

# **The Lost Tales of Power: The Enemy of an Enemy**

Written and Published by Vincent Trigili  
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## Introduction

The Lost Tales of Power is a collection of novels that describe an immense persistent multiverse. Volumes I through IV, also known as The First Quartet, are intended to introduce the reader to the multiverse and set up some primary recurring characters, settings, and themes. Volume V and on will be a mixture of standalone and miniseries novels. While the books are a mixture of classic science fiction and pure fantasy, some effort is being made to keep the books in the realm of the possible, or at least theoretically possible given some basic assumptions.

### Lost Tales of Power Series:

Volume I - The Enemy of an Enemy (Nov. 13, 2010)  
Volume II - The Academy (June 13, 2011)  
Volume III - Rise of Shadows (Mar. 24, 2012)  
Volume IV - Resurgence of Ancient Darkness (Jan. 19, 2013)  
The First Quartet - Special Edition (Apr., 2013)  
Volume V - The Sac'a'rith (Dec. 13, 2013)  
Volume VI - Spectra's Gambit (Sometime in 2014)  
Volume VII and beyond - TBA

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I hope you find as much enjoyment in reading these stories as I had living them. If you enjoy the books, please post a review and spread the word about them. As an independent author, word of mouth is the only marketing I can afford. Thanks!

## Prologue

I had to make it back to the ship before they returned. Most of my men were already dead. Those still alive were doing all they could to hold off the aliens who were defeating us, giving me time to get a message out.

When we first arrived, we were sure this would be a boring mission. This expectation was shattered almost immediately after we landed and began to deploy. Aliens poured out of the colony, waving swords and carrying shields. I do not know what those shields were made of but our blasters could not penetrate them. As they rushed our position we were forced into hand-to-hand combat with them. They proved to be clumsy and we were able to hold our own for a short while.

Behind the initial rush of sword-wielding aliens came others. These wielded thin energy weapons which they fired with deadly accuracy and power. The addition of these reinforcements was just too much for our squad. We were completely outnumbered and outgunned.

I slammed aside the airlock door as I rushed to the communication officer's station. I really needed his skill and speed on this equipment now, but he was ripped to pieces before my eyes by one of the aliens who somehow did it without ever touching him. I had to banish that thought and get a message out before others fell victim to this trap.

"Greetings," came a voice from the darkness. "I am glad you survived. We need you to do something for us."

I tried hard to ignore the chills running down my back from that voice. "Never!" I called as I spun and opened fire with my blasters. Then he walked out of the darkness. He appeared to be an old man, impossibly old, yet somehow still strong and vibrant. He stood before me without a spacesuit, even though the gaping holes in our spaceship had vented the entire atmosphere leaving us essentially in a hard vacuum.

I must have fired a dozen times from each of my hand blasters, at nearly point-blank range. I could not possibly have missed, yet somehow he was able to ignore my shots. It was as if he was immune to them.

"No. You will now comply," he said.

I felt my will slipping from my control; I tried hard to stop as I saw myself dropping my guns and reaching for the communications controls. I listened in horror as I sent a message, one obviously intended to lay a trap. I fought with all I could to break free of whatever was controlling my body, but I was utterly powerless.

"Thank you for your help; the trap is baited," he said as I felt my life slip away from me.

## Chapter One

“All senior staff report to the conference room for mission briefing,” came a call over the ship’s loudspeaker.

I had been serving on this ship for a while now, but this was our first serious mission since I joined the crew. I did not know why the captain accepted my appointment to his senior staff, but I knew that I must perform beyond expectations if I wanted to stay. Some other senior staff members were unhappy with his choice; partly because he passed over people they felt were better qualified, but mainly because I was an outsider to their group.

This mission was very unusual for a ship of this caliber, and that seemed to make the crew uncomfortable. There was an almost tangible sense of unease everywhere I went on the ship. That bothered me. I could not put my finger on the feeling but it did not seem natural, and I did not like it when things were not the way they should be.

The conference room had big double doors which, apart from their size, were completely unremarkable. An honor guard made up from the captain’s personal security forces flanked the doors. Deep in the heart of the flagship there was very little chance of any security risks; the position was more one of honor than necessity here.

The honor guard was extremely dedicated to their job and those who desired this position spent their entire lives working to achieve this high distinction. Only the best of the best were considered, and even then there was intense competition among those few for that position of honor. An outsider looking in might think they were statues; they did not even blink as I passed them and entered the conference room.

