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ECHOES OF COVENTRY
(*What's Past Book 3*)

Richard C. White



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imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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To Joni: I can never tell you how much I appreciate all those late nights helping me edit this beast into something close to a story.

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To Keith R.A. DeCandido: Thanks for taking a chance with me and letting me play in the Star Trek sandbox. (Psst...got any more work out there?)

And finally, to Mom and Dad: See, all that time I spent on the couch reading finally paid off. Thanks for always being there.

Chapter

1

2377

“A single bulb hung from a wire, dimly lighting the hallway, creating flickering shadows. Toby Scholtz pushed the door open slightly and peered across the hall through the cracked doorway. He could see a figure fumbling with the lock on his office door. Reaching into his pocket for his .38-caliber snub-nosed revolver, Toby decided to approach the figure now, rather than wait for him to ruin a perfectly good lock. Slipping into the hallway, his soft leather shoes made no noise as he crossed the worn wooden floor...”

Bart Faulwell rolled his eyes and shook his head, slowly lowering the padd onto the table in front of him. Now that he was no longer concentrating on the novel he'd been reading, the familiar buzz of voices in the mess hall came back into focus. Reaching out for his cup of coffee, he rubbed his eyes and stared up at the ceiling. “I can't believe Anthony recommended this to me,” he muttered.

“Recommended what?” a strange voice asked.

Startled, Bart nearly fell backward out of his chair, before catching himself on the table. Turning his head, he found himself looking into a set of piercing blue eyes. Scooting back a few inches, he saw the blue eyes belonged to a young ensign who was standing patiently beside his table. She realized he hadn't heard her approach and retreated several feet, blushing all the way to the edge of her blond hair.

The moment stretched into an uncomfortable silence before Bart finally found his voice. “Oh, this?” he asked, indicating the padd. “It's a novel a friend recommended to me. It was supposedly a genre popular back on Earth in the mid-twentieth century. I think he said it was called ‘noir.’ Personally, I don't know what he sees in it.” He paused for a second, scrunching his mouth up as if he'd tasted something unpleasant. “There's really not much to the plot, the characters are one-dimensional, and the writing is just atrocious.”

“Oh,” the ensign said, pausing as if uncertain how to continue, her hands nervously playing with the braided ponytail that hung in front of her shoulder.

“Please, sit down, ma'am.” As the ensign joined him at the table, he continued, filling in the awkward silence, “I don't believe we've met. I'm Bart Faulwell. I'm the ship's linguist and cryptologist.” He raised his cup to her in a welcoming salute. The more Bart looked at her, the more he was convinced she was fresh out of the Academy.

The ensign blushed even more and then looked up, “I'm sorry. I'm Martina Nemeckova. I transferred to the *Vinci* a few days ago. I'm assigned to communications, gamma shift.”

Bart smiled at her, his brown eyes twinkling. “Well then, welcome to the *Vinci* and to the S.C.E. I hope you're ready for anything, because that's what we tend to find.” His face twisted as an acrid taste filled his mouth. The coffee had gone stone-cold while he was reading. Hmm, must have been more intrigued with the story than I thought, he admitted to himself.

“I'm sorry,” Martina said quickly. “I didn't mean to disturb you.”

He gave his head a quick shake and then went over to the nearby replicator to get a fresh cup of coffee. “Coffee, French roast, half-and-half, no sugar.” He waited for a second as his request was filled, then turned back to Martina. “No, you’re not disturbing me. However, was there something you wanted to ask?”

“Well, it’s rather personal, so if you’d rather not talk about it, I understand.”

Bart groaned on the inside, trying to keep his composure. He glanced around the mess hall, trying to see which one of his “friends” had sicced the young ensign on him, but none of the usual suspects were in sight. “What would you like to know?” he asked, waiting for the inevitable questions.

“I was told you were in the Dominion War as a linguist. As fourth-year cadets, we were taught about the importance of communications security. They liked to use examples from the war to scare us.”

Bart nodded. He knew that drill too well.

She continued as if afraid she’d lose her courage if she stopped. “They also tested all of us for language capabilities our second year to see if any of us would like to transfer to intelligence.”

“How did you do?” Her last comment raised his hopes. Martina’s predecessor had been more interested in the technical aspects of communications technology than the linguistic end; it would be nice to talk a little shop with someone else who’d been through the same training as Bart.

A disappointed look crossed her face. “Not very well, but I really was interested in the field after that chief warrant officer talked to us. Anyway, I know what the instructors taught us at the Academy about security, but I don’t think many of them saw duty. I was just wondering what it was like—being in the war and all?” Martina finished up, her words pouring out like a runaway warp engine.

Bart lifted his cup to his mouth, letting the hot coffee wash over his embarrassment. That certainly was not what he thought she was going to ask. His relationship with Anthony and its recent troubles were well known on board the *Vinci*, so that was what he’d expected to be asked about.

A sudden frown ran across his face as he thought about those troubles, but quickly took another sip of his coffee and turned his attention to the young ensign. He eased himself back into his chair and watched her with amusement. She acted like she was still in the Academy, perched on the edge of her chair and waiting intently for him to start speaking.

“Oh, you’d be bored with my stories. It’s not like I was on the front lines or anything. I’ve probably seen more excitement here on the *Vinci* than I saw the entire war. My battle experience pretty much consists of sitting in a dark, windowless room trying to translate documents and old subspace messages.” Seeing the disappointed look on her face, he decided to take another tack, “Although, come to think of it, there was this one time back at Starbase 34...”

A half hour later, Martina’s eyes were filled with tears from laughing so hard. Faulwell finished up the last story about sending the poor petty officer to the supply officer for a left-handed magnaspanner, warp envelopes, and liquid to refill the particle fountain. Looking up, he saw he’d drawn quite a crowd in the mess hall, including the entire gamma-shift bridge crew, three of Corsi’s security people, and Nurse Wetzell. Loud applause broke out as he stood and took a bow to his appreciative audience.

“Thank you, thank you! You’re a lovely audience.” Grinning from ear to ear, Bart bowed to the crowd

and begged off, despite repeated requests for one more story. Grabbing his padd with the unfinished novel, he retreated from the dining hall.

After taking the turbolift down to his quarters, he stepped inside and turned on the lights. He set the padd down on the small table next to his bunk and started getting ready for bed. He had some time before he was required to be anywhere and a nap would be just the thing to recharge him. After hanging up his uniform, he flopped down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling.

Ah, if the poor ensign only knew, he thought as memories came unbidden from his tour of duty in Starfleet Intelligence. I've got stories that would curl her hair permanently. However, since I'm not really interested in being court-martialed and spending the rest of my life making big rocks into little rocks, I think I'll keep them to myself.

That little bit of hyperbole brought another grin to his face. Starfleet prisons weren't into corporal punishment any more than regular Federation prisons, but that phrase had been part of military folklore long before the first space flight.

His grin faded as a less pleasant thought ran through his mind. Running a hand through his thin brown hair, he remembered when he first transferred to the S.C.E. from Starfleet Intelligence after the armistice. He'd sat through several rather thorough debriefings and thumbprinted several nondisclosure agreements swearing he'd never reveal anything he'd ever seen, done, talked about, heard, or imagined. He was surprised they hadn't run a large degausser over his head, just to be certain.

There were times he was glad he couldn't talk about things. In fact, there were some things he'd rather not even remember.

Chapter

2

2375

The small shuttlecraft eased its way into the docking bay at Starbase 375 and settled into its berth. A soft hissing told Bart the walkway was attached and they'd be disembarking in a little bit. Ill at ease, he pulled at the collar of his uniform and waited with as much patience as he could before the airlock cycled open. When he heard the familiar sound of the door opening, he finally relaxed and started his trek through the starbase.

He wasn't quite certain why he was being transferred. Then again, the way the war was going, this sudden temporary reassignment didn't surprise him. The unexpected orders had only given him four days to report to this starbase. That was barely enough time to wrap up what he'd been doing with the latest batch of translations and pass the keys for the Cardassian Fifth Fleet's encryption system to the analytic section before he had to pack and catch a ride on the U.S.S. Sutherland .

SI's linguistics department was already shorthanded and getting shorter by the battle. According to scuttlebutt, one of their scout ships either had been destroyed or captured by the Cardassians during a scouting mission near the Badlands. As guilty as it made him feel, Bart sincerely hoped for the former. The last thing anyone in intel wanted to do was meet a Cardassian interrogator on his terms.

“Excuse me, are you Petty Officer Bart Faulwell?” a gruff voice asked, shaking him out of his reverie. Bart turned and saw two burly security officers standing there. The shorter of the two was staring at Bart over the padd he held in his hand. The other security officer was scanning everyone else coming off the shuttle.

“Guilty as charged,” he quipped, and then sobered up when the officer’s lack of a humor gene became painfully obvious. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m Ensign Thomas. You’ll need to come with us,” the one holding the padd said in a tone of voice Bart recognized. There was no questioning the implied “or else.” Bart simply gave him a nod and fell into step, with Thomas leading the way and the quiet one following close behind.

By the time they reached their destination, Bart was glad for the escort, humor gene notwithstanding. They’d changed directions, gone up and down different turbolifts, and doubled back more than once. At this point, he had no idea where he was. Finally, they stopped in front of a door in a fairly deserted hallway.

Using a special passkey, Ensign Thomas motioned Bart through the door. Curious, Bart looked inside and saw a standard briefing room. Sighing, he stepped in, jumping as the door suddenly closed behind him. Looking at it, he noted it required the same type of key to exit also.

“Welcome to the party,” a warm voice called out to him. Bart turned around to see a human sitting in the corner. He’d been so quiet and still, Bart had missed him when he first walked in. The man exuded confidence as he rose from his chair and strode across the room to shake hands. He was older than Faulwell, with a shock of white hair darkened only by a few flecks of brown, but his grip was sure and firm. “Pleased to meet you. I’m Chief Warrant Officer Cruz.”

“Bart Faulwell, Petty Officer First Class, and it’s a pleasure to meet you too, sir. Any ideas what’s going on here?”

“Not a clue,” the warrant officer said, sitting down at the conference table, putting his elbows on it and resting his chin in his hands. “I’ve been teaching an advanced course in communications analysis at the Academy the past couple of years. I finally got to take some leave at home on Alpha Centauri and then next thing I know, my leave gets cancelled and I’m on the first starship heading this way,” Cruz said, giving a huge mock sigh, before grinning up at Bart. “All I know is, if someone’s going to all this trouble it must be good.”

The door slid open again, cutting off Bart’s sardonic reply as a Vulcan entered and quietly took a seat near them. He carefully rested his arms on the table, relaxed but alert.

Faulwell paused for a bit, but the Vulcan seemed content to simply sit there. Finally, Cruz broke the silence and introduced Bart and himself to the newcomer. The Vulcan looked at the two men and nodded slightly to each in turn, his piercing dark eyes taking in the situation. “I am Chief Petty Officer Sabran, most recently assigned to the U.S.S. T’Kumbra. And to answer the question you’re about to ask, no, I have not been informed of the nature of our summons either.”

“The T’Kumbra? Isn’t that an all-Vulcan ship?” Cruz asked, curiosity evident in his voice.

“You are correct, sir.”

Bart ran a hand through his scraggly brown beard and piped up, “So what other ships have you served

on?"

"I am completing my second tour on the T'Kumbra . In between tours, I was detailed to the Vulcan Science Academy for a research-and-development project."

"Well, damn, it just seems strange they'd snag the three of us for whatever they've got planned. So, what did you do on that ship of yours, Chief?" Cruz asked, leaning back in his chair, staring at the door.

"I am a technician, specializing in computer languages. I was testing a new piece of communications security protocol when I was ordered to report to this starbase. Unfortunately, the test was about to finish in another week."

"Well, we'll have to see if we can make it up to you, Chief Sabran," a voice sounded from the door, almost drowning out the "Attention on deck," Thomas sounded out with. The three men inside the room immediately jumped to their feet as a human rear admiral entered, closely trailed by a human commander, and a Bajoran in one of their militia uniforms. Curiouser and curiouser, Bart thought.

As quickly as they cleared the door, a dour-looking Andorian lieutenant wearing a security uniform shouldered his way past the two security guards. A quick motion from the admiral sent the guards out of the room. They gave the Andorian dirty looks behind his back as they left. As the door slid shut, the admiral sat down, motioning for everyone else to take a seat.

"I'm glad you all were able to get here so quickly. I'm Admiral Hazlitt," the senior officer began, his deep bass voice carrying through the room. After the requisite greetings were exchanged, he continued, "This is Commander Jonathan Mwakwere. He's here to assist me with the briefing, and this is Lieutenant Priya Chantrea from the Bajoran Militia. She's been assigned to work with the three of you on the upcoming mission. Also, this is Lieutenant Zarinth, who'll be in charge of the security team that will be accompanying you. Commander Mwakwere, if you please."

Bart watched as the large, dark-skinned man stood and pushed a series of buttons on the computer console, calling up a holographic map. Faulwell's quick glance confirmed it was the current Dominion/Federation front lines.

"Thank you, Admiral Hazlitt," he said, then turned to the rest of the people in the room, his dark eyes fierce and intimidating. Bart found himself shrinking back into his chair as the commander sized up the assembled group. Taking a deep breath, he began, "I'm required to inform you this briefing is classified top secret. You've been chosen based on your records and skills for a special temporary duty and have been assigned to this Starfleet Intelligence project." Listening to him speak, Bart placed the commander's birthplace somewhere near the Great Lakes region of the United States of Africa.

"Roger that, sir, but what exactly is this project?" Cruz asked, leaning forward in his seat and staring at the map that was slowly rotating in front of him.

"Ahem...yes, I was just getting to that." Commander Mwakwere refocused the map to highlight a specific section. Raising the magnification, it was easy to see the outlines of Cardassian, Breen, and Federation space. "This is the current situation as of four hours ago. This sector has been relatively quiet." He made some adjustments and a small planet began to glow. "We'd like to keep it that way."

Looking closer, Bart noted that it was just beyond the Rolor Nebula. "Excuse me, sir, but that's definitely outside of Federation space."

