serious. “Make your call to the chief engineer, then go to the bridge and set course for Starbase 12. Have your conn officer engage at warp six-point-seven. By then, the first modifications to your warp drive should be complete, and that will get us there in plenty of time.” She grinned. “Then you can find out just how fast your ship can go. I think it will exceed all your expectations.”

* * *

Gomez looked out an open sensor port through the deflector dish. Beyond the glowing blue of the grid, the sky shimmered in waves of rainbow colors, and multicolored stars streaked past at a furious pace.

Duffy was standing next to her as they were making modifications to the deflector. “Well,” he said, “I’ll say this for Captain Newport, he’s got a vivid imagination. I always wondered what slipstream overdrive travel would be like. Whatever a slipstream overdrive is.”

Gomez and Omthon wrestled a field booster coil into its mounting, as Pattie crawled underneath to secure it in place. Gomez stopped to wipe the sweat off her brow. “I was improvising. I thought I did pretty well, under the circumstances. I even remembered to tell him we wouldn’t need to use the deflector while in slipstream, which makes our work down here a lot easier.” She turned to Omthon. “Thanks for your help. I’m not anxious to involve the Lincoln’s engineers in our changes here, but getting a message out to the da Vinci is going to be a close thing.”

He smiled. “Nobody wants out of this place more than I do.”

The smile made her blush for some reason, and there was that smell again. “Has anyone ever told you your skin is the color of pistachio ice cream?”

He laughed.

“Or that you smell nice?” That slipped out somehow, and it surprised even her. She glanced over, and saw Duffy giving her the eye.

The smile faded, and he seemed embarrassed. “My grandmother was green Orion. It’s the pheromones. They’re more prominent with the females, but males have them too. I’ve spent most of my life trying to figure out if it’s a blessing, or a curse.”

Gomez felt herself blush even more. Idiot, idiot! “Pheromones,” she said, trying to sound professional. Duffy was still looking at her. Well, a little jealousy isn’t necessarily a bad thing.

Mercifully, Pattie changed the subject. “We’re cutting it close. It will be small satisfaction knowing we saved the Chinook team if millions of sentients die.”

Gomez shook her head. “I’m open to suggestions, but those Cochrane solenoids we installed have to be brought up to working temperature slowly, or the cores will crack. Simulated laws of physics we can monkey with, but this is real equipment, and real physical laws. We aren’t even sure this is going to

work.”

“I wish,” said Duffy, “we knew howda Vinci did it. I suspect they used one of Fabe’s modified torpedoes to transmit Soloman-designed software to our tricorders, but we don’t know. We’ll just have to hope our method works.”

Roth emerged into the sensor room, climbing down a ladder from a Jefferies tube.

“Well,” he said, “the captain has it all set. TheChinook personnel are being kept busy at the local Starfleet adjunct’s office until we arrive and can beam them over.” He blinked. “Hey, couldn’t they be here already? This is a simulation, they could be a few hundred yards away.”

“Or tens of kilometers,” replied Gomez, “and even if they are close, we’d never be able to find them and get a transporter lock through all the force fields and holograms.”

“You know,” said Duffy, “if this works, we’ll be punching a narrow-bandwidth EM hole through Enigma to the outside, to get our signal through. You could do the same thing to create a sensor window. Aim it like a searchlight, and you could scan anywhere in Enigma.”

Gomez grunted. “I wish we had an extra day to work on that idea. I wish you’d come up with it before we started our modifications. In fact, I wish you’d come up with it before we got stuck in Enigma in the first place.”

“Sorry,” Duffy said with one of those irritatingly endearing grins of his.

“Well, it’s too late now. As Captain Scott once said to me, ‘Sometimes, lass, you’re just stuck with plan A.’”

* * *

Stevens settled the torpedo onto the launch cradle and disconnected the anti-gravs. He checked the torpedo room’s status display, satisfied himself everything was in order, and tapped his combadge.

“Stevens to bridge. I’m ready to fire down here.”

Gold replied, “We’ll need a few minutes to have Soloman pull back to a safe distance. You’re early, Stevens.”

He chuckled. “Somebody named Scott once told me to always pad my repair estimates.”

“I’ll just bet he did. Stand by.”

* * *

Though theLincoln hadn’t yet reached Starbase 12, Duffy and Omthon headed to the transporter room. Depending on how things went, they might need to bring theChinook people rapidly into their conspiracy.