In this room there was a large oval table. I had been told that the captain wanted a round table instead of the traditional rectangle, but the room was too narrow to allow it. I did not know if this was true, but it fit in with the captain’s desire to encourage everyone to take part in these meetings. The room was barren except for the table, a few personal monitors, and a large viewing screen. The idea was to make sure that nothing would distract anyone from the tasks and responsibilities given to us by the Emperor.

By the time I arrived everyone had already taken his seat, with the exception of the captain who had not yet arrived. First on the right of the captain’s chair was the big and powerful presence of Zalith. He was the Chief Tactical Officer of the Dragon Claw. His primary function on the ship was to lead the military operations and to advise the captain on all matters referring to weapons and combat. In addition, the infantry on board reported directly to him and through him to the captain. If anything happened to the captain, he would assume command.

Zalith was a Zalionian, a member of a reptilian race that was one of the first races to join the Empire. They made up the bulk of the military might of the Empire. Their loyalty was without question, but they tended to favor a strong aggressive stance, and lived by the motto, “The best defense is an overpowering offense.”

Zalith had served with the captain for several decades, far longer than any other member of the senior staff. Together they had served on countless missions, and as a team they had never failed the Empire.

Seated next to Zalith was Dr. Rannor, Chief of Medical Operations for the Dragon Claw and each of our support vessels. In addition to that, he was in charge of any biological samples that we collected or used as weapons. While his primary function was handling the healing of our crew he, like all of us, was on the ship for one reason only: to crush the enemies of the Empire. He had joined the staff about five years earlier when the famous Dr. Smith retired.

Dr. Rannor, like most of the executive crew, was human. Humans founded the Empire in a time lost to history. To this day, humans tend to be found in all the key positions of authority throughout the Empire. Indeed, with the exception of Zalith the entire senior staff of the Dragon Claw was made up of humans.

My seat came next. I was the youngest member of the staff; indeed, I was the youngest member of the Imperial Navy ever to serve on the captain's senior staff. My youth was the reason that most of the staff did not fully trust my judgment. I think they saw me as a child trying to play an adult game.

Next to me sat Larath. He was the Chief Morale Officer. Because of the vast distances and time involved in space travel, people started to think of their ships as home, and their crewmates as family. This bonding proved to be very beneficial, as it encouraged loyalty and sacrifice, yet at the same time very troublesome for the Navy. From time to time fights would break out, or weddings occur. To handle this, the Empire determined that there needed to be a department whose job it was to handle interpersonal issues. These issues ranged from homesickness to mental breakdowns, weddings and funerals. If it was a personal problem, it fell in Larath's department. Larath was also fairly new to the staff, but was a well-respected veteran of the fleet.

Commander Jones, Chief of Alien Relations, or head diplomat, took the final seat. He was an expert in all alien peoples and cultures. All peoples not part of the Empire were considered to be aliens. It was his primary responsibility to handle any and all contacts with the aliens, and to advise the captain on all matters relating to them. The captain specifically chose Commander Jones for his staff less than a year ago, but like Larath he was a well-respected veteran.

The captain, as always, arrived last. I had been told he did this so the staff could talk before he arrived and have time to make final preparations. Normally the staff would take advantage of this time to chat about random topics. I, of course, could do nothing more than listen, since they never included me in their conversations; even if they did I would not know much of what they were speaking of, as it always related to their long service in the Navy.

This time not much was happening in the way of talking. The uncertainty and unusual nature of this mission seemed to have everyone on edge. The situation we were heading into did not make sense, and no one liked that, least of all me.

The captain entered the room, and immediately what little conversation there was ceased. Even amongst his inner circle the captain had an aura that spoke of the power of the Empire. He was in charge of the Dragon Claw, the most powerful ship ever to be built. The Empire had never suffered a defeat when the captain brought the Dragon Claw to bear. Despite the fact that he was human, his reputation was as ruthless and deadly as any Zalionian. At unofficial functions his senior staff would have no problem talking to him like an equal, but this was not one of those times. The seriousness of the situation was made all the more apparent by the look on his face and his gruff silence as he took his seat.

"Okay, men, we've got quite a problem on our hands," said the captain. "I am going to play the last transmission we received from Arken IV, then Zalith will bring everyone up to date with what we know." The captain started the transmission on the main screen with a touch of his console.