“Yes, we know, which is why this mission is so sensitive. We’ve taken advantage of that fact by establishing a listening post here.” He enlarged the map again, showing a rather nondescript planet with an ice-covered moon circling it. “Right now, the Cardassians have not made any moves in this direction and by keeping our footprint in this system as small as possible, we’re hoping to keep their eyes turned to a different direction. There is occasional traffic through the system en route to the Bajoran colony of Dreon, which is how we’ll insert you.”

“Insertus?” Cruz asked, drawing out the last word to encourage Commander Mwakwere to expound on that thought.

“Yes. You’re going to be assigned to Project Mungin. We’ve managed to deploy a number of listening devices into Cardassian space as well as in between the Cardassians, the Tzenkethi, and the Breen Confederacy. They periodically dump their information to the listening post we established here.”

He pushed another button on the console. The moon began to expand, showing a cutaway schematic of a post buried beneath the surface. “The actual listening post is designed to allow a small team to process and analyze everything they pick up without drawing attention to themselves. If the team discovers anything of interest, they’ll review the intercepted subspace messages or other anomalies, decipher and interpret them, and periodically report their findings here or to Starbase 621 as an alternate.”

The admiral broke in. “We have it on good authority that the Dominion is trying to bring the Breen into the war. I know the Breen are currently neutral and the Diplomatic Corps swears up and down that there’s no reason to suspect they’ll change their stance. However, you know and I know, Starfleet Intelligence cannot take that chance. If the Breen were to enter the war on the Dominion’s side, an already ugly situation could quickly become untenable.” He ran his hand through his close-cropped white hair and refocused on the holographic projection. “Mungin’s purpose is to ensure we don’t get caught off guard.”

“Begging the admiral’s pardon,” Bart said, as the admiral paused, “but there must be some mistake. I am a linguist, but I’m barely familiar with Cardassian.”

“No, Mr. Faulwell, there’s no mistake. We’re well aware of your scholastic achievements before you joined Starfleet, but your skills as a cryptanalyst are why you were chosen for this mission. You’ll have plenty of time to brush up on your Cardassian, but that’s why Lieutenant Priya is going to be joining you on this mission. She’s an expert on the Cardassian language as well as a number of the Gamma Quadrant races that are serving in the Dominion’s forces.”

Commander Mwakwere added, “The lieutenant has been fully vetted and cleared. Even though Bajor’s signed a nonaggression pact with the Dominion, the Bajoran Militia has been quietly working with Starfleet Intelligence since the start of the war. Mr. Cruz, you’ll be in command of the cryptography mission. Lieutenant Priya will be your second in command, and Lieutenant Zarinth will be in charge of security.”

“Folks, I don’t have to tell you how important this mission is,” Admiral Hazlitt said as Commander Mwakwere powered down the computer console. “You’ll be given full documentation on the mission once you leave the base. Your mission is scheduled for six months, with a possible extension of another six months. The base has been equipped with the finest state-of-the-art technology and highly classified systems. In case of discovery, the base cannot, I repeat, cannot fall into the hands of the Dominion. Do I make myself clear?”

Lieutenant Zarinth spoke up for the first time. “Perfectly, sir. You do not have to worry about that. My

people fully understand their duty.”

Somehow, I’m not really comfortable with how well his people understand their duty, Bart thought. If we get into trouble, are they likely to shoot the enemy... or us?

Admiral Hazlitt and Commander Mwakwere headed for the door. “You’ll remain here until an escort comes to retrieve you. You should be leaving for Mungin in approximately two hours.” The admiral paused at the door and raised an imaginary glass to toast the room, “Here’s hoping you have a very uneventful six months.”

Chapter

3

Bart thought back on the admiral’s final words. Obviously he cast a curse on this entire mission, because “uneventful” is exactly what’s going on.

Bart sat at the terminal in the operations section of Mungin watching as the computers downloaded another transmission from Probe 13. Looking up, he scanned the room, painted in a standard eggshell white, with light gray floors and track lighting overhead. There were several computer terminals stationed at various locations in the room, one for each of the team members. Two large screens flanked the walls near the exit to the room. They were set up so the analysts could work together on projects as well as doubling as a communications viewscreen.

Bart let his thoughts wander as the transmission from Probe 13 was being processed by the station’s computers. Operations was on deck two, while security and communications were located on deck one. The deck immediately below them held the rec room, gym, and holosuite. Farther down were the decks that held the living quarters, sickbay, armory, life support, and other sundry functions. The lowest deck, which they had dubbed “the boiler room,” was where the powerful generators that kept the entire system running smoothly resided. The base was very utilitarian, with minimal design for comfort.

Even that wouldn’t be a problem if we were kept busy. Given the lack of work though, plain walls and such become depressing over time. He stared at the walls, trying to motivate himself. He knew he ought to get up and start working on the recovered data, but he was having a hard time convincing himself anyone really cared what they were collecting here.

Looking across the room, he saw Priya listening to a recording they’d made a week ago. She looked up and noticed him watching her.

“Is there something you needed to bring to my attention, Petty Officer?” She spun in her chair to face him, removing her earpiece. The modified communications device was partially hidden beneath her red hair.

“No, I was just thinking about how boring it’s been lately. From the way the admiral had built this assignment up, I was really expecting a lot more than just this. If that Cardassian cruiser hadn’t transited through the system, I’d begin to think the rest of the universe was an illusion.” Bart stretched, feeling the tension in his shoulders and neck. “What in the world is so important about this site?”

“We were told to monitor specifically for any communications between the Dominion and either the

Breen or the Tzenkethi.” She rose from her chair and straightened out the earring she wore on her right ear. She followed his lead and stretched also before retaking her seat. Just before she buried her head in her work again, she smiled wistfully at him. “The commander did point out this was an inactive sector of the conflict, Dr. Faulwell.”

“Inactive is right and please call me Bart.” Bart groaned as he stood up from the stool he’d been sitting on. “We could probably all pack up and go home and no one would notice. I don’t know how you keep from going insane, Priya. I mean, the highlight of my shift is getting to listen to that repair facility near Delavi. I swear, I know more about Cardassian freighters and tugs than I ever thought was possible.”

“True, there hasn’t exactly been a pressing need for a Cardassian language expert. You’ve had more than enough time to brush up on your language skills.” She paused for a moment, and then said in a softer voice, “Even if you do still speak with an accent.”

Bart simulated tossing a grenade at her and turned back to the computer terminal. An all too familiar noise announced the transmission from Probe 13 was completed. He called up the results of the transmission, his fingers flying across the touch pad and, as expected, it was the weekly transmissions from Cardassia Prime to various outlying bases discussing upcoming personnel transfers and supply requests.

He noted with a passing interest the Cardassians had changed their encryption system again. He transferred the data to his padd and walked over to the replicator to get a cup of coffee. Armed with fresh caffeine, he sat down at the small table nearby to see whether this was simply an updated system or if they’d actually done a communications change.

“It could be worse.” Priya’s voice broke through his concentration. Her almost cheerful voice caught his attention and he turned to see her resting her head on one arm, looking at him.

“Oh? This I have to hear.” Bart chuckled, setting the padd down.

“We could be sitting on top of this rock. Nothing like temperatures averaging around twenty below zero to help you appreciate how good you’ve got it,” she said. Bart felt his skin crawl at the thought of being out in the almost permanent blizzard conditions that existed just beyond their lair. Priya continued, “Of course, it’d beat being on Antros III itself.”

“It’d be a little tougher being stationed on an airless world, I must agree.” Antros III might have been a Class-M world once long ago, but something had stripped it of any atmosphere it had. In a way, it reminded Bart of being on Earth, only in reverse. Here, the moon was habitable (if only barely), but the planet was a huge ball of rock, hanging over their head. “Remember when we first got here and Jamie was spending all that time examining Antros with the short-range sensors? I thought Zarinth was going to have a conniption fit if he didn’t quit messing with the settings.”

“Serves him right. I thought I had some tough trainers when I first joined the militia, but Zarinth is incredible. I’m surprised his people haven’t killed him yet.” Priya shook her head in amazement.

Jamie Cruz entered the room just then. “Well, he’s trying to keep them sharp. A bored security guard is a dangerous security guard, especially around all this equipment. I’ve already had to explain to McKenzie why he can’t take over the zero-g racquetball court and turn it into a target range.”

“Oh, don’t tell me he’s on that kick again,” Bart said in an aggravated tone of voice. “I thought Zarinth got through to him last time.”

“I thought so, too. I guess they’re as bored as we—”

Cruz was cut off in mid-sentence by a sudden chime from the computer. “Incoming message from Probe 42.”

“Forty-two? Have we ever gotten anything from that one?” Cruz looked from Priya to Faulwell apparently hoping someone would have an answer.

Bart rushed over to his station and typed in a few queries into the main computer. “No, in fact, Mungin shows no traffic of any type ever coming in on it. I’m getting a preliminary reading now.” While he examined the results the computer was sending him, Priya started running a diagnostic on the traffic. After a few minutes, Bart looked up at Jamie. “I’ve never seen anything like this before. This is seriously strong encryption on this message.”

“I’ve been looking at the message logs,” Priya said, following up on Faulwell’s initial report. “There was no preliminary chatter, nothing that would tell me who might have sent it or why. It just started at a specific time and stopped at a specific time. No acknowledgment from whomever received it either. I honestly can’t say if it was Cardassian, English, or straight binary.”

“Bart, any chance these might be Jem’Hadar communications?” Cruz asked, sitting down with the Bajoran officer to go over her preliminary analysis.

“I don’t think so. This doesn’t resemble anything we have on record for them.”

Bart was busy typing in a new diagnostic test when Cruz came over and tapped him on the shoulder. “Okay folks, I know you were just getting off shift, but if you don’t mind...?”

“Mind? Are you kidding?” Bart looked up at the warrant officer with a surprised expression on his face. “After the past few weeks, this is definitely worth losing a sleep shift over.” The cryptanalyst got up and started pacing around the room, his fingers interlaced behind his neck. “The only problem is, there’s only this one piece of traffic. We’re going to probably need a lot more if we’re going to break it. The sample is too short to run most of the tests I know.”

“Well, that’s not exactly up to me, Bart.” Cruz smiled at the linguist’s enthusiasm. “However, I’m sure we can dedicate a link to monitor this probe.” He moved back over to his workstation and tapped his combadge. “Sabran, we’ve got a new signal down here. If you wouldn’t mind, could you come down here and run some tests?”

“Why would I mind, Mr. Cruz?” The Vulcan’s confusion was evident even over the link. “Is that not why I was assigned to the team? I will be down there shortly.” Bart watched as Cruz started to explain further and then apparently decided it wasn’t worth the effort. Sabran would be in the operations center before he could finish.

The group quickly divided up to begin analyzing this mysterious signal. Bart began by getting a printout of the signal. Taking a look at the entire message, he punched some commands into the computer to begin looking for any anomalies or sections that repeated. He was looking for anything that would give him a chance to start identifying the encryption system. In addition, the computer would provide a frequency count of individual letters as well as groups of two, three, four, and five.

“Priya, any luck identifying what language this is?” Looking up, he realized two hours had passed while

he had been analyzing the results the computer had given him.

The Bajoran looked up from the padd in front of her and pinched the bridge of her nose. “No, but there’s nothing here besides this message. As far as I can tell, it’s machine code of some kind. We’ll have to break into it before I can find the actual language. How about you?”

“Nothing. The first rule of cryptanalysis is to know what the target language is,” Bart admitted, stretching his arms over his head. “It makes it a heck of a lot easier to set up your diagnostics if you know what you’re going after.”

Sabran looked up from his scope, “So, she needs you to break the encryption before she can identify the language and you need her to identify the language before you can break the cipher? Most unfortunate.”

Bart laughed, “Well, I can break it, eventually. I’ve translated a few artifacts without having a clue who made them or what their purpose was. It just helps if you know something about the culture. The more clues you have, the better your chances are.”

Priya looked over at Jamie. “How are you doing over there, Mr. Cruz?”

He looked up from his station and smiled. “Please, call me Jamie, okay? I’m patching a range of subspace frequencies into Probes 24 and 38, since they’re the two closest to 42. If we pick up another unidentified message, it’ll alert those two and we’ll try to triangulate the message. If we’re lucky, we’ll catch the receiving station acknowledging and we can see where this message is going.”

“How long will that take, Mis—Jamie?” Priya asked, picking up her padd again, and touching a few symbols on the page with her stylus, isolating them for further study later.

“Reprogramming the probes? Already done. How long will it take to find where these messages are coming from? All depends on if and when they transmit again. I can’t find what’s not out there. I’ve filed the initial report with Starfleet. I forwarded a section of what we picked up for them to do some crunching on those big computers they’ve got back there.”

“Do you believe they’ll have any more success than we?” Sabran asked. “I’m having difficulty even identifying the transmission method for this message. It’s akin to nothing I’ve ever encountered.”

A silence settled back over the room while they continued to examine the message. After a little while, the silence was broken by a beeping coming from Jamie’s console. Touching a control, a fuzzy picture appeared on a small communications screen set in the wall.

“This is Raven, over,” Jamie replied to the hail. When they had arrived, their orders explained that even over secure comms, they were to use cover terms. If the Federation was able to break Cardassian codes, there was every reason to believe they could return the favor.

“Raven, this is Tiger. Reference your last message. Drop all else. Ironclad coverage on lone wolf in the pack. Forward all reports to this station every twelve hours. Out.”

The message faded out as the transmission was cut off, leaving an eerie silence in the room. What in the world have we discovered? Bart wondered.

Chapter

4

A week later, Bart was almost wishing they hadn't found that signal. "Sabran, have you had any luck at all?" he asked as he reviewed his padd for what felt like the thousandth time.

"I am quite capable of understanding orders." Even in the dim light, Bart thought he could see a faint hint of frustration on Sabran's normally stoic face. "My silence implies my lack of success."

"I can't help it! I'm going out of my mind with boredom." Bart snarled, almost tossing the padd across the room. "This bloody signal isn't due for another six hours, thirty-two minutes. Every day, it's the same; a quick microburst and that's it for the day."

