

CHAPTER ELEVEN

—PASSWORDS AND COUNTERSIGNS—

Bren
October 16th, 2985

September 13th, 2953. The day I remember as the end of my life. The day I dropped off the face of the world. My name is Samuel Vorek, a spy infiltrated deep into enemy intelligence agencies. I work for the Brenodi Empire, spending every *day* of my life running through data, spreadsheets, and SPYSAT recon, between conferences, interrogations, and torture sessions. By *night*, I work for the Jekotian Republic, my homeland, the nation on the wrong side of the war.

It started in 2886, between two peaceful towns: Kolntus, of the Jekotian Republic, and Emin, of the Brenodi Empire. A construction project in Emin led to the unearthing of ancient ruins. In months, an entire city had been uncovered. It changed everything. Both nations believed so strongly that they were the rightful inheritors of the lost civilizations' legacy. In less than a year peaceful negotiations broke down, both cities had been evacuated, and military forces moved in, attempting to secure the city ruins, and conduct archaeological investigations. The fighting was violent, surpassing trench warfare in the toll it took on the soldiers. It was considered the bloodiest conflict in known history. And it was just the beginning. The ruins started a war. The ruins started *the* war. The entire planet is now in chaos. And me? I'm just another tick-box on a never ending personnel list. A tick-box that has finally received orders.

October 20th, 2985

"Morning Samuel," the security guard greets me as I pass the first checkpoint. It's eight o'clock in the morning, on June 4th. I'm heading to a meeting in the Office of Military Intelligence, a special invitation, past my normal security clearance. I nod in response and continue past him to the elevator on the right. I wait for the elevator, surrounded by colleagues I recognize, but don't personally know. When the elevator arrives we stand to the side as part of the night shift files out. I greet the few people I know, and then join my colleagues in elevator. As the door closes I push the button for section 6C. The elevator rapidly descends into the complex, stopping at a floor sandwiched between layers of bomb-proofing every two-hundred meters. After a few minutes, the elevator is empty except for me and a woman. When the elevator stops, I move to exit the elevator, but she grabs my arm.

"This is my stop, not yours. I take it you've never been to 6C before?" she asks me.

"No, ma'am. But if this isn't 6C, where do I get off? This is the lowest point in the complex, is it not?" I reply, puzzled.

"You'll find out, it's always interesting the first time," she winks at me and departs. I remember to shout my thanks as she clears security, then I step back into the elevator and press the button to close the doors. Once the doors close, I hear tiny motor and a small panel by the elevator controls recedes into the wall.

“Access to section 6C is restricted. Please present your credentials.” It’s an automated message I hear playing from where the panel moved, and I see a card slot directly below the speaker. I insert my temporary pass into the slot, and then the voice instructs me to use the retinal scanner beside the card reader. Once it finishes verifying my identity, ironic considering I’m a spy, I retrieve my security pass. The panel moves back into place covering the security terminal, and the elevator lurches into movement. It descends for no more than a few seconds, then stops. Another lurch, and to my surprise, the elevator starts moving horizontally. I draw back one of the metal shutters on the wall of the elevator, and see that it is moving along a rail. In a few seconds it comes to a stop. I hear a chime, and the elevator doors open.

I step out into a hall that looks much the same as every other one in the complex. I walk towards the security checkpoint at the end of the hall, where the lone guard checks my pass and retina again. The guard then directs me down the hall, third door on the left, then first door on the right. I follow his directions at a brisk walk and in less than a minute I arrive at my destination.

“Ah, Samuel, good to see you. Please take a seat, we can begin the interrogation now,” my commanding officer, Richard Gryth tells me, gesturing towards one of the few unoccupied chairs around the room. As I take a seat among the others, Richard whispers something to one of his assistants, who disappears into a back room. A few moments later, he comes out with an armed guard escorting a prisoner. The man is forced into the chair in the middle of the room, and tilts his head up to look at those around him. The instant we make eye contact, my heart stops. My mind starts racing, anxiety starts to kick in, and I break into a cold sweat. I try to tell myself it’s a mistake, but there’s no other possibility. It’s Alex Tyme, one of the few other spies infiltrated into the OMI.