[Begin transmission] "... I don't have much time; they'll be here soon. I am Lieutenant Tom of the Imperial Navy. I was part of the preliminary task force sent here to attempt to bring peace to the colony... I can hear them coming, not much time left ... When we arrived the place was in shambles, far worse than we expected. We thought we could handle it, though; that was until we learned of them. They wiped out the entire class-three task force before we could establish a secure base. They were unstoppable, came from every direction at once. Wait, what's that noise? . . . They're at the door ... By the Emperor!" [End transmission]

This was far worse than I had originally thought. Officially the mission that Lieutenant Tom was leading was a simple probe operation to find out why this colony broke off communications. That was now exposed as a cover story. I had no idea as to what could have brought down a class-three task force so fast. Such a task force was designed to penetrate a planet held by a hostile, advanced alien nation, and establish a permanent foothold from which to launch further attacks. This mission should have been a boring walk in the park for them.

When the transmission was finished Zalith stood to talk. Standing his full two-and-a-quarter meter height, he was an impressive sight. His long, powerful tail swept aside the chair to give himself more room.

“We do not know much about the situation at this time. Most of what we do know you just heard in that transmission. Unfortunately, that is the only transmission we received from Lieutenant Tom. If the Empire were currently at war, and Lieutenant Tom a young and inexperienced officer, I would say he met up with overwhelming numbers and firepower shortly after they landed, and was simply underpowered for the mission. The appropriate next move would be for a battle fleet like ours to move in and handle the problem with sufficient force to prevent a second loss,” Zalith stated.

“Of course the problem is that we are not at war ...” interjected Larath. He was right; it had been ten years since our last major conflict. There had been a few border skirmishes, but this colony was nowhere near them. “... and I have a feeling you are about to tell us that Lieutenant Tom was not all that green.”

“You could not be more right. Lieutenant Tom was a battle-hardened vet. His record is very impressive, and he has faced death many times before. The truth is, the message we received is baffling.”

When the task force landed they would immediately have deployed temporary shelters; this would have been achieved very quickly. These shelters would hold up well to small arms fire, but in very hostile situations would tend to draw fire away from the landing ships, which would be completely hidden behind them. Next, more secure barriers would be deployed. These barriers would give the troops a much safer position to work from. After that a more permanent and secure base would be erected.

“Tom’s message states that they were defeated before creating the secure base, yet he was in a building of some kind since he mentioned the attackers being ‘at the door.’ Based on this I would assume they had raised their temporary shelters, but had not yet got the permanent base in place. These temporary shelters would not hold up well against an onslaught, and in that situation the troops would not be in the shelters. They would either be planning to move to a more secure location, or be out front attempting to stop the attack. However, the shelters were up, and Tom was in one of them. This implies they were caught completely by surprise, and by a superior force.

“The problem with this is that even if the entire population of the colony were heavily armed, there were not enough of them to accomplish this feat. Add to that the fact that the colony consisted mainly of families, at most with light weapons, none of which should have been able to pierce the standard issue body armor. The task force should have been completely immune to any attack mustered against them.

“A class-three task force was far too much power for this mission, and should never have been sent. The only conclusion that I can draw from this information is that a hostile power has taken control of the colony. There is simply no way the people we had there could have accomplished this feat. High Command must have suspected this in order to have sent the firepower they did.” Zalith paused here, clearly unsure if he should say what he was thinking.

“Go on,” prompted the captain.

“Well, sir, there is one more problem with this message. Lieutenant Tom sounded scared. That does not fit his personality. He has faced death too many times to be afraid of it, and has even survived being a prisoner of war. Yet his voice and manners in the message are those of a person greatly afraid of something. It’s odd enough that a colony well inside our borders would be such a hotspot of hostile activity; when you add in the lieutenant’s unexplained fear, it makes me concerned this message may have been tampered with.”

That statement just hung there in the air for a minute. No one was really sure how to respond to it all. The captain turned to me and asked, “Commander, do you have anything to add?”

“No, sir. The amount of firepower needed to do what Zalith described is far more than the colony should have been able to muster. I have to agree with him. The only way this could have happened is through the addition of an outside force. The information I have on Lieutenant Tom agrees

with Zalith's assessment. Even facing certain defeat he should have been calm and collected. Also, none of the normal intelligence channels have any talk of activity in this area. There are vague threats in the Beta region, but nothing out here," was my lame attempt at an answer.

"Dr. Rannor, what exactly was this colony there to do?" asked the captain.

"Well, they were researching biological warfare," began the doctor.