"Ironclad coverage does not allow us to deviate our attention to other signals of interest nor can we commit any of our equipment to other tasks. While I'm not certain I understand the logic in ignoring other signals to listen for this specific one, we have our orders."

Deciding this conversation was over, Bart sat at his workstation fuming for a bit. Looking around the operations area, he noted the chaos that had descended on it; stacks of printouts, padds, and reference material were scattered everywhere. Even though most of their work was done on computers, sometimes they found it easier to deal with a schematic or a long piece of analytic work when it was printed out so they could observe the whole thing at once. He had a number of the messages pinned to the walls with lines of varying colors going from one side to the other, looking for commonalities.

"I don't mind the orders so much, but I'm growing tired of Admiral Hazlitt's staff checking up on us all the time. I'm pleased they're interested in what we're doing, but I wish they weren't trying to tell us how to do our jobs." Bart could hear the tone of annoyance in the feminine voice that sounded in the hallway. A few seconds later, Priya appeared in the room. "You're relieved from your shift, Sabran." She took her place at her workstation and brought her console to life. As he started to stand, she continued, "Although if you want to hang around, you're more than welcome."

The Vulcan immediately settled back into his chair and called up a new set of equations on his workstation. "If you would not mind. There is something in this latest communication we intercepted that is proving interesting. I would enjoy an opportunity to pursue it further." Before Priya could respond, he turned around and returned to his task, the images changing on his computer screen faster than she could follow.

"Good evening, Bart. I'm glad to see you're in such a good mood. Are you ready for another racquetball match after our shift?" The sly grin on her face told Bart this wasn't as innocent a question as it sounded.

"Of course I am. After the drubbing you gave me yesterday, I fully intend to get my pound of flesh." Bart grinned back at her. "Oh, Priya, could you look at this bit of traffic with me? I think I'm starting to make sense out of a few sections. Make sense in the most generous terms, that is."

The Bajoran lieutenant moved over quickly and began examining the sections of code Bart had highlighted on his padd. Her eyes flicked between the padd and the scribbles he had made on the papers lining the wall, slowly nodding to herself. "That's promising, Bart. The same section of code occurs here

in group 21 on this message and group 17 on the fourth message. Have you been able to identify the particular code yet?"

"No, the messages are still too short. We're starting to get enough of them to begin making comparisons. Up until now, I've been mainly applying brute force methods to them, trying different Cardassian words and seeing if I could force something in. Heck, I've even tried Jem'Hadar and Bajoran military terms to see if anything fit. Not that I think the Bajorans are helping," he quickly added, spotting the look on her face. "It's just that at this point, I'm trying anything the Cardassians might use to see if I can crib something in."

They spent the next couple of hours working on the problem, discussing different possibilities and discarding more theories than identifying ones worth pursuing further. Bart felt his mind and throat getting worn out about the same time and decided a cup of coffee was exactly what he needed. He looked up and saw Sabran and Jamie huddled over a computer whispering excitedly to each other.

"Good God, sir, what are you doing up? I thought you'd gone to bed hours ago." Bart grabbed the steaming cup of coffee from the replicator. "I didn't even see you come in."

The Alpha Centaurian turned to him with a harried look. "I was lying there almost asleep and all of a sudden it hit me. I had to come down here and check it out." Jamie's voice was slightly slurred and from the hunch of his shoulders, Bart could tell his body was fighting with his will about sleep.

"What hit you?" Priya spun around in her chair to look at the analyst. Her dark brown eyes showed concern for Jamie's condition, but there was no mistaking the excitement creeping into her voice.

Jamie continued his slurred explanation, as if he'd never heard Priya's question. "Sabran is helping me run the statistics. I don't trust my eyes right now, but I think I've figured out a way to determine where the messages are going to and coming from. That might give you guys the break you need to get into those messages." From the way his eyes were glazed over, it was obvious to Bart the immediate question was would the computer finish its analysis before Jamie fell asleep on them.

"Jamie, have you been skipping your sleep sessions again?" Priya's expression showed a hint of irritation as she ordered up some hot chocolate for the drowsy analyst. "I thought we discussed this obsession you have with working until you pass out."

"We did discuss it. It's just hard once I get my teeth into a problem to not work on it," Jamie admitted, before gratefully accepting the steaming mug. After nearly scalding his lips, he compromised by taking a deep whiff of the chocolate smell before setting it aside to cool. "However, I think I've really got something this time."

"And as soon as you're certain, one way or the other?" she asked in a threatening tone.

"As soon as I'm certain, I'm going straight to my bunk. No questions asked."

"We're getting something," Sabran announced to no one in particular. Bart and the others crowded around the workstation as the Vulcan brought up the results on the large projection screen.

"I was right, the first message is originating in Cardassian space." Cruz almost crowed as he grabbed a padd off a nearby table and started paging through it. "According to that last bit of information I requested from Starfleet, there's something... ah, an abandoned Cardassian naval yard is located at those coordinates. I guess we can inform Starfleet it's been reoccupied. Sabran, can you pull up a map with

those coordinates highlighted?”

“Certainly, Mr. Cruz.” Sabran never looked up from his screen, continuing to work on Jamie’s calculations.

“Sabran...” Jamie stretched the Vulcan’s name out, ensuring he had the chief’s attention.

“Yes, Mr. Cruz?”

“Will you please call up the map with those coordinates highlighted?” he asked the literal-minded Vulcan.

Bart stifled a chuckle as Sabran turned without saying anything and nonchalantly brought the requested scene up on the large monitor. He wondered sometimes if Sabran was as literal as he appeared or if this was his subtle way of encouraging Jamie to be more precise with his language. Pulling himself back to the here and now, Bart noted the coordinates were on the “northern” edge of Cardassian space. There were only a few inhabited systems nearby and none of them were important enough to warrant much interest. It was a great location for a base if you didn’t want to draw much attention.

“Here comes the tricky part, Sabran. How close do you believe the second set of coordinates are to being correct?” Jamie asked, a small waver in his voice. He picked up the hot chocolate again to steady himself.

“I have no way to be certain, Mr. Cruz, but from examining your proposed test, the mathematics are sound and the proposal is highly logical. I see no reason to doubt the results at this time.” Sabran’s voice was carefully neutral as always.

“All right then, let ’er rip.” Jamie said, the excitement in his eyes blazing, his posture straightening as the next wave of adrenaline hit.

Bart watched as a series of formulae flashed over the screen. He wasn’t sure what the computer was searching for, but he could tell the mathematics involved were more advanced than anything he’d taken either during his abortive time at Starfleet Academy or after that in the three different universities on three different planets where he’d done his studies leading to his doctorate.

After a few minutes, the computer announced it had arrived at an answer.

“Put it on the main screen,” Jamie said. As they watched, a star system was projected on the wall in front of them. “Magnify and identify.” Bart could hear the excitement in the mission commander’s voice as his idea had apparently paid off.

Finally, the recipient of the mysterious transmissions was identified. As soon as it became clear where the messages were going, Bart felt a cold shiver run down his back.

The Breen Confederacy.

“Well, that explains a lot of things,” Priya said, a forced nonchalance in her voice. Bart took a quick glance at her and could see she was unnerved by this sudden turn of events. “No wonder it didn’t match up with any word patterns I was applying to your recoveries, Bart. I was applying the wrong language.”

“Don’t look at me. I hope you speak Breen. I know just enough to order a beer and find the bathroom if I got stuck in one of their space ports.”

“We certainly didn’t have contact with them on Bajor, but I’m certain someone’s got a Breen dictionary we can access somewhere.”

“Is it wise to concentrate on the Breen language?” Sabran asked, his quiet voice breaking into their congratulations. “Since these messages are going to the Breen homeworld, is it not possible it’s communication aimed at someone else? It could still be Cardassian, or one of the Dominion species such as the Vorta or the Jem’Hadar.”

“Ah, Sabran, always the voice of reason,” Jamie said. “Well, let’s get this information off to Starfleet. It’ll take a little while for them to digest this lump of gristle and inform everyone who needs to be informed. They’ll probably request further directional shots to be certain we know how to read a computer screen.”

“You think they won’t believe us? Why would Starfleet put us out here if they won’t accept what we find?” Priya’s questions were accompanied by a disbelieving frown.

“Didn’t say they won’t believe us, but some old Earth scientist stated something like ‘extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof.’ If I were you, I’d certainly enjoy my next few shifts off. I expect things to get really busy around here very soon.” Jamie raised a hand to his mouth, stifling a yawn.

“And you need to get back to bed, Mr. Cruz,” Priya said, threatening the half-asleep Alpha Centaurian. Bart chuckled in spite of himself as she assigned Sabran to ensure Jamie got to his quarters before he passed out. Turning back to his padd, he started to go over all his data again.

The Breen.

Chapter

5

The insistent buzzing of the intercom woke Bart up out of a deep sleep. Groggily, he reached out and found the speaker button on the second try. Trying not to fall out of his bunk, he finally made himself intelligible. “Faulwell here.”

“Bart, this is Cruz.” A familiar voice slowly filtered into his sleep-fogged brain as he forced himself to sit up on the edge of his bed, staring into the darkness of his room. “You need to get down to operations as quickly as possible.”

“What’s going on? The power plant threatening to blow up? The Cardassians are attacking? Ow!” Stars exploded in his head as his shin rammed into the nightstand next to his bed. “Computer, lights.” Fully awake as the room became illuminated, he grabbed his leg, trying not to plunge forward on his face. Expelling a few choice curse words under his breath, he headed for his closet.

In the background, he could hear Jamie’s response. “Priority One message from SI headquarters. They want all of us present. Preferably in one piece.” Bart could hear him suppressing a laugh.

So much for them taking their time to digest the information. He grabbed a fresh uniform out of the closet, giving himself a second to calm down before replying. “You’re hilarious,” he called back toward the

intercom, struggling to put his tunic over his head. “Be there in about five minutes.”

As Bart entered operations, he noted everyone else seated around the various workstations that dominated the room, waiting for him to arrive. To his surprise, even Lieutenant Zarinth was there. Someone must have held a phaser to his head. He never comes down to operations unless he absolutely has to. Bart responded with a cheery smile as the Andorian greeted him with a humorless nod. Zarinth had taken over the security center and converted it into his office/personal quarters, preferring to ignore the intelligence personnel as much as possible.

As soon as Bart placed his chair where he had an unobstructed view of the screen, he nodded to Jamie, who dimmed the room lights and brought up the signal. The transmission was weak and fuzzy, but there was no questioning the concern on Commander Mwakwere’s face.

“Excellent work so far. The analysts here at Headquarters agree with your findings. It corroborates some reports we’ve been receiving from other sources. Prepare to receive supplemental tasking for your mission.”

“Standing by, sir,” Jamie said.

“Your first priority is to determine exactly who is sending and who is receiving these messages. We need as much information as you can possibly derive from any and all sources at your disposal. Secondly, we need to know exactly what is being transmitted in these messages, so we’ll need full reports on not only the encryption system and its keys, but also complete translations of all messages that you can recover.”

“Should we continue forwarding everything we intercept to your location for analysis?” Bart noted there was a serious tone in Jamie’s voice he’d never heard before.

“Yes and no.” Commander Mwakwere ran his hand through his close-cropped black hair. “There’s no question about the value of the information we’re receiving from you. We have no historical equivalents to the cryptosystem you’ve encountered. The head shed thinks it’s probably a unique system and probably some very high-level stuff going back and forth on this channel. However...”

“I’m not certain I like where this is going,” Bart said, not realizing he’d spoken aloud.

“You’re going to like this even less, then, Petty Officer. We have reason to believe the existence of your mission has been compromised. We’re not certain, but the counterintelligence guys tell us there’s a good chance that one of the Mungin receivers was discovered, based on their own sources. The Dominion probably doesn’t know where they’re routed to, but you can be damn certain they’re going to devote a lot of time trying to find out.”

“Understood, Commander. We’ll make preparations just in case,” Jamie replied.

“I’m certain you will, Mr. Cruz. However, to minimize your signature, it would be best if you limited communications with us. That’s why Mungin will have to do the majority of the heavy lifting on this project. The more traffic you feed us, the more likely your site will be compromised. In fact, unless absolutely necessary, maintaining radio silence unless you have a solution would probably be best.”

A feral grin on his face, Zarinth said, “My people are quite prepared for any possible encounters with the Dominion, Commander. We’ve arranged a few surprises should they attempt to penetrate this site.”

“Let’s hope you don’t have to test their training,” the commander replied, rubbing his hand over his eyes.

Even through the fuzzy picture, Bart could see Mwakwere probably hadn't had much sleep lately. "Good luck and keep us informed if anything develops. Tiger out."

As the screen went blank, a sudden quiet settled over the room. Looking up at the chronometer, Bart saw there were only three more hours before his shift started. Even though he had always been able to survive on catnaps, here lately he'd appreciated getting in a full night's sleep to recharge. He knew he was in that no-man's land, but if he went back to bed, he'd just get into deep sleep about the time his alarm went off.

Pondering his options, he looked back around the room and noted everyone, except Zarinth, was still there. The Andorian had wasted no time escaping back into his own cocoon. Probably dreaming up new ways to torture his people in the name of training.

"So, what's next?" Priya asked, stretching back in her chair.

"We get back to work," Jamie said, grinning like the Cheshire cat. "And you two, get back to bed. I want my two linguists as sharp as possible when they're on duty. Sabran and I can handle things for now."

Bart nodded to Jamie and wedged himself up out of the chair to leave. He shook his head in mock dismay as he saw Jamie and Sabran already huddled together, examining something on the Vulcan's terminal. He slipped out of the room without disturbing them. Before he had gotten very far down the corridor, Priya fell into step with him as they made their way to the turbolift.

"So, what was your impression about the conference?" the Bajoran asked, pinching herself on the ridges just above her nose to fight off a yawn.

"I think Commander Mwakwere knows more than he's telling us. I don't know if it was because he was worried about the conversation being monitored or if there's something else going on, but he seemed to be holding back. Either way, it's a concern." Bart touched a control, summoning the turbolift to their level.