Pattie stayed behind in the sensor room, to initiate their communications pulse just as soon as the solenoids were ready.

“There’ll be a security team at the transporter room of course,” said Duffy, looking to make sure there

was nobody else within earshot, “but Lieutenant Roth is leading it, and he’s handpicked the team.”

Omthon didn’t seem to be listening. “She’s a beautiful woman.”

Duffy managed not to trip over his own feet. He kept looking straight ahead. “Who?”

“Sonya Gomez.”

“I hadn’t noticed,” Duffy said glumly.

“It’s a good thing Sonya has been dealing with Captain Newport, Mr. Duffy. You are a very poor liar.”

Duffy considered for a moment. “That smell thing, it doesn’t come in a bottle, does it?”

* * *

Commander Gomez loitered off to one side of the Lincoln’s bridge, pretending to examine the vacant engineering station. A few of the bridge crew gave her the occasional curious glance, but largely, she went unnoticed.

She glanced back at Captain Newport, who sat in the big chair like Zeus on his throne. He rubbed his chin, and stared intently at the main viewer. They’d be dropping out of warp in a few minutes.

She wondered how Pattie was doing. It was impossible to know precisely how much thermal shock the solenoid cores could take, or exactly when they would be ready. At least we’ll save the Chinook people.

But then she had an ugly thought. They were only assuming the simulation would bring back the real Chinook away team in response to Newport’s perceptions.

But what if they were somewhere else, lost in their own simulation? What if, instead of the real away team, Enigma gave them back only holographic duplicates? Then they might not be able to save anybody at all.

* * *

Stevens stepped out of the turbolift and onto the da Vinci’s bridge.

Gold looked at him curiously.

“Nothing more I could do down there, Captain. I figured this would be the place to watch the show. In fact”—he glanced at the tactical station—“I was wondering if I could push the button?”

Gold nodded. “Be my guest.”

McAllan moved out of the way to allow Stevens access.

“Just one thing, Stevens.”

“Sir?”

“Don’t miss.”

* * *

Duffy and Omthos stopped just outside the transporter room, and Duffy groaned. "Not now!"

The ball of light hovered just outside the door, then shaped itself back into the form of the Bolian officer.

"Listen to me," said Duffy, "your ship is in danger. You have to listen to me."

The Bolian looked annoyed. "You disrupt the simulation. You must be isolated."

* * *

"Captain," said Lincoln's conn officer, "we're being hailed. A ship is matching course with us."

"On screen."

Gomez looked up and gasped. She'd seen the ship before, but only as a drawing on a padd. It was Duffy's S.C.E. ship.

"They're the U.S.S. Roebing," reported the ops officer. "Sir, they're asking us to beam over a Commander Gomez, a Lt. Commander Duffy, and Crewperson P8 Blue."

Gomez blinked. Roebing.

She remembered the name from her engineering history class. A nineteenth-century engineering family back on Earth. If memory served, they designed and built the Brooklyn Bridge. Duffy had mentioned visiting the Brooklyn Bridge to her once.

Enigma had to be plucking things from Duffy's mind, only they didn't realize this ship was real only to him.

"Captain," said Gomez firmly, "that is not a Federation ship; it's an alien imposter."

"Captain," said the ops officer, "all their Federation identity codes verify."

"Check your database. You'll find no U.S.S. Roebing listed, nor will you find any ship matching that configuration. Look at it! It's a poor copy of a Norway-class vessel," she added with a mental apology to Duffy.

Newport looked at her. He nodded. "What should we do?"

"I recommend evasive action. Fire on it if you have to, but don't let it delay us getting to Starbase 12."

* * *

As abruptly as he'd appeared, the false Bolian was gone. Duffy was surprised he hadn't been transported elsewhere, but he somehow didn't think it was over.

As they entered the transporter room, the deck shuddered slightly. Duffy immediately knew what had happened.

“That was a torpedo launch! What is blazes is going on up there?”

Roth was at the transporter console. Duffy slid in beside him. “We’re still not in transporter range.” He glanced at the sensor display, then did a double take. “There’s another ship registering out there.”

Omthon leaned closer to see. “Do you recognize it?”

“Oh yeah,” said Duffy, feeling another torpedo fire, “I recognize it. And I think Commander Gomez does too.”