"Are you telling me we may have experimental bugs to deal with on top of everything?"

"If the attackers raided the bio-labs, then yes. If the labs were merely hit in an attack, the safety systems would automatically destroy the live cultures, eliminating any chance of contamination. However, since we do not know much about the attackers, we have to assume they could have taken control of the stockpile."

"What does that mean for any troops we send to the surface?"

"Sir, I would strongly advise against any landings unless we know those bugs are controlled. If even only one live sample were released, the planet would need to be sterilized from orbit. Based on the official information about what the colony was working on, I would say these bugs are far too powerful for our normal biohazard procedures to handle. Indeed, I do not believe they can be handled with our current technology."

"Great. Does anyone have any good news?" The captain paused here and looked around the room at each of us before continuing, "Okay, as we approach within one day of the colony, the fleet will go to full battle alert, and is to go to battle stand-by immediately. We already have our orders from High Command. They want us to investigate what is going on, and we have authority to use whatever force we deem necessary to contain the situation. Dr. Rannor, you will establish a task force to study all the data we have as it comes in. I want probes launched immediately to start gathering information. If those bugs got out somehow, I need to know before we arrive. General Zalith, start working on a plan to take control of this planet, assuming there is a hostile force in place with the power necessary to take out the class-three task force as you described. Commander Vydor, I want you to head up the probe operations. We need information and we need it as fast as possible."

Since there was little we could do until we got some information from the probes, we scheduled our next meeting for the day the probes were scheduled to start transmitting return data.

## Chapter Two

Because of the fairly limited time we had to work with I immediately went down to the ship's probe bays to select something from our stores suitable for this mission. After ruling out the battle probes as too slow, I decided to use a very fast, light-duty one known as the Specter Mark IV. It was the fastest probe we had, and would reach the colony long before the fleet could. In order to keep down its size its sensor array was somewhat limited, but that small size made it fast and hard to pick out on sensor screens. The data we would get from this probe would help us in deciding which, if any, other advance probes should be sent. I expected that we should start to get data from the probe in less than two days.

After personally inspecting the probe to make sure it was fully functional, I put it in sleep mode and launched it. While asleep it would be virtually undetectable, and even if spotted would likely be mistaken for space junk. The only real disadvantage was that since its sensor array was fairly short-range, it would have to reach orbit before it would get any real data. Once in orbit and scanning, it would be highly vulnerable to attack. If it were detected, that would limit the time we would get to scan with it. However, it seemed like a reasonable risk to run in order to get the data as fast as we could.

There was some concern among my men that this might affect our chances of sneaking up on the planet. Unfortunately, there was no realistic way we could move a fleet of this size and not be detected. They probably already knew we were en route.

In one of the preliminary staff meetings that I held to brainstorm about possible explanations for what happened at Arken IV, some of my staff suggested this was a revolution being staged. I did not agree with that theory. This colony was made up entirely of highly-trained, highly-disciplined Imperial officers, scientists and their families. Every one of them was picked for his loyalty. And there had not been a single uprising in seventy-five years. Besides, why would anyone want to rebel against the Emperor?

What annoyed me most was that High Command must have known something more than they were saying. First they sent in a class-three task force, which was a thousand times more powerful than was called for. Now we were being sent "The Jewel of the Fleet," the Flagship Dragon Claw and her entire support fleet, the most powerful arm of the Imperial Navy.

It was very suspicious that so much power was being sent to a colony with only a few hundred people in it, many of who were just the families of the men stationed there. There were more people than that aboard this ship alone, and that was not counting our support fleet. We had more than enough firepower to conquer several star systems.

The Dragon Claw was too big to even orbit the planet; the shadow from it alone would push whole sections of the planet into night. Our fleet was designed for meeting hostile navies in interstellar space. It was a rare event for us to move into a system, and then it was only for repairs. We had smaller ships and fleets better suited for interplanetary battle. The only reason to send us would be for intimidation, yet this was our colony; intimidation should not have been necessary.

As I watched the probe launch, I began to wonder about the future ... specifically my future. I had jumped the ranks so fast into the highest position possible in my career path that I wondered if there was anything left for me. There were only two positions above me in the Intelligence chain of command, and one of those was the Emperor himself. The other was a lifetime appointment to his personal council of advisors and rulers, High Command. Obviously I could not aspire to be Emperor, but I wondered if in some distant day I would serve him on that council.