"I agree. Personally I think it was a little of both. If we have been compromised, there's a chance the Dominion could be listening in. However, I have a feeling we'd be considered 'acceptable losses' in case we came under attack. I doubt there's a Starfleet ship close enough to come to our aid if we needed it."

"Now, there's a comforting thought." Bart gave a mock groan as the doors to the turbolift opened. They stepped inside and he called out, "Deck four."

As the doors hissed closed, Priya turned to him and grinned, "So, how are you with a phaser, anyway?" Her brown eyes twinkled mischievously at his sudden discomfort, as the lift began sinking in the tube.

"Well," he admitted grudgingly, "last time I qualified, I managed not to shoot myself or any of the range cadre. Let's just say there's a reason why I'm in intel and not security. Just hope it doesn't come down to me saving the day with a fancy shot. I'm more likely to hit the life support than the attackers."

"That bad, huh?"

"Pretty damn close." As Bart finished his confession, the lift reached the end of its trip. They walked into the dimly lit corridor toward their quarters. "Now, Zarinth is a different matter. I'd be surprised if he isn't running a snap drill right now. He seems to live for a chance to scrap with the Cardassians."

“To be quite honest, I’ve got a few scores to settle with them myself. However, unlike Zarinth, I’m not so gung-ho that I want to take on a battle cohort by myself. I’m happy helping direct some of your Federation ships to deal with them for me.” The sudden ferocity in her voice caught Bart off guard.

As they paused in front of her quarters, Bart changed the subject. “I have to admit, Chantrea, I was surprised when you were introduced to us. I thought Bajor was neutral in this conflict.”

Priya stopped, her hand arrested just millimeters short of her door. Turning back toward Bart, she glanced down at the floor as if unsure how to continue. Finally, she looked up at him, coming to a decision.

“Officially yes, Bajor has signed a nonaggression pact with the Dominion. The Emissary requested that, to keep us from becoming a Dominion target.”

Bart frowned. “The Emissary?”

“The one sent to speak the words of the Prophets to the Bajoran people. I believe you know him as Captain Sisko, the commander of Deep Space 9.”

Bart soundlessly mouthed “Oh,” having no idea what she was talking about. He wasn’t up on Bajoran mythology, but it was obvious whatever the Prophets and the Emissary were supposed to be, Priya was a true believer. The real surprise was that Benjamin Sisko was apparently part of that mythology. Bart knew of him as the commander of DS9, the station that had been at the forefront of the war, as it stood proximate to the wormhole to the Gamma Quadrant, through which the Dominion forces had come to this area of the galaxy. Didn’t realize he was also moonlighting as an emissary.

Priya continued. “In any case, we know who our friends really are, so a select group of militia officers resigned our commissions and, well, disappeared. Then we contacted Starfleet surreptitiously and offered our services. This way we can keep helping the Federation while giving the government deniability with the Dominion.”

Bart leaned up against the corridor wall, stunned by this revelation. “So, you’re not officially part of the Bajoran Militia after all?”

“No, not officially. Don’t get me wrong, this is my uniform—I was a lieutenant serving in Dakhur Province up until I volunteered for this.” The pride in her voice was obvious.

“Well, for what it’s worth, I think their trust was well placed in you.” Bart’s arm snapped upward to stifle his own yawn. “However, if Starfleet is trusting me to be awake on shift, I better get to sleep now. See you in about three hours.”

“Thanks, Bart. I appreciate the vote of confidence,” she said just before she slipped through the door into her quarters. Bart stood there, staring at the now shut door and pondering the events of the past thirty minutes. Slowly he returned to his quarters, lay down on the bed still dressed, and shut off the lights.

The alarm buzzer went off two and a half hours later with him still staring up at the dark ceiling.

Chapter

6

The days following the conference with Mwakwere blended together into a painful memory for Bart. After a while, the concept of shifts devolved into endless sessions in operations with everyone catching sleep as they could. Tempers began to run short and they found themselves having to go back over and over their work to make certain they weren't overlooking anything in their exhausted states. After about a week, things were reaching their breaking point.

Bart looked up from his padd after another unsuccessful attempt at breaking the code to find Jamie standing in the doorway. Jamie's fierce look swept across the room and Bart could see the Alpha Centaurian start to say something at least twice before thinking better of it. Finally an idea lit up Jamie's face as he made a decision.

"All right, folks, everyone follow me. Team meeting." His voice broke through the silence in the room, causing Priya and Sabran's heads to pop up as if someone had set off an explosive charge in the door.

"But, Jamie, I'm..." Priya's voice quickly trailed off as the analyst cut her off with a withering look.

"That was an order, not a suggestion. Let's go, people. We need a break and we're taking onenow!" he repeated and then spun around. Slowly the others rose from their workstations and followed him out of the room. Jamie stood at the end of the hall, holding the door to the turbolift open until he was certain everyone was there. He followed them into the lift, calling out deck three to the central computer.

Once they reached the requested deck, Jamie led them past the gym and the rec room into the holosuite. As the door shut behind them, he called out, "Program Alpha Six-Two."

There was a slight wavering and the team found themselves standing on a tropical beach, surrounded by palm trees and looking out over a crystal blue sea that stretched to the horizon. Bart looked behind him and found four chaise lounges arranged there, with their own individual umbrellas and coolers.

"Grab a seat, people. We're going to relax, review what the hell we've been doing here lately and then I'm ordering some mandatory R&R." Jamie plopped down on one of the chairs and adjusted the umbrella to cut down on the sunlight hitting his face.

"Hang on a minute there, sir. Who's monitoring the situation if we're all down here?" Bart asked, confused. "We might miss something vital."

"I've instructed the computer to deal with any incoming traffic. Zarinth has someone monitoring the subspace radio in case Starfleet finds it necessary to break radio silence. He knows we're going to be down here for a while. If anything really important happens, he knows the pass code to get in here. For the next couple of hours, our only mission is to soak up some rays, do some swimming, or simply walk along the beach and enjoy the ocean breezes. And for the next couple of hours, drop the 'sir' stuff. There'll be enough time for that once R&R is over."

"Mr. Cruz, I'm afraid I don't see the wisdom of this. Wouldn't our time be better spent continuing to work on the problem at hand?" Sabran asked, a hint of curiosity and irritation in his voice.

"Chief Sabran, you may enjoy the ocean or you may sit here and do nothing. That is your choice." Jamie turned slightly in his chair to face the recalcitrant Vulcan. "However, once we finish the review of our

mission, there'll be no more work on the project until the simulation runs its course. There are a couple of cabanas a few meters in that direction. You're all to change into the beachwear you'll find there and reconvene back here in ten minutes for the staff meeting." Seeing the hesitation, Jamie sighed and continued. "That's an order, folks." He leaned down and snagged a glass bottle filled with an amber liquid out of his cooler.

"Sir, I really do not see the need to change our clothing to have a staff meeting," Sabran continued.

"Of course you don't. That's exactly why you need to do it." Jamie shaded his eyes from the sunlight that broke through the light clouds in the sky. He got up off his chair and headed inland. "Nine minutes left, folks."

A few minutes later, the group reassembled in their bathing gear, except for Sabran, who had chosen a T-shirt and shorts. Jamie motioned for them to pull their chairs together in a circle. "Ah, this is better. I want you to know I've noticed how hard everyone has been working on this project and I really appreciate it. I guarantee it'll be reflected in the report I submit at the end of the mission. However, I think we've hit the proverbial wall. Our efficiency has been going down like aptarn bird that's been hit by a stunner. So, I made the command decision that we were going to take this break." He paused long enough to take a drink and then turned to Sabran. "In a nutshell, what have you discovered about the communications system we're targeting?"

Bart noticed the Vulcan looked positively uncomfortable out of uniform, but he gamely tried to accept the unusual situation with grace. "It does not appear to be a standard subspace communications system. In fact, it does not match up with anything we have on record. I would say there is a 92.54 percent chance we are intercepting a Gamma Quadrant communications device."

"Priya, does that match up to what you're seeing?" Jamie asked.

The Bajoran leaned back in her lounge. "It's as good an assumption as any. Nothing about the code we're examining seems to match up with any frequency rotas for any known Alpha Quadrant language. I've even compared it against every Beta Quadrant language I could find on record, just in case, but no luck. If it's from the Gamma Quadrant, it wouldn't surprise me." She paused, and then sat up slightly in her chair. "It's possible that it's an unknown dialect, but until we break the encryption, I'm not going to be able to isolate enough of the language to accurately identify it, much less start translating it."

"That throws the ball back into your court, Bart." Jamie lifted his bottle toward the cryptologist.

"I'd throw it right back at you if I could," Bart said, letting go with a self-deprecating laugh. "It's been a very frustrating situation. Every time I think I've found an in, it turns out to be a dead end. However, there is a section that's starting to look promising. I've got the computer running an analysis against it while we're down here."

"Keep plugging away, Bart. If we're going to get anywhere, you're going to probably be the linchpin. Once you get us into this thing, the rest should fall into place." Jamie leaned back in his chaise, staring up into the blue sky.

"Thanks, Jamie. No pressure. I like that." Bart laughed at him.

Jamie took another drink, finishing off his bottle and then tucked his hands behind his head. "Well, I've been concentrating on what little external chatter I've been able to get from the messages. We've only seen the receiving station in Breen space reply twice. Hard to say who or what's going on there based on

such a small sample. However, the originating station is another story.”

“How so?” Priya asked, her curiosity piqued.

“There’s been some ship-to-ship communications that the sensors have picked up at the ‘abandoned’ naval yards. I’d say there are at least four Jem’Hadar battleships there and a number of supporting craft.”

Bart sputtered. “Four Jem’Hadar battleships?”

“Yep. I was thinking that’s an awful lot of firepower simply to secure an abandoned site. In addition, the way the war’s going, why would you tie up one battleship on something as simple as transmitting a message, much less four? I’d say there’s someone pretty damn important there to rate that kind of an honor guard. Anyway, I’ve got a few more things to check out and then I’m going to give you the results of my investigation, Bart. Hope it’ll help you.” Then he hopped up out of his chair. “So, who’s up for a swim?”

Bart and Priya turned and looked at each other. Shrugging, Bart slowly got to his feet. “Might as well. You said the simulation wasn’t going to end for a while.”

“You’ll pardon me if I don’t join you, Mr. Cruz?” Sabran asked.

“Your loss, Chief, but if you’re more comfortable here, knock yourself out. As I said earlier, this is your ‘vacation,’ however you want to spend it is fine with me,” Jamie replied, and turned to sprint toward the water. He hit the water with a long, shallow dive and surfaced several feet out in the water. Priya and Bart waded out into the warm water until it was deep enough to begin swimming and slowly stroked out to where the warrant officer was treading water, waiting for them.

They’d been out in the water for a few minutes when the sound of a siren caught their attention. Before they realized what had happened, they found themselves standing on a blank floor, with Zarinth standing in the doorway to the holosuite.

“Sorry to interrupt your session, Mr. Cruz. However, our long-range sensors have picked up a possible intruder entering the system. Mayhew is comparing its signature against any known ships, friendly or enemy. I felt it was best to alert you as quickly as possible.” The Andorian kept his eyes aimed just over Jamie’s shoulder, trying not to notice the analyst’s current choice of attire.

“You did exactly the right thing, Lieutenant. We’ll get changed right away and meet you here. If you find out anything more, let us know as soon as possible.” Jamie nodded to Zarinth and then turned to head toward the dressing room that had been disguised as a cabana earlier.

After a quick shower and change of clothes, they met up with Zarinth. Before Jamie could ask him anything, Zarinth’s combadge started beeping. “Zarinth, here. Report.” The Andorian’s words came out in a sharp staccato reminding Bart of an old-fashioned projectile weapon.

“Mayhew here, sir,” a voice crackled. “We’ve identified that intruder. It’s a Cardassian scout ship. However, there are five more intruders approaching this system in a slow, looping approach. I’d say it’s the rest of the scout’s unit. Estimated time to Antros III, one hour for the scout ship, four hours for the five unknown bogies.”

“Roger. I’ll be back up at the command center in about five minutes. Defense posture Bravo for right now. Keep a close eye on that scout. Zarinth out.” The security chief turned to Jamie. “Mr. Cruz, I’m

going to have to insist we go to minimum power usage to lower our signature. Please go up and begin shutdown procedures. Your people will be restricted to the bottom four levels once you've accomplished your mission."

"Excuse me, Lieutenant. I believe the admiral put me in charge of this mission."

"You are in charge of the cryptography mission, Mr. Cruz. And I am in charge of the security of that mission. If your people are down here, minimizing our electronic signal and not in the way of my professionals, we're more likely to get out of this alive. I think my instructions on this matter from the admiral were quite clear. If you object, you have the right to protest to Admiral Hazlitt after this situation is resolved. Provided we're still alive to contact him."

The Andorian let Jamie chew on that for a few moments. Bart could see Jamie's jaw moving as if he were trying to form some words, but nothing was coming out.

After a few minutes staring at each other, Zarinth spun around on one heel and disappeared in the direction of the turbolift. Jamie slowly turned to face the group, his face flushed with anger and embarrassment. "All right, you heard the man. Let's get up there and go to minimal operations. If you have printouts, grab them and meet back down here. We can use the open area to set up a secondary operations area."

"What about that program I have running?" Bart asked, a worried tone in his voice. "If we interrupt it now, I could lose everything it's recovered up till now."

"Can't be helped, Bart. Try to save what you can, but get that computer shut down. If Zarinth isn't overblowing the situation, losing the data could be the least of our worries."

The team quickly headed up to deck two and began shutting everything down. Bart saw the computer was about eighty-five percent through the process, but he had no clue if it was getting anything useful. With a lump in his throat, he hit the interrupt key, placing the diagnostic program on standby and saved what he had. He had to hope the computer system would be able to restart from the saved point, but there were no guarantees, especially once they powered the computers down.

Looking up from his work, he saw Jamie and Sabran talking. With a curt nod, the Vulcan headed out of the room toward the turbolift. Bart knew Jamie was still steaming about the incident with Zarinth, but he could see their leader was in no mood to speak to anyone about it.