* * *

“Torpedo away,” said Stevens. He watched the torpedo streak toward Enigma, heading straight for its heart. But the torpedo wasn’t designed to penetrate it, or even touch it.

It would explode just short of Enigma’s surface, and a carefully tuned magnetic plasma burst would shred Enigma’s holograms like confetti.

* * *

Duffy watched the screen anxiously. “TheRoebing is trying to get multiple transporter locks on us, probably to beam the three of us troublemakers off the ship, but they can’t do it while our shields are up.”

“We’re almost to Starbase 12,” said Roth, his fingers flexing nervously over the console.

Omthon looked at Duffy. “They’ll have to drop shields to beam theChinook people on board. We’ve got a problem.”

“What,” said Duffy sarcastically, “another one?”

* * *

P8 watched the sliding temperature scale on the wall console, her front leg hovering over the control. Just a little more. A little more.Now.

* * *

Soloman watched the torpedo sail past his module, and he did not hesitate to follow as it approached Enigma. Bynars did not have the excessive sensitivity to glare that humans had, so he had instructed the viewport not to polarize, as he would still be able to see everything.

Then it happened.

The torpedo exploded into an expanding ball of yellow plasma that struck Enigma. The force fields shimmered with arcs of energy, and the holograms began to flicker. At last, Enigma would be revealed.

“Good luck, my friends,” said Soloman, surprised at his words, especially given that there was nobody there to hear.

* * *

Stevens watched the tactical console in disbelief. “Captain, there’s a message coming from inside Enigma. It’s from Commander Gomez. It says—” His gut suddenly knotted, and misery crept into his voice. “It says, ‘Life or death, do not disrupt Enigma. Do not fire on Enigma.’”

* * *

“Something’s happening,” said Omthon, looking at the exterior view on a wall-mounted viewscreen. As he watched, the floating top that was Starbase 12 flickered, as did the Roebing flying close formation with them, the blue planet in the background, and the very sky itself.

“We’re too late,” said Roth, his face turning pale.

Duffy pushed him aside, scanning frantically for the combadges he knew would be there. For a moment, there were thousands, and then there were only three. “I’ve got a lock! Energizing!”

Three stunned Starfleet crewmen materialized on the transporter pad, but Duffy knew it wasn’t enough.

“Great Emerald gods,” said Omthon, staring at the screen, dumbstruck. “There must be millions of them, and they don’t have a chance.”

Chapter

11

Soloman’s eyes widened. Something was wrong.

As the holograms faded, there should have been a ship, a hull, but there was only space, and that space was not empty.

There was a vast cloud: unidentifiable pieces of machinery, most no bigger than his module. A few ships, most of them looking abandoned and derelict, some eroded as though by long corrosion.

But mostly there were bodies, beings, people flailing about, horrified as they found themselves dumped, unprotected, into space.

Soloman reacted instinctively. He saw a being near him, six-legged, pink-skinned, huge blue eyes that shined with both terror and intelligence.

He activated the thrusters, simultaneously extending a manipulator arm from the pod to grab the floating body. Two meters short, the pod stopped and rebounded.

He’d hit something. A force field.

Soloman accessed the module’s sensors and scanned the cloud. He read air, and several other exotic breathing mixtures, encased in millions of individual force-field bubbles.

Then he looked up again. He’d missed something the first time, because it blended in with the stars. In

fact, it looked like a cluster of stars, but there were far too many of them.

It took him a while to realize there was one star for each bubble.

* * *

Captain Newport stared openmouthed at the viewscreen, his face ashen. He turned to look at Gomez and blinked, like a man waking from a dream. "I've done something terribly wrong, haven't I?"

She glanced over at him, still transfixed by the screen. It seemed as if everything that could go wrong had, and yet it was somehow working.

The Chinook crew were safe; the Lincoln was, in more ways than one, free of Enigma; and Enigma's countless unwilling passengers were still alive, though for the life of her, she couldn't figure out how.

"In the end, Captain, you did the absolute best thing you could do, even if you didn't know you were doing it." She glanced at him, trying to look reassuring. "This isn't your fault."

"Captain," said the ops officer. "We're being hailed by the da Vinci, sir. I'm reading her thirty kilometers off our port bow, though I can't tell you how she got there, or what happened to Starbase 12. It's like we jumped thirty light-years in an instant."