There was something else, too. As I watched the probe drift away I could not help but wonder what it would find out there. In a sense, I wished I could ride it to the planet and meet this problem face-on. Something was out there, watching us closely. My instincts told me that we were in grave danger.



While waiting for the probe to reach its destination, I spent the next day reviewing some of the information we had on the system. It was a fairly unremarkable system with a few small planets. The colony was on the innermost planet, which was composed mostly of rock.

This system was chosen for two reasons. First, it was almost completely surrounded by a thick, dark gas and debris cloud, probably left over from some massive collision lost to history. In fact, from most of the Empire you could not see the star at all. The other advantage of this location was that the planet was completely void of life. That meant there was nothing to corrupt any biological research.

The lack of any real atmosphere forced the placing of most of the colony underground, with only the spaceport under a small surface dome.

The next morning, I headed to where my team was gathering in anticipation of receiving the preliminary data feed from the probes. If my estimates were correct, we would be receiving data very soon, if not already.

“Sir, we are getting data,” reported one of my team as I entered.

“Excellent,” I said as I moved to the viewing screen. “Well, based on this it looks like the colony is intact.” This surprised me. We knew there was a recent battle there that had wiped out the task force. There should have been some indication of a fight.

“Sir, this does not make sense; preliminary data makes it appear there are around five hundred people there ...” a young officer started when all of a sudden all the viewing screens went blank. “Sir, the probe has been destroyed!”

“Bring up the last few seconds of data. I want to see who or what destroyed it,” I ordered.

“Here it is, sir, but nothing was recorded; it was just reporting data then abruptly ends. Whatever took it out must have done it with one hit,” he responded.

He was right; there was not even any indication of anything nearby that could have destroyed the probe, and no indication that anything was fired from the ground. This made no sense. “Ensign, you started to say something before about the population count?”

“Yes, sir, the data shows about five hundred people there. Imperial records indicate the same number. We know that the task force was sent and did combat with somebody, so where are they? All of the probe’s data indicates the population there is as it should be based on Imperial records.”

“That is a very good question, Ensign James.” This ensign impressed me. Normally I would not have put such a new member of my department on a critical team like this, but his instinctive knack for reading data made him an excellent choice. “What else strikes you at first glance about this data?”

“Well, sir, everything else also matches our records. We do not have a lot of details in this limited data, but as far as the overall picture goes, nothing else sticks out ... except ... well, this is odd.” He paused for a minute looking lost in the data. “Sir, I do not see any sign of a landing site for the task force.

“Okay, so far no change in population, no signs of a fight, and no signs of a landing party. If this was a simulation back at the Academy, I would say we loaded the wrong one,” he continued. “There is one more thing that sticks out too, sir.”

“Go on,” I prompted.

“If you look here, this is the starting transmission time and here is the time we received it. Allowing for travel time, there is almost a full minute’s difference, sir.”

He was right, but I did not like where this was going. “What conclusion do you draw from what we know?”

“Sir, I think this report is a fake.”

“Yes, I agree,” I replied. This was not good at all. Not only did that mean all the data we collected was compromised, it also meant our enemy knew a lot more about us than we knew about them. “What about the encryption keys? Were they valid?”

“Yes, sir, all the keys are perfect. There is no question our probe sent the data.”

“Okay, we need to start digging through what we got and try to see if there is any legit information in it at all.” They might have used real data and just modified it as needed. If so, that might mean we could reconstruct some of it.

We dug through the data for hours and found nothing that we could use. Whoever they were, they were very thorough. It was almost like they had known this probe was coming for weeks in advance and recorded the data ahead of time.

## Chapter Three

The senior staff was reassembled to go over what we had learned from studying the probe's reports. Everyone knew that that probe had been destroyed, but they were hoping that my team had been able to obtain some useful data first.

The captain called the meeting to order, then addressed me, "Okay, Vydor, your team has been working on the probe data for several hours. Did you come up with anything?" He said this as if he expected me to say no, with good reason.

"I am passing out a copy of the pertinent data from the probe. The first thing you might notice is that the time of the report and the time we received the report are not equal. If you allow for travel time, you'll still come up roughly a minute shy. Other than that, you might notice that the data is perfect, an exact match to all Imperial records of the colony." I paused to give them time to digest that. The captain did not look happy with this. He already had a good idea what conclusion I had come to.

"From this data, I must conclude that the report has been falsified. This leaves us still with no information about our target."