Snagging his padd and all his printouts, he headed toward the door. Priya was waiting there and he could see Jamie was making one last check through the room before shutting everything down. Finally, as operations went dark and silent, they made their way down the corridor to the turbolift and returned to deck three.

As they entered the holosuite, Bart saw Sabran had already set up several folding tables and was busy setting up a portable communications system. He turned to Jamie, "I thought we were supposed to shut everything down. What's with the comms equipment?"

"If they break through into the compound, I plan on dumping everything we've got on file here as long as the subspace antenna is intact," the Alpha Centaurian said, a wry tone in his voice. "That blasted Andorian isn't the only professional at this site."

Bart grinned back at him. "Remind me not to get on your bad side." Looking over to his left, he saw

Sabran handing a phaser and a couple of spare power packs to Priya. “What’s up with the weapons?”

“No sense in taking chances. I requisitioned the weapons and borrowed enough stuff to make some rather nasty booby traps, just in case,” Jamie replied, setting a large satchel on one of the tables by the door. He opened it up, showing Bart a number of devices with a series of lights on them. “Pressure activated bombs, remote activated bombs, and a rather nasty electrical field generator. Zarinth would have a fit, but some of his people thought it was funny to teach the ‘old professor’ something about things that go boom.”

“Tears of the Prophets...did you build those yourself?” Priya asked, looking over his shoulder.

“A few of them. M’tanga helped with the trickier parts. We tested a few of them outside, so I know they work in theory.” Jamie beamed down on the devices as if they were his children.

“Outside? When the—? Those sleep shifts you were missing. You weren’t working on this, you were out goofing off with the security guards!” Priya yelled at him, the veins in her forehead becoming pronounced.

“Not all of them,” Jamie confessed. “However, I figure a few hours of missed sleep may just pay off for us. And if we don’t need them, at least it was fun learning about this stuff.” Priya looked at him like he’d lost his mind, but she finally just laughed softly and walked away. Bart noticed Jamie was so busy checking and rechecking the devices he’d designed, he never saw her leave.

A sudden chirping caught everyone’s attention. Jamie reached up and tapped his combadge. “Cruz here.”

“Mayhew here, sir. The Cardassian scout ship has transited the Antros system, but the rest of the Cardassian fleet has moved into orbit around Antros III. Don’t know what they’re up to; we’re passively monitoring the situation. Will keep you informed.”

“Understood. Cruz out.” Jamie turned around and looked at the group. “Well, that’s it for now. We hunker down and wait.”

Chapter

7

Bart stepped out of the holosuite after another frustrating shift. He’d gone over and over the readouts he’d brought with him when they shut down operations, but he was no closer after this shift than he’d been two days earlier. He knew without a doubt the answer was waiting for him in the memory buffer of the main computer, but they simply couldn’t chance turning it back on.

Mayhew had informed them that the ice-covered moon had been probed at least four times in the past two days. Apparently the shielding Starfleet Intelligence had used to hide the underground facility had done its job, but knowing a single barrage from one of the ships floating near Antros III would completely obliterate their spider hole kept everyone on edge. Bart gave Zarinth credit, though. Whatever his personal feelings were toward the SI personnel, he did a great job of keeping them updated as things began happening.

“Hey, Bart, you awake there?” He glanced up to see Priya standing over by the entrance to the zero-gravity racquetball court. “You’re just staring off into space.”

“Oh, hey, Priya. Sorry, I was just thinking about those cruisers up there. It’s just tough knowing we don’t even have a good spitwad shooter to fire back at them if they decided to take a few dozen feet off the surface.”

“Welcome to my world. When the resistance was fighting with the Cardassians, we had no navy and very little air support to speak of. We learned to appreciate caves with high concentrations of magnetic rocks. The Cardassians knew we were using them to hide from their sensors, but there were too many caves and tunnels for them to guard all of them all the time. I swear, there were times I wondered if the sun was still in the sky. It felt like I lived most of my life underground.”

The earnest look on her face made him smile. “That sounds familiar. Not so much the hiding in caves, but working for SI, I spend way too much time in windowless buildings, hiding behind sensor-resistant screens. We called the place I was just at ‘the mushroom farm’ because we were always kept in the dark and fed a lot of manure.”

Priya laughed. “So, are you up for a quick set of racquetball?”

“Ah, trying to work off some of your stress by picking on my minuscule racquetball skills?” Bart teased.

“Oh, please. I mean, you actually scored seven points last match.”

* * *

Bart retrieved the racquetball as it hovered in midair. Floating about five feet above the floor, his measured movements helped keep him stationary, letting him savor the moment. The current score was 14–11 and for the first time since they’d started playing against each other, he felt confident he was about to win a match. He turned his head, trying to estimate where Priya’s trajectory was going to take her before he served.

“All right, quit gloating and serve, would you?” He finally located her, floating near the ceiling. She was positioning herself to kick off to try to retrieve his shot.

“Gloat? Me?” he asked in a shocked voice. “Perish the thought.” Bart drew back, trying to counter his body’s inertia as he pushed the ball downward. If he’d done it right, he should hit the ceiling just about the time the ball struck the floor and they’d meet about the center of the room.

Just as the ball hit the ground, he felt himself growing heavier and he started floating down toward the ground as the dampeners kicked in. Before he could turn around, Jamie’s voice rang out from the control room. “Sorry about the game, guys, but we need you in here now.”

“Dammit, Jamie! Couldn’t you have waited one more minute?” Bart called back as his feet settled to the ground and normal gravity returned to the room. “I was finally going to beat her. It was game point!”

“In your dreams, cryppie boy,” Priya muttered, just loud enough for Bart to hear.

“Sorry, but it can’t be helped. The Cardassians just launched a small shuttle toward our position. Zarinth wants everyone in position, even us nonprofessionals.”

The smile fled from Priya's face. "What's the shuttle's ETA?" From the tone of voice and the way she held her body, Bart was reminded more of Zarinth than the racquetball partner he'd had a moment ago.

"Best estimate is one hour before they touch down. You've got a little time to shower and change, but we need you in the holosuite as quick as possible." The concern was easy to hear in Jamie's voice. Bart realized their leader might try to keep the atmosphere light but Jamie took the responsibility of his command seriously.

A quick shower later, Bart found himself being issued an additional hand phaser, just in case. As Jamie went over a series of strategies, the door to the holosuite slid open without warning and Mayhew walked in. The blond-haired noncom's eyes bugged out and his hands involuntarily rose skyward at the sight of four phasers being pointed in his direction.

"You know, you could knock and let us know you're coming, Mayhew," Priya said, an aggravated tone coloring her voice as she realized her mistake.

"Uh...yeah...sorry. Lieutenant Zarinth wanted me to issue you these." He handed each member of the team a wide belt. Each belt had a large bulge in the middle and a covered button on the buckle.

"And these would be?" Sabran asked, gingerly holding the belt in one hand.

"Those are your last-ditch weapons. If it looks like you're about to be captured, flip open the cover and hit the button. Five seconds later, the phaser power packs mounted on your belt will go critical." Mayhew's voice showed no more emotion than if he were explaining how to perform maintenance on a turbolift. He raised an eyebrow as his ice-blue eyes scanned the shocked faces in the room.

"Are you crazy? Why would we do that?" Jamie sputtered.

"Sir, with all due respect, I'd rather you do that than fall into the hands of the Cardassians. Besides, if they manage to fight their way all the way down here to where you are, we've probably hit the self-destruct button. I'd rather go like this, quick and painless, than have several tons of rock and ferrocrete land on me. But, that's just me."

"A very sensible precaution, Mr. Mayhew," Sabran said, buckling on the belt. "What is the status of the approaching enemy?"

The rest of the team eyed the belts like they were handling live snakes. After everyone had put them on, Mayhew continued. "The shuttle just landed. We lost visual on them as soon as they got within half a klick of the surface, but it appears they landed just north of this site. We have a few micro-sensors out there, but for now, we're keeping them in their shelters. The lieutenant thinks trying to acquire them isn't worth the chance of them spotting the sensors."

"That makes sense," Priya said. "Surely we have other methods for tracking anyone trying to approach the base, though."

"We have a few, but this site was designed for concealment. I don't think when they built it they were considering defending against an enemy on the surface of the moon. We're going to have to rely on the pressure grid and the passive sensor system to give us a heads-up. Odds are, we won't know where they are until they're right on top of us," Mayhew said, rubbing his hand on his chin. "Oh, and we're shutting down the turbolift as soon as I get back upstairs. You'll have to take the ladders if you need to get anywhere. We'll keep you up-to-date as best we can."

“Thanks. We appreciate your candor,” Cruz said.

The noncom nodded sharply to the chief warrant officer and beat a hasty retreat out of the holosuite.

“Well, that certainly puts a different light on things,” Bart said, patting the power pack resting in the small of his back. “I didn’t realize our sensors were so limited.”

“We have additional sensors, but cannot use them,” Sabran responded, inspecting his phaser once again. “They’re all active sensors. They’d show up on the Cardassian monitors the instant they were turned on. We have to rely on passive sensors, which are notorious for their short range and lack of sensitivity. They’d pick up a ship flying overhead, but probably not a human-sized target using a jet pack.”

“You’re not making me feel any better, Sabran.”

“I didn’t realize you were ill. Do you require something from the medical supplies, Petty Officer?”

Bart started to say something and just shook his head no. Jamie tried to suppress a smile and failed miserably and Priya spun around, giving Bart the impression she was trying to hide her amusement also. Once he regained control, Jamie told Sabran and Priya to go grab some sleep while Bart and he settled in to take the first watch.

They spent the first half of the watch setting up some barricades where they could keep an eye on the turbolift. After Jamie was comfortable with their efforts, he sent Bart in to get back to work on his project, while he sat out in the hallway on guard.

Six hours later, Sabran and Priya relieved them. After Jamie and he showed them the improvements they’d made, Bart climbed down the emergency ladder to his quarters on deck four. He smiled at his pillow as he flopped down on his bunk and dropped off into an exhausted sleep.

All too soon, his alarm went off. Making his way back up the ladder, he was surprised to see Sabran working at a portable monitor. Looking over his shoulder, his eyes widened even more as he saw the Vulcan technician had acquired a picture of the security office. It was easy to make out the complement of guards on duty, monitoring various stations in there.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to be using the computer. How’d you get that signal?”

“While I was on duty last night, I realized, even with the main computer offline, the computer that maintains our life support system was still operational. It’s a much less powerful system, but a computer is a computer.”

“And, you are a computer expert,” Priya said, grinning.

The Vulcan looked at her and gave her a small nod to acknowledge her compliment. Turning to face Jamie, who’d just arrived, he continued. “All I had to do was tap into its systems and I was able to bring this up. This device can receive signals that are only available through the life-support monitors to minimize bandwidth. It’s crude, but it’ll be more effective than sitting here staring at the turbolift door.”

“A commendable solution, Chief Sabran,” Jamie said, a broad grin spreading out over his face. “However, I wouldn’t make a big deal about this. I’m not certain how well Lieutenant Zarinth would take it.”

Sabran started to say something to Jamie and then paused and nodded. “I see your point, Mr. Cruz.”

* * *

The next three days crept along for the quartet. Bart was going over the printouts for what seemed to be the thousandth time when he heard the familiar chirp of a combadge.

“Cruz here,” Jamie said.

“Mr. Cruz, this is Zarinth. Sensors indicate the Cardassian shuttle has left the surface of the planet. From what we can ascertain, it appears the fleet is making preparations to leave the Antros system.”

Bart thought he heard disappointment in the Andorian’s voice. He’s actually upset they didn’t get to fight the Cardassians, he thought as Jamie acknowledged Zarinth’s transmission.

“We’ll stay on minimal functions for another day until we’re certain they’ve actually left the system. This will give my people sufficient time to do a sweep and see if they left any monitors on the surface. We’ll be restoring turbolift functions in a little bit. You can tell Chief Sabran he’ll have to keep using his sensor for a bit longer.”

“Why that son-of-a—He knew all along,” Jamie said, a smile of admiration forcing its way onto his face.

“Apparently they have their own computer experts,” Sabran said. “I was not trying to hide my intrusion, but then again, it wasn’t an obvious program I was running. I wonder if they spotted it, or if they’ve been observing us on their own terms?”

“Their own terms, meaning they’ve bugged the compound?” Bart asked, letting the others draw the same conclusions he was reaching.

“It’s possible, since they work out of the security office. It would make perfect sense for there to be hidden sensors. Remember, there have been rumors of Changelings infiltrating Starfleet. A saboteur could easily threaten the safety of this mission. Of course, if there had been a spy in our midst, transmitting messages to the Cardassian ships overhead would have been just as effective.”

Jamie agreed, nodding to himself. “If the Dominion could gain control of this site without Starfleet’s knowledge, they could feed false data directly to SI. They could trick us into maneuvering our limited reserves to meet a nonexistent threat, opening up entire sectors to be exploited. I certainly don’t think any of us is a traitor, and I’m pretty darn confident that Zarinth’s people are solid, but from a security standpoint, Zarinth can’t afford to take any chances.”

“That’s a pretty damn cynical attitude to take, Jamie,” Priya said, shaking her head and looking up at the ceiling for any telltale signs.

“Thirty-eight years in Starfleet Intelligence will do that to you, Chantrea. I’ve seen some peculiar things and met some peculiar people, but the men and women in counterintelligence are the most paranoid, anal-retentive, everything-by-the-book bastards you’d ever meet. However, they’re also the people I most want watching my back.”

“Even so,” Priya said, “I dislike Zarinth flaunting his abilities like that.”

“He does seem to have an attitude about SI that goes beyond the typical combat arms mentality. However, as long as he does his job and lets us do ours, I don’t have the time to let his petty games get to me. Grab your stuff, guys, and let’s get ready to head back upstairs. There’s work that needs to be done and we’re the people to do it.”

Chapter

8

The near-miss by the Cardassian vessels seemed to spur everyone into a higher gear. As Bart had feared, shutting down the computer system had corrupted his data. However, Sabran was able to do a partial recovery, so the cryptologist didn’t have to start from square one again.