A man on my left glances at me, a puzzled look on his face, and asks if there’s something wrong. “I’m fine, just under-dressed, I’ve never been to 6C before. I was expecting somewhere warmer.” He accepts the excuse and turns his attention back to Alex.

“Gentlemen, let’s get down to business,” Richard says, now standing in the middle of the room, the guard between him and Alex. “We caught this man last night, a Jekotian spy, attempting to upload a virus to the network. We also believe he transmitted the coordinates of the Missile Defence Network mainframe servers to the approaching Jekotian operation. I’ve asked each of you here because I have confidence in your abilities in each of your fields. This is the first spy we have caught in the facility, the largest risk to national security in years, and I intend to ensure we get as much information from him as possible.”

The next few hours were gruelling for me. I had no choice but to co-operate and interrogate one of my friends, between his ‘sessions’ with my colleagues. If I attempted to save him, we would both die. I couldn’t risk my cover, I couldn’t do anything for him, but it weighed heavily on my mind.

Four hours later

As I left the room, I couldn’t help but smile. Even with everything done to him, he hadn’t broken. He hadn’t betrayed a single secret about our homeland. The only thing that came out of his mouth aside from insults was a glob of phlegm aimed squarely at Richards face. I found my way out on my own, and made my way past the guard I had passed on the way in. It was now a little past twelve o’clock, so I took the elevator back up to street level to meet a friend for lunch. We had made arrangements in the last week to catch up; she was a good friend of mine, and one of the few Jekotian sympathizers within the Empire.

The cafe we had chosen was a small one, the type of place you could have a conversation without being overheard. It served good food, and the staff always ensured you were a satisfied customer. They had the strong belief of treating all customers as family, and

serving them only food they would give their own family. I take another left, down a cobbled street, a shortcut between buildings, and arrive just outside the cafe.

“Good afternoon Mike, have you seen Kelly around yet?” I ask him outside as he prepares the tables for the lunch rush.

“Good afternoon to you too. She’s inside waiting for you, back of the cafe on the left,” he replies. I say my thanks and enter the building, stopping a moment to let my eyes adjust to the darker atmosphere. Once I see where she is, I make my way towards her table. When I get closer, she stands up and walks over to me, a broad smile on her face. We stand there staring at each other; it’s been months since we last met. Then she hugs me. It’s the one aspect of her I never have grown accustomed to; she’s such a warm loving person, and my line of work requires a level of emotional detachment. After a few moments we move to the table and sit down, engaging in random conversation, sharing what’s changed in our lives. Then the conversation shifts.

“Do you know what’s happened to Alex? He hasn’t responded to anything in the last few days. I’m getting worried,” she asks me. My good mood instantly vanishes.

“He’s been compromised,” I say flatly. “They caught him uploading a virus to the network last night, and they believe he sent the coordinates of the MDN mainframe to the approaching fleet. I was part of a hand-picked team Richard gathered to interrogate him. I’ve spent the last few hours trying to do a convincing job without hurting him. I couldn’t save him without getting both of us killed, I’m sor-” I’m cut off midsentence as my pen vibrates for a split second. “Ah, sorry, excuse me, I need to relieve myself,” I say, pointing at the pen in my shirt pocket so she understands. I go towards the bathroom, and after ensuring no one is looking, I take the back door out.

In the back alley I lean against a dumpster and pull the pen out of my pocket. I click the mechanism halfway down and release it, engaging the hidden high-gain transmitter. I rotate the two halves of the pen around its midpoint, stopping and reversing direction to create a pattern matching a Morse code signal. The pen vibrates again. I rotate the top half ninety degrees and click the mechanism again, linking it to my neural implants. I start speaking at a whisper, exchanging the verification codes with a radio operator in Jekotian High Command.

“Samuel Vorek, this is Fleet Admiral Denise Ralis aboard the approaching JNS Raven One. Prepare to receive new orders.”