"Vydor, is it possible that the equipment was malfunctioning?" said Larath. He was a bit of an odd character; he never seemed to show any emotion at all, yet somehow still managed to convey that he cared a great deal about this mission. There was something else about him that I could not put my finger on, but I just did not trust him.

"No, Larath. I personally checked the equipment before it left. It was in perfect working order. It may have developed a bug or two along the way, but nothing that could cause it to do this," I replied. "There are only two ways that this could happen. First, the enemy could have cracked our codes and used them to send back a fake report, but I do not think that is what happened here. If 'they' captured the probe before it started to transmit and played with its sensors so that it would record only the data they wanted it to, then let it transmit, it would send it all in code. They would have no need for the codes; the probe would handle that for them." I stopped there to gather my thoughts.

"Vydor, is this something that is easy to do?" Dr. Rannor asked. The good doctor was like the grandfather I never had. He always spoke with a soft, gentle tone, and was the only member of the ranking officers on the Dragon Claw who did not seem to mind my appointment.

"Absolutely, Doctor. If a person has the time and knows his probes, it can easily be done with this type of probe. The one-minute lag is probably from turning the power off temporarily to disconnect its defenses," was my reply.

"So it appears that all we have learned from this operation is that the enemy knows our probes as well as we do, and they know we are coming. They still have the upper hand, and that is not acceptable. I want better probes assembled immediately, which are to transmit over their entire voyage. I don't want a repeat of this," ordered the captain.

Much of the rest of the meeting was throwing around ideas on how to get information on "them." Larath proposed we call them the "Magi," just to give them a name. I was not clear where he got that name from but it was approved. After all, what was the difference?

After the meeting with the captain, I headed back to the probe bay where some of my better probe technicians were waiting for me.

"Okay, team, we need to get a probe to a hostile planet and have it stand up to attack long enough to get us some decent information on our enemy. What are our best options?" I asked.

After much debate we chose a battle probe that would only need minor reconfiguration to handle the type of search we wanted. It could only handle limited, short scans. Even though it only needed some minor changes, it still seemed like years before it was ready to launch. Now, just days away from the system, we were finally able to launch it.

"Sir, the probe launch was a success. We will be receiving data shortly... Okay, we are getting a good clear signal. Probe is functioning to full specs."

We still had no idea who or what the Magi were. A lot of theories went around, even one that pictured them as monsters right out of some cheap horror movie. The most reasonable conclusion was that they were a previously undiscovered alien race. If this was true, then we had a big problem on our hands. That would mean war with an obviously powerful race.

Though I had no fear that our naval forces would defeat them, it could be a long and devastating war.

## Chapter Four

I was sleeping in my quarters when an urgent call came over the intercom, "Sir! Come quickly!"

"On my way," I drowsily replied. I hurried to the bridge, where the message had come from.

"Sir! The probe is under attack!" was my friendly greeting from one of my team members.

"What?" It took me a moment to realize what I had just heard.

"Sir, look there." I looked where he pointed and saw for myself. A beam of energy or light struck the probe dead center. This was apparently the last strike necessary to eliminate the probe.

"Sir, I think the probe is gone."

"It would appear so. Where in the Emperor's name did those blasts come from?"

"They came from beyond the range of the probe's sensors."

I could have guessed he was going to say that. "Any data on those beams, at least?"

"Checking." Lights and pictures flashed across the screen as he searched through the last ten transmissions. "Sir, they appear to be plasma bolts of some sort."

"I want to see these reports myself. Send copies of the data to my office. I want blue and yellow teams to work on this."

Plasma bolts were not a good sign. It was a relatively new weapon our army was developing. If the Magi had this weapon, it could mean they were more advanced than we were. That could be a problem.

While my men worked on the reports, I studied them myself in my office away from the noise and activity of the teams working the data, hoping to find out that they were fakes, or that our initial conclusions about the attack were wrong. I let my teams worry about what the data said. I was looking for something deeper. Even if I could not find proof that the data was faked, then maybe I could find some thumbprint implied by the circumstance that would shed a light on the people behind the attacks.

"Sir, the report from yellow team is in," came a call over the intercom, disturbing me from my intense study.

"Finally!" That gave me less than four minutes to get my own report together. I was relieved that I would not have to give my report without the information from the yellow team.

One look at the report made me reconsider the feeling of relief that I'd just had. I gathered up all my notes and the new report and headed to the senior staff meeting. I must have taken longer than I meant to review the data, as the captain was already in his chair when I arrived.