They found Probe 26 had managed to record much of the Cardassian’s ship-to-ship chatter during the transit of the Antros system. Jamie immediately set out to incorporate this new information into their databases and compare it against earlier intercepts. As he suspected, it was a different system than the one they were most interested in, but he noted a few similarities that might be worth pursuing.

Bart examined the messages while he was waiting for the newly reactivated computer to finish the program he’d started seven days ago. A cursory examination didn’t find anything that jumped out at him. It was a straightforward Cardassian encryption system; his diagnostic program identified it as a pre-Dominion cipher that Starfleet had broken a few years ago. Priya took his decrypts and began translating them in case there was anything useful to report when the next opportunity arose.

After a few hours, Priya went over to Jamie’s station and physically escorted him out of the operations center, muttering dire threats about what would happen if she caught him out playing with the security guards. He put up a halfhearted protest, but he knew she was capable of following through on her threats, so he acquiesced in the end.

“I swear, Bart, sometimes he’s just like a kid,” Priya said as she reentered the room. “He knows he needs to eat and get some sleep, but he’d be in here 26/7 if he thought we’d let him.”

“I think this is the first time he’s been in the field in a long time. He’s starting to get to the age where they’re not going to want to deploy him much more and he knows it. He’s trying to squeeze everything he can out of this assignment.” Bart looked up at Priya over his padd. He turned to push a few buttons on the computer terminal next to him and annotated the information on his padd before continuing. “He sees this as his swan song.”

“Swan song?” There was no questioning the confused tone in her voice. “What would a bird have to do with this mission?”

“One of the most pervasive of swan legends back on Earth is it sings a beautiful song just before dying. Over time, it’s come to mean the last great act a person does in their life.”

“You think Jamie will die after this mission?” Her shocked voice echoed in the ops center.

“No, but he’ll probably go back to the Academy and teach there until he retires. He sees this as his last chance to do something really meaningful. That’s why he’s doing all the extra stuff, playing commando, et cetera,” Bart confided, keeping his voice low before returning to his computer.

Looking up a while later, he saw Priya sitting at her terminal, staring over the top of her monitor at the wall beyond her. “Is something wrong?”

She jumped, startled by Bart’s sudden question. “No, I was just thinking about what’s going to happen to us after this mission is over.”

Bart laughed, “Well, I don’t know about the rest of you, but I fully expect to wind up in some dull, boring, and very safe assignment after this war is over.”

“I imagine I’ll go back to Bajor, but in a way, I’m not looking forward to it.” She sat at her terminal, tapping the end of her stylus on the table in front of her.

“I thought you were fighting to liberate Bajor?”

“I am.” There was pride in her voice, but sadness was visible in her eyes. “It’s just that it’s only been a few years since we liberated ourselves from the Cardassians, and now this. I don’t know what Bajor’s going to be like when the war’s over.”

As they reached the end of their shift, the computer finally spit out the results Bart had been waiting for. His eyes lit up as he saw there was a positive match with several of the groups of code he’d been targeting. As he turned around to pass the good news on to Priya, he saw Sabran standing in the doorway to operations. It was obvious the Vulcan had something on his mind, but Bart had the feeling he wasn’t certain how to ask.

“Chief Sabran, would you check this out for me and make certain I’m interpreting the data correctly?” he asked, hoping it would give Sabran the opening to say whatever was bothering him.

The Vulcan moved across the room with a catlike grace, taking the padd from Faulwell. His brown eyes gazed at the computer’s results and then he began comparing the recoveries and the original text. “Very good, Petty Officer Faulwell. It appears you have begun to make good progress against the unknown code.”

“It’s a start. I just wish it didn’t take so long to run this program. There’s no guarantee the Cardassians won’t return before I get the entire message broken out.” Frustration was visible on the cryptologist’s face. “It takes too long even to prove something’s wrong.”

“I believe I can help there.”

“Oh?” The Vulcan’s hesitation had gotten Bart’s attention. Sabran was usually so confident when he spoke.

“I noted certain...inefficiencies in the diagnostic program you were using. I have been working on a suitable upgrade if you are interested in testing it out. I realize using an untested process is against regulations—”

“—but given the current situation, I take full responsibility,” Jamie said, appearing behind the two of them out of nowhere. “What makes your program so much better, Chief?”

“Well, the original program was only designed to look at a small number of messages, comparing statistical and various other attacks against the traffic. It is extremely thorough, but it requires a large

amount of the computer's capabilities, even one as advanced as this station's, which is why it can only review selected messages." The Vulcan's voice grew stronger as he warmed to the subject.

"I understand the limitations of Bart's current analytical programs. What are you going to do to improve that?" Jamie asked, waiting for Sabran to get to the point. "And, in plain terms. My head still hurts from the last time you tried to explain that damn subspace signal."

"Very well, sir. My process will allow the computer to skim all the traffic we've intercepted, and at the same time we can easily include any new information that might arrive once the process starts. It looks for commonalities rather than examining it at the micro level. My initial thought was to attempt a brute force attack, but since Petty Officer Faulwell has made these possible recoveries, that simplifies things. The program can be modified to take advantage of his recoveries and use all known attacks against the intercepted messages as well as every possible variant. We'll be putting a strain on the main computer, but I believe there's an eighty-six percent probability it'll lead to a recovery sooner than our current methodical process."

"My head's starting to hurt again, Sabran. However, unless Bart has an objection, go ahead. We can always continue using Bart's diagnostic programs if your system doesn't work." Jamie smiled at the Vulcan and then turned to walk over and get a cup of coffee from the replicator.

"Thank you, Mr. Cruz." The Vulcan took his position and began to type away on his console.

Turning to Faulwell, Jamie gave him a big smile. "Nice work on that possible recovery, Bart. I know you were chomping at the bit when we were shut down."

"Well, it's only a partial recovery, if it is a recovery. For all I know, it's strictly coincidental. Until I have readable text, it's still a theory."

"I've got a good feeling about it." Cruz carried his coffee over to his console. Entering a few commands, he made annotations about the Cardassian fleet that had just moved beyond the Antros system. Looking back up at Bart, he gave him a wan grin. "You're a cryptanalyst; I'm a communications analyst. Sometimes you just know something's right, long before you can prove it. I know you're on to something here."

Looking around, Bart saw Priya had already left the room. He hurried toward the door to see if she was up for a match before shift, when Jamie's voice stopped him.

"Oh, by the way, I'd keep a low profile. I had a talk with Zarinth. He's concerned the Cardassians may return in force. He wants to issue defensive armor and weapons to everyone, just in case. Unless you want another thing to have to hand-receipt, I'd make certain he didn't find you."

"Me hand-receipt something? I'd hate to think how much stuff you've signed for just in improvised explosives," Bart laughed.

"No comment. Now, get out of here and get some sleep." Jamie's voice followed Bart down the hall as he hurried toward the turbolift.

As the turbolift door shut, Jamie's final comment finally sank in with him. Oh sure, you're a great one to be giving sleeping advice.

Three days later, Bart slid open the door to his room to find Priya waiting for him. He noticed she was looking over his shoulder into his room at the pile of equipment lying in the corner. “Yes, one of Zarinth’s minions found me. I’ve got more military hardware resting in my room than I’ve ever owned in my life.”

“Don’t feel bad; he caught me earlier too. I’ve never used a phaser rifle before, so Mayhew was kind enough to give me a training manual. At least I don’t think he’s going to expect me to field strip it blindfolded yet.” Priya’s eyes twinkled as they shared a laugh. “However, knowing Zarinth, it’s just a matter of time before we’re drilling right along with his troops.”

“I know the Andorians are a martial race, but Zarinth is taking this to extremes. Are we certain he’s not part Klingon?” Bart joked as they made their way to the lift. “It’s too bad we don’t have time for another match.”

“After the way I trounced you today, I’m surprised you’re wanting a rematch so soon.” As the door to the lift opened, they discussed the match as the turbolift rose toward deck two. The conversation lasted all the way down the corridor toward operations, with Priya showing Bart some of the things he was doing to tip her off on what he was trying to do.

“So, I’ve been giving myself away this whole time?” he asked, playfully slapping himself on the forehead. As they walked through the door, a sudden snoring halted her response and they both turned to find Jamie laying sprawled across his terminal. They rushed over but, after a quick examination, they decided there was no medical emergency here.

“That goofball,” Priya said. “I’ll bet he stayed up all night doing something with M’thanga again and fell asleep before his shift was over. I swear, if they don’t blow themselves up, it’ll be a miracle.” She pointed toward a clear spot on the floor by the far wall. “Help me move him over here. At least he can be comfortable while he’s asleep.”

Bart grabbed Jamie under the arms and began to lift so Priya could get a grip under his legs. As Jamie’s torso came upright, a sudden intake of breath from the Bajoran nearly caused Bart to drop Jamie. He turned his head to look and she was nodding her head at a portion of his workstation that had been hidden beneath Jamie’s slumped torso.

A single red light was flashing.

Shifting Jamie’s body carefully, he positioned himself so he could reach the screen without dropping his commander. Bart quickly ran his hand over the touchpad to take the terminal out of snooze mode, and carefully typed in the password with one hand to get past the security layer. A broad smile crossed his face as he examined the information that sprang to life on the screen.

They’d broken the code!

Chapter

9

Bart stood there staring at the results on the computer before Priya’s strained voice broke through the fog. “Ah, Bart, I know you’re excited about this, but Jamie’s really getting heavy. Could we finish moving

him first?"

Quickly muttering an apology, he reacquired his grip on the recumbent analyst. They moved him over by the wall, being careful not to slam his body into anything and eased him onto the floor. Bart toyed with the idea of getting one of the gurneys from sickbay, but he knew the medic would insist on reporting this to Zarinth. He was not in the mood to deal with the Andorian right at the moment.

"Priya, can you see if you can contact Sabran. I'm surprised he's not here." He made certain Jamie was comfortable before moving over to his station. Priya tapped her combadge as Bart routed the information from Jamie's workstation to his. He could hear her conversation in the background, but he immediately lost himself in the information flashing on the screen.

"Yes, see here, we've got matches all across the board!" Excitement rose in his voice as he motioned her over to the screen. "We're getting plain text now. Do you recognize the language?"

"I've never seen anything like this before, but it's definitely a language of some sort, Bart." She spun him around in his chair, a huge grin on her face. "We've done it, you've done it! You broke the encryption. Now it's just down to doing the translations."

"Time to earn your keep, Lieutenant." Bart began going through the parameters of the encryption system, preparing the short explanation of the system. He would do a more formal report on the system later, but right now, it was important to get the basic information about the system ready to broadcast. Cryptanalysts had their own shorthand for describing encryption systems; with a good description, any analyst would be able to re-create the cipher without ever having to see the original message.

The room remained quiet as Bart and Priya buried themselves in their work, only Jamie's soft snoring echoing above the familiar hum of the computers. After a few hours, Priya projected the images from her screen onto the large viewscreen mounted on the wall. She began manipulating the symbols on the screen as Bart looked on in amusement.

"I've never seen letters that looked like that," he said in a confused tone as she replaced one set of symbols with another to begin building an alphabet of unknown origin.

"Well, these aren't real letters." Priya never took her eyes off the screen as she shifted several symbols around into a new progression. "One of the tricks with dealing with an unknown language is to use symbols. If I started out using Bajoran letters for similar sounds, I could talk myself into assigning meanings to words that have nothing to do with their real meaning. By using these generic symbols, I can concentrate on trying to decipher the words on their own merits."

"Makes sense. It's too easy to talk yourself into thinking something is 'X,' whether it is or not, in cryptanalysis also. You've got to keep an open mind and not assume anything."

"These words here are probably proper names, since they occur near the first and last of the message." She ran her stylus over the pad she was using, highlighting several symbols on her terminal screen. "I'll leave them alone for later, but I'm certain these groups of symbols here are words based on their repetition in the message. Now, if the computer just has something that matches up with these possible word patterns, we'll be able to cross-reference it against the original alphabet and voilà, we've identified the language."

"That's great...if the computer has a match. After all, there aren't that many languages spoken in the galaxy, are there?"

Priya frowned at him and then realized he was picking on her. “Arrgh! Well, luckily, the Federation’s Universal Translator’s technology has proven very flexible. All we need are enough samples and there’s a very good chance we’ll get somewhere. It would be useful if we could identify the language, though.”

As Priya manipulated a few more symbols, a section of the screen began to glow blue and an unknown alien writing began to appear in the blank spaces directly beneath the symbols. Just below the writing, a translation began to appear also. Bart moved over and began to read the translation as Priya continued to manipulate the symbols, causing more and more of the alien writing to appear.

“You’ve got something here, Priya. It’s still disjointed, but you’re on the right track,” he called back over his shoulder. He could see her furiously punching on her terminal as the number of unidentified symbols rapidly converted into the alien symbols. “Has the computer identified the writing?”

“I believe you’ll find that it’s Vorta,” came Sabran’s voice from the doorway.

“Vorta?” Bart asked, quickly turning around to see the Vulcan standing there.

“They are administrators for the Dominion and serve as ambassadors to non-Dominion governments.”

“I’m familiar with who the Vorta are, but why do you think this code is theirs? Usually their codes are easy to decipher because their language is very simplistic, since the Founders never needed vocal speech. They just created one to speak to us. This is a significantly high-level code.”

“It would not surprise me if after all is said and done that this is actually a Breen encipherment system given to the Dominion. After all, the Breen have very little love for the Federation. However, with regard to the Vorta, it would only be logical to find them behind these communications. Although the Cardassians do have an embassy on the Breen homeworld, I began to suspect the Vorta based on the unknown communications system.”

“How long have you suspected the Vorta?”