"We didn't go anywhere, Lieutenant." Newport looked over at Gomez. "Right, Commander?"

Before Gomez could answer, her combadge chirped. "Sonnie, it's Kieran. Meet us down at the transporter room. And, ah, bring Captain Newport, if he's in the mood to come. There's someone here you really should see."

* * *

Gold ran to the hangar deck. He had to see this with his own eyes.

As the outer doors opened, he saw Enigma, spread out before him, re-forming itself. One by one, the bubbles of air transformed into opaque, golden holographic bubbles, no longer hidden from view.

At first they were scattered, but then they began to cluster together, blending, rebuilding, and reinventing what it had been before.

As the full shape of Enigma began to re-form, Gold saw a dark speck, moving rapidly against the golden mass, a speck that rapidly grew larger and resolved into the sleek form of an Intrepid-class starship.

The U.S.S. Lincoln was back.

His combadge chirped. It was Corsi.

"Captain, the Lincoln is returning hails. Our missing people are on board, safe and sound, and they have the missing freighter crew member and the Chinook personnel as well."

Despite himself, he broke into a broad smile, and barely kept from laughing. He was glad Corsi wasn't there to see. At times like this, he wasn't the most dignified officer in the fleet.

But it seemed she didn't need to see. "Enjoy the moment, Captain. Corsi out."

She understood. She was coming along, this Corsi. Like him, she knew it was all over but the shouting. Like him, she knew that apparently, this time at least, he'd done the right thing. And she knew what that meant.

She's going to make somebody a fine first officer some day, maybe even have a ship of her own.

"Captain Core-Breach," he said out loud. "It has a nice ring to it."

* * *

Gomez and Newport arrived at the transporter room just as Roth emerged with the Chinook party, looking confused, but unharmed. Roth made hesitant eye-contact with Newport.

"Sorry, Captain," was all he said.

Newport pushed his lips together and nodded sadly. "You did all right, Roth." He patted him on the shoulder. "We'll talk later."

They stepped into the transporter room to see Duffy and Omthon standing with the holographic Bolian. Newport seemed puzzled.

"Captain," said Duffy, gesturing at the Bolian, "meet areal alien imposter."

The Bolian bowed his head in greeting. "We call ourselves the Quanta. We owe you thanks, for waking us from our long sleep. We owe you apology for the trouble we have inadvertently caused yourselves and others we have encountered. It is time you knew our story."

"You never developed warp drive," said Duffy.

"We did not know that was unusual until we met you. We encountered other beings with this technology, but by then we were not—lucid. Only in our stories and dreams could we do such things, but we did not give up on our dreams of the stars. One day, some of us determined that we would go, no matter how long it took. But by that time our stories were quite developed. They were what we were, and we brought them with us."

"Your holoprograms," said Gomez. "You built your entire ship out of holotechnology, self-powered, self-sustaining."

"It worked well. We visited many worlds, until we reached the void where stars were far apart. Somewhere, on the edge of that gulf, we fell into our dreams and did not come out. From time to time, we encountered other beings such as yourselves, but by then, our stories had grown stale and repetitive, and we welcomed the new stories these beings brought with them."

"You were like me," said Newport, "denying reality, incorporating anything that challenged it into your fantasies."

"Until," said the Bolian, "like you, Captain, we were forced to confront reality in a way we could not deny."

“What I don’t understand,” said Duffy, “is how you and all your ‘passengers’ survived without your holotechnology, or even how you’re maintaining this form. At minimum. Your systems are only now rebooting.”

“Your ship disrupted our independent holographic projectors, the telepathic systems that maintained our ship’s systems and ran our gross simulations. But we have developed our holotechnology over a long time. We are more intimately associated with it than you imagine. Each of us has individual holographic capabilities as well. These forms I have adopted, have aided in communication, but it is time that you saw us as we really are.”

Abruptly the Bolian faded. It brightened into the familiar ball of light, then that too dimmed, revealing what was hidden within.

The device was as they had glimpsed in the alien marketplace. About the size of a human torso, perhaps a little larger, it floated a meter above the deck, apparently supported by antigravs or force beams. The curved surface was intricately inlaid with tiny, jeweled hexagons, which Gomez guessed corresponded to the holodiodes on their holodecks, though vastly more sophisticated.

But their eyes were drawn irresistibly to the transparent dome on top, and the tiny being housed inside.