“It was always one of the possibilities. Since the Vorta maintain a high position in the Dominion, it was the logical solution. However, I did not want to prejudice Lieutenant Priya’s work. There was a slight probability it could have been any of a number of other races that serve in the Dominion’s forces or even the Founders themselves. From my research, I determined the majority of our knowledge of the Founders and the Vorta language come from the reports which are on record at SI headquarters—”

“—which, of course, we can’t access because we’re on radio silence.” Bart and Sabran turned to see the Bajoran staring grimly down at her terminal. “Even though Vorta is a fairly simplistic language, we don’t have much in the linguistic databases. Bart, I’m going to need your help on this one. We’re going to have to do this the hard way. Maybe it’s a good thing Admiral Hazlitt added an extra linguist to this project.”

“That’s why he gets all the perks, I guess. Sabran, we may need some computing help here. We’re going to be stretching some of these programs to create a Vorta dictionary in a hurry. We may need you to write some patch code as we go along.”

“Very well, Petty Officer,” the Vulcan replied. “While I am here, there are a few scenarios I want to run against those subspace transmissions. Some are really quite fascinating and I’d like to include more data about them when we make our report.”

“Knock yourself out, Sabran. We’ll call if we need you,” Bart said, turning back to his terminal. Priya and he continued to hammer on the translation. They followed a few rabbit trails here and there before realizing their mistakes. After several hours, they had resolved most of the kinks in their program with some assistance from Sabran.

The first few messages they translated were fairly innocuous, providing little information about the Vorta representatives in Breen and Cardassian space outside of their names. Apparently negotiations with the Breen had progressed slowly. However, the message they’d received yesterday was much more ominous.

Greetings Veydek,

Our efforts appear to have begun to pay off. The Breen have expressed interest in an alliance with the Dominion. We agreed there is much to be gained by both sides in such an alliance, both militarily and economically. Their forces are fresh and would help compensate for the losses our forces have sustained.

However, they still wish to be convinced that our forces will prevail. They point out that they gain very little if they back the wrong side in this war. While there is little love between the Breen and the Federation, there is also no real rivalry. They desire to see something more convincing before they will agree to ally with the Dominion.

Please coordinate with the Founders and inform me of their desired response to the Breen.

In service to the Founders,

Lithara

After they’d read the message, Bart and Priya turned toward each other. “That doesn’t sound good,” she said, touching a few controls on her terminal. Bart nodded in agreement as she continued. “I’m going to run that through the translator one more time. I want to be certain those words match up against the other messages.”

“A very logical course of action,” Sabran said, looking up from his work.

Bart scratched his beard thoughtfully. “Maybe we should see what today’s message says before you do that. If we’re correct, it should be a response to this message. We could even do it as a blind test by running the translation program on it without input from us. This way, we could be certain it was really what the message was breaking out to instead of us filling in what we thought we’d see. I think we’ve recovered enough to understand what was being said even if a few words were missing.”

“Might as well. I’m as curious as you are about what the reply might have been.” Priya turned to the terminal and poked in a few commands. “Given the length of the message, it’ll be a few minutes before the computer has an answer for us. Want to grab something to drink while we wait?”

“I think a quick stretch and a cup of coffee would be just the thing. Actually, a quick session in the gym and a long jog would be even more useful, but that’ll have to wait.”

By the time he rejoined her at the computer, the program had run its course. Calling up the message, they stared as the words scrolled across the main screen. As the enormity of the message sank in, Bart felt his blood run cold.

Lithara,

The wisdom of the Founders never ceases to amaze me. The Founders have just arrived at Naval Repair Station Delta Seven, bringing the Breen ambassador to Cardassia with them to tour the Jem'Hadar battleships at my disposal. I had no more brought your latest message to their attention before they summoned the Breen ambassador to the conference room. We discussed several points that might serve as a basis for a treaty with the Breen. It would call for them to set aside their neutrality in return for certain concessions by the Dominion in the way of resource-rich planets currently within the Federation.

The Breen ambassador did mention he was impressed by the latest counterattack we'd launched against the Federation/Klingon combined fleet. The Founder had a situation map brought in and showed him the purpose for our fleet to be assembled at Delta Seven.

We are prepared to attack Federation Starbase 11. If our attack on the starbase is successful and we can drive off their defenders, we are to proceed toward Benecia. No doubt, the Federation will have to move their forces to ensure an important system like Benecia does not fall to the Dominion. If the Federation reacts as our analysts believe they will, they will have to weaken their forces around [untranslatable]. We will use this opportunity to seize [untranslatable] which will make their position in the [untranslatable] system untenable.

The Breen ambassador was impressed by this plan. If our mission is successful, your mission should easily come to fruition. Wish us luck.

In the service of the Founders,

Veydek

As the last words scrolled across the screen, a deathly silence settled on the room. Finally, Bart pried his eyes away from the screen to turn and look at Priya, who had paled reading the translated message.

"We've got to get this information to Starfleet, now!" Bart said, the urgency unmistakable in his voice. "What planets were they discussing?"

"I don't know, Bart, the computer didn't recognize the names. I don't know if those were code words, if they were recoveries we simply haven't made yet, or if the Dominion have their own name for those planets, similar to the Cardassians calling Deep Space 9 'Terok Nor.' Either way, you're correct. We've got to get this forwarded as quickly as possible."

Bart spun around in his chair and went over to where Jamie was sleeping. "Rise and shine, bossman. Time for you to earn your keep," he said, poking Jamie to wake him up.

Slowly Jamie's eyes opened and he blinked them furiously to try to focus them. "Wha... what the hell are you do—" As he tried to sit up, he banged the side of his head against the wall. "Ow!" He reached up to rub the sore spot and looked around confused.

"Yes, you're still in ops. I wasn't going to haul your carcass all the way down to your room just because you can't be bothered to go to bed when you should have." Bart helped their sleep-addled leader to his feet. "Come on, we've got something hot here. We need you to send it out."

Jamie finally stood up, stifling a yawn with the back of his hand. He shook himself all over, trying to get the blood flowing again and slowly made his way over to his terminal. “Quick, hot chocolate, a status report, and more hot chocolate in that order.” Easing his way into his seat, he winced as he sat down and arched his back, obviously trying to get a kink out from where he’d slept on the hard floor. He heard Priya’s sympathetic chuckle and looked over at her. “Remind me to requisition softer floors the next time we go out on one of these damn-fool missions.”

“You’d better look this over, Jamie. If we don’t get this information out soon, there may not be any more missions, damn-fool or otherwise.”

Accepting the steaming hot chocolate from Sabran, he blinked several times getting the last of the sleep out of his system and then turned to the main viewscreen. The hot chocolate paused just short of its intended destination as Jamie’s eyes began running down the message on view there. He eased the untouched cup back down onto the table and began calling up additional information about the message, correlating the new recoveries with the message externals.

“Incredible! I knew there was something going on, especially once we saw there were four battleships there, but to think the Breen ambassador was actually visiting,” he said in an awed voice. “This is incredible. Time to break radio silence. Send me everything you have on this. I’ll need a few minutes to get everything together that they’re going to need back at SI HQ. This ought to spin a few heads, once they get a load of this.”

Sabran looked over at Priya, who smiled at him and nodded. “I believe he’s saying they’ll be pleased with this,” she said. Sabran merely nodded and raised an eyebrow as he looked back at the Alpha Centaurian who was frantically typing his report at his station.

The room was strangely quiet, except for the tapping sound coming from Jamie’s position. After a few more minutes, he raised his right hand with a flourish and brought it down on the button next to his terminal. “And, kids, that’s a wrap!” He beamed at his team with obvious delight. “Now it’s all up to the guys back at HQ. With any luck, they can maneuver a fleet to intercept the Jem’Hadar. That would deliver a crushing blow to the Dominion and keep the Breen out of this war once and for all.”

* * *

Several hours later, as they were finishing up their celebration, a buzzer went off in the room. “Incoming message from Starfleet,” the computer’s voice rang out over the dying conversations.

“On-screen,” Jamie called out, as they moved quickly over by the main transmission screen. It took the signal a little bit to focus, but shortly they could see Commander Mwakwere sitting there. “Sir, we hope you received our message.”

“Indeed. Let’s just say you’ve kicked over a beehive here. I just wanted to call and let you know everyone is very proud of the work you’ve done.” The commander’s huge smile said more than any words could. “In fact, we have new orders for you.”

“Standing by,” Jamie said, picking up a nearby padd.

“This target is being assigned to another collector. You are only required to maintain logs when this target transmits and only report on it if there is a major change in their communications. Report any signs of ships moving into that region or departing. Otherwise, resume standard sweeps looking for new targets of interest.”

“Sir?” The hurt and confusion was visible on Jamie’s face. “We have a strong signal from the target and we’ve just finished adapting a translator for the messages. With all due respect, I think we’ve earned the right to continue providing information on this target.”

The commander’s face became serious as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “I understand your feelings, Chief Warrant Officer, but these orders are not open to negotiation. This is no reflection on your team’s competency. In fact, word of your discovery has already been forwarded back to Starfleet Command. They are the ones who issued the orders for you to discontinue the current mission. Don’t know exactly what they’ve got planned, and I didn’t ask.”

Jamie let out an audible sigh. “Understood, sir. Wilco on the new orders.”

“At least I have some good news for you, Mr. Cruz. Admiral Hazlitt has decided to relieve you at the six-month mark. Looks like you’ll be saying good-bye to that place pretty soon.” Mwakwere’s smile returned as he passed that information on to them. “Tiger out.”

As the screen faded to black, everyone sat there pondering what they’d just heard. Bart felt the tension they’d all been under for the past several weeks begin to fade away a little bit at a time. He felt himself physically slumping in his chair, letting his back relax.

“Well, folks, you know what this means?” Jamie asked after a short while.

“No, but I’m certain you’ll tell us,” Priya teased.

“I think it’s time we got back to that well deserved R&R on those sandy beaches. Last one to the holosuite is a rotten egg.”

Chapter

10

The rest of the time spent at Mungin was uneventful and the repetitive shift work helped mask the passage of time. They found themselves retreating to the holosuite more and more often as their tour wound down. To everyone’s relief, the next shift of analysts arrived at Antros III on schedule. Jamie’s team briefed the newcomers and boarded a tramp freighter with their gear, all under the watchful eyes of Zarith’s people.

Their flight back into Federation space was quiet. In fact, a little too quiet. The only member of the crew they saw was the steward who brought them their meals. The freighter’s captain had restricted them to their quarters, which didn’t even have their own replicators, stating his ship was too cramped for a bunch of passengers to be wandering about, interfering with his crew’s work. Bart and the others were too excited to care about their accommodations as long as they were leaving the ice-covered moon that had been their home for the past six months.

Once they were deep in Federation space, the freighter rendezvoused with an Excelsior-class Federation starship. After a quick exchange of information on the communicator screen, they were beamed aboard the starship. Instead of materializing in the ship’s transporter room however, they found themselves in an isolation ward in the ship’s sickbay.

“All right, this is starting to get ridiculous.” Bart tested the door to find it sealed.

Jamie paced around the room like a caged tiger. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think we were under house arrest.”

“But why? What’s going on? If we’re under arrest, why are we here and not in the brig?” Priya asked.

“I do not believe we are officially ‘under arrest,’ ” Sabran said, looking at Priya. “If I have begun to understand Mr. Cruz’s dialectal use of language, I believe he means we’re being kept away from the crew for some unknown reason rather than being held for criminal matters.”

“Either way, this stinks. If we’ve done something wrong, they should just come out and tell us.” The frustration of the situation pushed Bart’s words out like an explosion.

Before he could continue with his rant, Priya broke in, “Has anyone seen or heard anything from Zarinth? Do we even know if he left on the freighter when we did?”

“I saw some of Zarinth’s security personnel when we were boarding the freighter, but I had no way to ascertain whether or not they actually boarded once we were in our quarters,” Sabran said, sitting down on one of the examination tables.

Bart started to ask the Vulcan if he knew how to answer a question with a simple yes or no, but managed to rein in the sharp reply. Sabran was not the enemy and this was not the time to make him one. He went over to the communications terminal and activated it.

“Nurse Orisaka,” came a feminine voice over the intercom. “How may I help you?”

“You could let us out.” Bart knew what the response would be, but felt he had to try.

“I’m sorry. We’ve been ordered to keep you in the isolation ward until we reach our destination. We can’t risk the possibility of infection,” came the sympathetic reply.

“Infection? What infection?” Jamie’s voice broke in over Bart’s intended question. “There has to have been some mistake here.”

“Again, I’m sorry. Our orders stated we were to pick you up from that freighter and transport you. You’ll have to ask Dr. MacDonald for more information. I thought you knew why we’d been sent to retrieve you.”

“Could you please summon Dr. MacDonald for us? We’d like to speak to him as soon as possible,” Bart asked, shushing Jamie with his left hand.

“I’ll have him come to your ward so you can speak to him personally,” Nurse Orisaka said. “If you’re hungry or thirsty, there is a replicator in the ward set up for your needs.”

Bart turned off the intercom. “Well, they’ve thought of everything. A nice little gilded cage we find ourselves in.”

“I’m not certain what’s going on, but there’s nothing we can do until Dr. MacDonald arrives,” Priya said. “I recommend relaxing and enjoying the trip. After all the things we’ve been through the past six

months, some enforced inactivity is not the worst that could have happened to us.”

Bart and Jamie looked at each other, and took seats at the one table in the room with little grace. Bart had just gotten up to get a cup of coffee when Dr. MacDonald appeared at the door. They rose as one to move toward the door, but he casually waved them back to their seats. He pulled up a chair outside their door and hit the communications button beside it.

“The communication system in the isolation ward is set up so that we can hear you wherever you’re resting. There’s no need to crowd around the companel,” he said, a slight accent coloring his voice. He brought his long fingers up in front of his face, forming an inverted V with his hands as he looked them over. Bart felt the gaze from his green eyes boring into him and knew, without a doubt, what a specimen felt like beneath a microscope.

Jamie recovered first. “We’d like to know what’s going on, Doctor.”

The tall, lanky figure on the other side of the door slowly turned his head to look at Jamie. “Mr. Cruz, we received orders from Starfleet to rendezvous with the S.S. Kristen’s Luck to assume responsibility for transporting three Starfleet members and one Bajoran officer for medical attention.” He paused, looking at a padd before continuing. “According to the information we received, you were examining alien artifacts when the containment field failed. Each of you had been contaminated in the incident. Your last station had been unable to isolate the cause of the illness, so you needed transportation for further medical examination. I am not to enter, nor examine you for fear of contaminating this ship. Is this not correct?”

Bart started to open his mouth when Jamie quickly stopped him. “You have to understand, Doctor, it’s just we were surprised about the transfer. When we left, we thought the freighter was going to take us all the way.”

“Understandable, given the current situation and all. However, we were already headed back to Jupiter Station. Diverting to meet the Kristen only took us a few hours off course. We’ll be able to make up the lost time, now that you’re safely aboard.”

“Do you have an estimate of when we’ll arrive?” Priya asked in a small voice.

“It shouldn’t take more than a couple of days. We received some damage in our last battle and can’t quite make maximum warp. As long as we maintain this speed though, we should be all right. The captain wanted me to reassure you we’ll do everything in our power to get you there in plenty of time.”

“Just one moment, Doctor, I want to make certain everyone is feeling all right.” Pulling the others into a tight huddle, the Alpha Centaurian whispered as he made a show of checking pulses and foreheads, “I don’t know what’s going on, but we still have to maintain operational security. At least, we know where we’re headed now. Just play along and let’s see where this leads.”

“Is everyone all right in there, Mr. Cruz?” Dr. MacDonald asked, brushing a lock of his red hair out of his eyes. “I do not like the idea of not being allowed to examine you. Just seems very inappropriate, but my orders were very clear.”

“I’m not a doctor, sir, but I’m certain if Starfleet sent out those orders, they must have a very good reason for doing so. We certainly appreciate your concern, though.”

They chatted with the doctor for a bit longer, letting him talk about the ship and its crew, and some of

the battles they'd been in. Dr. MacDonald was a likeable person and they felt bad about having to make up a story about what they'd been doing and the artifact they'd found. He excused himself after a short while to make his rounds, promising to check back with them once in a while.

After they were certain he was gone, Jamie had everyone search the isolation ward for transmitters. After a thorough search, they were unable to find anything, so they had to assume they could speak freely. Jamie called them together and whispered, "I don't know why we're going to Jupiter Station and not back to Starbase 375. Something is very strange here. Everyone hang loose, keep your thoughts to yourself and enjoy the ride."

* * *

Three days after their transfer, they arrived at Jupiter Station and were beamed into a security center. They were allowed to clean up and change clothes before being escorted to a large conference room. They meandered through the ornate room toward the large podium in the front and Bart noticed everyone was keeping their thoughts to themselves. He could tell by the way everyone moved they were all as nervous as he was.

They'd been there for a few minutes when Jamie broke the silence. "I wonder what's keeping them. I wonder if Commander Mwakwere will be here to debrief us?"

"I don't know, but I want to know how badly we beat that Jem'Hadar fleet. I'll wager we didn't let a single one get away," Priya said, a small sharklike grin crossing her face.

Just then, a whistle rang out in the room, and the door at the far end slid open. "Attention on deck!" a security officer called out as two officers and a master chief petty officer came into the room. Bart looked in amazement as he realized Admiral Marta Batanides, the commander of Starfleet Intelligence herself was the first one in the door. As the officers took their seats, the master chief motioned for the four to sit down also. Bart and the others quickly complied.

Admiral Batanides looked them over, her elfin features making it appear she was ready to break into a smile at any moment. Finally she began, "Let me start by saying the Federation owes the four of you an incredible debt of gratitude. Your efforts were invaluable in helping to turn the tide against the threat from the Dominion."

She paused for a second, pouring herself a glass of water from the silver pitcher sitting on the table. "The Vorta have been very generous in letting the Breen ambassador use their circuit to transmit information back to his government. He's proven to be quite a talented observer and has gone to great lengths to inform his countrymen about the size, composition and strengths of the Dominion forces he's observed. He's also made heavy use of that encryption system you identified." She took another sip from her glass and continued. "When the Breen entered the war, I have to admit the ferocity of their attacks caught us off guard. However, we were able to maneuver our forces to meet their counterattacks and as the Dominion withdrew even farther into Cardassian space, the ambassador was quick to keep his government informed with the latest news from the front."

"Begging the admiral's pardon," Jamie said, as she paused. "When the Breen entered the war? Wasn't Starfleet able to stop the Jem'Hadar fleet from attacking Starbase 11? There must have been time to put together a flotilla to stop them."

"Yes, Mr. Cruz, when the Breen entered the war. Once we started getting the field reports from the Breen ambassador, it was determined that the value of the information was too great to lose. There's no

question we could have intercepted the Jem'Hadar forces. However, there was no way we could have done so without having exposed Mungin and the fact that we were listening in on the ambassador's private network."

"But, the people on Starbase 11...?" Bart's soft voice broke the ugly silence.

"We gave them as much warning as we could," she admitted, letting her emotions show through for a second, running a hand through her still dark brunette hair before she reimposed her professional demeanor. "Once the Jem'Hadar fleet attacked, we sent out a fleet we had pre-positioned and drove them off before they could complete the attack. Unfortunately, the Breen then announced their new alliance with the Dominion by attacking Earth."

Bart swallowed. He no longer had any family on Earth—or much of anywhere, truth be known—but he had friends there.

"You seem to be using the word 'unfortunately' an awful lot here, Admiral," Jamie said, a hostile tone creeping into his voice.

"Mr. Cruz, you more than anyone else here should understand the need to protect the source," she replied sharply, then caught herself. "Yes, the attack on Earth was unexpected. We had no indication of that on any of the messages we intercepted. And the loss of life at Starbase 11 and in the reserve fleet was higher than anticipated. However, there is no question the information we've been getting directly from the Breen ambassador ever since has shortened this war, saving the lives of hundreds of millions."

Bart and the others exchanged looks as the admiral softened her expression and continued. "In the twentieth century, there was a rumor that during their second World War, a Terran leader was faced with a terrible decision. His intelligence people had informed him his enemy was going to bomb one of his cities in the middle of the night. However, the enemy was communicating with what they believed was an unbreakable encryption device."

She let that sink in for a second and then continued. "If he evacuated the city, he would without a doubt save hundreds of lives, and if he maneuvered his dwindling air support, he could shoot down a number of the enemy's bombers before they could flee. But, if he did that, there was no doubt he would tip off the enemy that his intelligence people were listening in on those 'undecipherable' networks and they would change to a new system. Loss of this information would endanger a proposed invasion and prolong the war by an unknown number of years. What do you think happened?"

After a short pause, Sabran looked up. "He had to let the enemy bombers go through. Logically, it is the only answer. The needs of the many exceed the needs of the few."

"Yes, Chief Sabran, that's exactly what happened, except the rumors weren't quite accurate. The truth was there were five possible targets that night and his intelligence people couldn't identify which city was the target until it was too late to intercept the bombers. The city of Coventry was almost obliterated in the attack. However, we have reason to believe that even if he had known, he wouldn't have compromised the fate of the war to save a city."

"We regret the loss of life on Earth and at Starbase 11, but if their sacrifice brings the war to a close one day sooner, then it was worth it," her aide spoke up for the first time. "If the Breen or the Dominion had changed that cipher system, we might have lost thousands more lives than we have taking the fight to the Cardassian homeworlds."

Admiral Batanides brushed her hair back and gave them a sad look. “Believe me, these decisions were not made without a lot of sleepless nights. There hasn’t been a night that I haven’t questioned myself, wondering if there was another way to do what we did. However, that’s why we brought you directly here. I wanted to be the one who informed you about Starbase 11. Also, I wanted to be the first to thank you for what you did at Mungin. Your efforts were in the highest tradition of Starfleet and SI.”

Her face turned sober as she continued, the chill evident in her voice. “However, I have to once again inform you that what happened while you were on this temporary assignment is highly classified. Under no circumstances are you ever to talk about Mungin, what you did, where you were, nor who you were with during this time period. This prohibition extends even beyond your service in Starfleet. This program is not likely to be declassified during your lifetimes and therefore must be protected. Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir,” the four of them answered in unison.

“Very well. There is a reception in your honor being set up in the room next door.” She motioned toward her aide. “Captain Abundez will be your point of contact here on Jupiter Station. He will be working with you to get your next assignment set up as well. As of 2400 tonight, you begin thirty days admin leave. Enjoy, go home, relax, and report back here in one month for reassignment.”

The others sprang to attention as she stood up. “At ease. You’re the honored guests here. If you’ll please accompany me...” she said, motioning them toward a side door. As they passed through, they found a group of senior Starfleet officers and nearly the entire command of SI waiting for them. The master chief led them down to their seats on the front row as the admiral and her aide moved up to the dais in the front of the room.

A smattering of applause from the assembled staff officers and senior enlisted caused Bart and the others to exchange embarrassed looks. After a short pause, the admiral began, “Thank you all for coming. We’re assembled today to honor the four members of Project Mungin for their invaluable contribution to the security of the Federation. Without their dedication and commitment to this cause, there is no doubt the Federation would be in truly dire circumstances.”

* * *

The rest of the evening was a blur to Bart. He shook hands with more people than he knew were assigned to SI and made small talk with some who promised great things were ahead for him. All he could think about was Starbase 11 and Earth and the fact that for all his work and all his brilliance and all his ingenuity, they were still as dead as if he’d never solved the problem. All he really remembered about that night was getting stupid drunk with Jamie as quickly as possible before being given two stimtabs and being poured into a shuttlecraft to take him on his “well-deserved” leave.

Epilogue

2377

Bart sat up in his bed as the soft chime from the alarm sounded in the darkness. “Computer, lights,” he said as he sat up and tapped the chronometer to shut off the insistent chime. Shaking his head to clear the cobwebs, he saw a rueful smile on his now clean-shaven face in the mirror. That was a memory he hadn’t had in a long, long time.

He made his way over to the shower to start getting ready to go on duty, and thought about his companions. They'd all planned to get together, but it seemed that something or other always came up. It just never happened.

After he'd returned from leave, he'd been assigned to Starbase 92, which had been a rather interesting assignment in its own right. However, when he'd been approached about transferring to the S.C.E. and told about the type of work he'd be doing, he'd jumped at the opportunity to do something completely different.

Jamie Cruz and he had kept in sporadic contact. Jamie had gone back to the Academy afterward, becoming a chief instructor, before finally retiring a few months back. Bart smiled, thinking about the pictures Jamie had sent him from his home on Alpha Centauri. According to one of the latest notes, he was devoting himself to being a full-time grandfather and spoiling the grandkids rotten. In his spare time, he was working with another instructor, writing a history of Starfleet Academy, just to keep his hand in. Bart knew Jamie might claim to be retired, but he couldn't imagine his old leader just sitting around not doing anything.

As Bart pulled his tunic down over his head, he thought about his much put-upon shift mate, Priya Chantrea. Smiling fondly, he knew she'd returned to Bajor after the conclusion of the war, and was present when Bajor joined the Federation last year. She'd rejoined the militia formally, with a well-deserved (in Bart's opinion) promotion to major. The last he'd heard, she was teaching linguistics at one of the universities on Bajor. She was very active on the faculty council as well as working with the student ambassador program, getting young Bajorans to travel to other Federation worlds to study.

Sitting down on the edge of his bed, his face sobered as he thought about the remaining member of the quartet. A few weeks before the end of the Dominion War, Jamie had sent him a message. He'd heard through channels that Sabran was killed. He'd been assigned to one of the ships involved in the invasion of Cardassia Prime. Apparently, his ship had come under attack from a Jem'Hadar ship trying to break through the blockade and the section Sabran was working in took a direct hit while its shields were down, leaving no survivors.

Looking around the room, he continued letting his thoughts wander. He remembered how angry he'd been, how stupid and wasteful it had seemed at the time. It's amazing how naïve I was back then. I think I understand it better now, especially after Galvan VI. I remember being so guilty afterward. Why them and not me? Why were so many of my friends killed or injured when I escaped virtually unharmed? It really made me appreciate friendships and love more than ever. Life's too damn short to be afraid to reach out to each other.

Bart paused, looking at himself in the mirror. He ran a hand over his naked chin, debating once again the wisdom of having shaved his beard off. He had to admit his smooth cheeks made him look about ten years younger than when he'd had that salt-and-pepper beard. As he ran his hand down his chin, he thought about the reluctant member of their little group. I wonder whatever happened to Zarinth? We never saw him or his team again. Mayhew, M'thanga—it's like they never existed at all. Of course, knowing Zarinth, I'm certain he's still in Starfleet, terrorizing a new batch of recruits or making some noncom's life a living hell just because he can.

Checking the chronometer, he saw it was about time to report for duty. He paused as he reached the door to stare at a black wooden statue. A raven sitting on a rock that looked suspiciously like the moon of Antros III stared back at him. Admiral Batanides technically couldn't give them an award for their accomplishments because their mission had never actually happened as far as Starfleet was concerned. However, if an admiral wanted to give out a few mementos to some personnel in her command, there

was no harm in that, was there?

Bart patted the raven on the head a couple of times for good luck and quietly shut his door. He was supposed to meet Commander Gomez in a few minutes, so he needed to get moving. As he headed down the corridors of the da Vinci toward the turbolift, he had a sudden thought.

I need to check to see when I have some leave coming up. I know Anthony may be disappointed, but for some reason, I'm really in the mood to play some racquetball.

About the Author

A veteran of licensed fiction, RICHARD C. WHITE's first work appeared in *The Ultimate Hulk* anthology, where he cowrote "Assault on Avengers Mansion" with Steven A. Roman. Following that, he wrote a fantasy novel set in the world of *Gauntlet: Dark Legacy*, *Paths of Evil*, which was released in July 2004. *Echoes of Coventry* is his first work in the *Star Trek: S.C.E.* setting. Before starting his career as a writer, Richard spent fifteen years in the U.S. Army in Military Intelligence as an Analyst, Cryptanalyst, Instructor, and Linguist. A graduate of Central Missouri State University, Richard now resides in Maryland with his wife, Joni, his daughter, Katie, and two cats who can't understand why he spends all his time on the computer and not attending to their needs like he should.

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