It was covered with brown fur, and looked at them with large, yellow, eyes. The top of it was domed, and Gomez supposed that was the brain case. Under this was a tiny, flattened, body, and four useless, atrophied, limbs.

Various tubes and wires connected the body to the machine, providing life support. Gomez doubted the entity could live more than a few minutes without it.

Gomez would have loved to study the technology the “holobody” represented, but there was a shimmer, and as though shy, the creature was again shrouded in a glowing ball of light.

Chapter

12

Duffy sat in the dining hall, studying his padd and the flat diagrams of a nonexistent ship that covered it. He thought about the holographic U.S.S. Roebing and sighed.

He wished he’d gotten the chance to beam on board, see what it was like. Then he remembered Captain Newport, and decided he was just as happy to have missed it. Maybe next time they were docked at starbase, he’d reserve a holodeck for a little while. That would be good enough.

Gomez walked over, carrying her lunch on a tray, and sat down across the table. Corsi and Stevens were right behind her. “Mind if we join you?” asked Gomez.

Duffy nodded at the other empty seats at the table. They all sat down. Corsi leaned toward Gomez conspiratorially.

“So,” she said, nodding towards the corner table, where “Pappy” Omthon sat talking with Ensign Conlon and Robins from security, neither of whom seemed to be able to stop giggling, “how long is he

staying?”

“For a week or so, till we can rendezvous with his freighter.”

Corsi grinned. “As far as I’m concerned, he can stay as long as he wants.” She almost giggled herself.

Corsi?

Corsi turned to Gomez. “Have you—smelledhim?”

Duffy frowned at her. “He gets that a lot, you know.”

“It’s happening,” Stevens said suddenly. Everyone—the four of them at the table, Omthon and his two new friends, and Drew and Hawkins from security, who were sharing lunch across the mess hall—all rose from their seats and made for the windows. Enigma was breaking up, its vast cluster of grapes turning into clumps of two or three or four.

Duffy pressed his nose against the cool transparent aluminum. They were going home, the lost people of Enigma. The Quanta had warp drive now. Holographic warp engines that work. That’s something I’d like to study.

Ironically, they’d had the knowledge of warp capability for hundreds of years, since the first warp-capable ship became trapped in Enigma’s web and its crew was read by their telepathic computers. But by then it had seemed to the Quanta as only one more fantasy among many.

Only now were they lucid enough to put the knowledge to practical use. Now they would take their lost people home, those that wished to go. Others had built lives on Enigma. They would stay, and join the Quanta on their explorations of the universe.

“There.” Conlon pointed. There was a streak, a flash, then a cluster went to warp.

Then another, and another.

Then hundreds, thousands. And then they were gone.

“There’s something you don’t see every day,” Drew said.

Hawkins smiled. “On this ship, that’s saying something.”

“A beautiful end,” said Omthon, “to a long nightmare.”

Duffy gazed out at the stars, the sky, suddenly empty. “Mazel tov,” he said.

* * *

P8 Blue watched gratefully as Abramowitz left their shared quarters to begin her watch. She scrambled down from her bed and pulled open her locker. She hesitated, then reached inside.

It had to be done.

She removed the magnetic probe with her front legs, checked it carefully, then turned it on. She shoved

the probe against the front of the locker. Metal struck metal with a clunk.

P8 made a rattling sound that, for a human, would have been equivalent to a satisfied sigh.

It never hurts to check.

About the Authors

J. STEVEN YORK has published multiple novels, two nonfiction books, and dozens of short stories in such magazines as *Analog*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and anthologies such as *Nanodreams* and *The Ultimate X-Men*. He's recently coauthored two novellas, set in Keith Laumer's Bolo universe, with Dean Wesley Smith, and his novels include *Generation X: Crossroads*, and *Generation X: Genogoths*. He lives on the rugged Oregon coast with his wife, Christina.

CHRISTINA F. YORK is a novelist with a bent toward romance and a background in science fiction. Her *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* stories "Life's Lessons" and "Calculated Risk" appeared in the first two *Strange New Worlds* volumes. Her latest anthology sale is "The Technomancer's Apprentice," to *Mage Knight Collector's Guide Volume I*, written in collaboration with husband J. Steven. She has sold two novels, the adventure-romance *Hot Waters*, and a war story-romance, *Flight Time*.

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