"Welcome, Commander Vydor," greeted the captain. "Is your report ready?"

"Yes, sir, but I wish it weren't."

"That good?"

"Well, sir, the probe was destroyed by a series of plasma bolts, three of them to be exact."

"What?" called out Zalith. Apparently he too was hoping the plasma bolt theory was wrong.

"Yes, Zalith, plasma weapons are a reality now."

"We have been trying for decades with no real success. That's the final straw, we must stop these probe games and attack," said Zalith. "They are playing us like fools!"

"Zalith, let Vydor finish his report," ordered the captain.

"I have requested and received permission to disclose information regarding the Empire's research into the plasma weapons." I paused to begin handing out the briefing papers I had received. "There are only two plasma weapons in the Empire, and both of them have about a seventy-five per cent failure rate."

"Just what are these weapons?" questioned Larath.

"They are at present the most powerful weapon we know of. Right now, we only have two prototypes, and no battlefield-ready units. Still, the two prototypes are ten times more powerful than any single weapon on this ship." I let that sink in for a minute, and then I continued.

"The data we retrieved from the probe shows it was hit by three bolts in rapid succession. Each bolt was exponentially more powerful than the first. The final bolt that hit the probe was of a

magnitude that could disintegrate a small destroyer. That is three shots in less than thirty seconds. Our prototype plasma weapons can't come close to that rate of fire." That drew a lot of shocked looks and muttering.

"Why would they fire three shots? At that range there is no way they could have known that the first shot failed to destroy the probe, at least not that fast ... unless they knew the first two shots would not destroy it in advance," began Zalith.

"Sounds like a fear tactic to me. Once again our enemy is proving they have the upper hand. They know a lot about us and are using that information to put us on edge," the captain answered.

Time for my biggest bombshell yet. "It gets worse. Intelligence estimates that any race capable of the feats that our Magi have accomplished are a hundred years or more ahead of us."

"One more thing, Captain," said Zalith.

"Yes?" the captain responded.

"I have been poring over the reports from the probes and have found something that Vydor missed. The Magi apparently do not have advanced sensor technology."

"What leads you to that?"

"Well, both of the probes were picked up right around two hours from the planet, which is about the range of the planet-based sensor array that was there before they took it over."

I jumped and grabbed a copy of the reports. "Captain, he is right," I began. "Even the digital pattern matches. These probes were scanned with our own planetary-based equipment." I blew it. I should have caught that.

Everyone must have been wondering what this meant. I certainly was. On one hand, the enemy's plasma weapons made them look extremely advanced, but on the other hand, they apparently didn't have their own advanced sensor technology.

"If they are using our equipment then we can jam it," stated Zalith. "This gives us the opening we need. Captain, let me take some of our battle cruisers and teach these aliens what it means to mess with the Empire."

"Zalith, as much as I can sympathize with that plan, it is not something we can do at this time. I called this meeting because I received classified orders from High Command. I was hoping Vydor's report would make me feel more comfortable about them, but it has not. This is not how I would choose to run this mission," began the captain.

"High Command has ordered that we are to position the fleet in the asteroid belt and begin collecting large asteroids for bombardment operations. From that position we are to send a small squad to the planet to attempt to penetrate their defenses. Once there, they are to collect all possible information on the situation and establish an advanced base to operate from. The orders go further than that. They state that Vydor will lead the mission." The captain paused here, as if to decide whether he should continue, then went on.

"We are approaching a known hostile planet. We should be trying to make contact from the fleet, not sending good people to a place that has killed many people already. High Command has informed me that the Emperor himself decreed all the parameters of this mission. This is the first time in my career in the Imperial Navy that this has happened. Something very strange is going on here. My orders are to have Vydor lead a squad to investigate and make the mission a code-one stealth mission. The only control I have is choosing the soldiers that will join him." The captain paused again. Taking a breath, he continued, "Quite frankly, I don't like this at all. I have every reason to believe that High Command estimates their safe return to be unlikely."

Zalith broke into what I was sure was vulgar language, but in his anger he used the Zalionian tongue of his youth. I knew him well enough by now to know that he much preferred a direct frontal attack and despised the games, as he called them, that High Command would play. A fierce gaze from the captain silenced him, but judging by his posture his silence did not change his opinion of the situation.

No else one piped up. This was very bad. Code-1 stealth meant that once we launched there would be no communications with anyone for any reason until the mission succeeded. There was no

provision for failure. It seemed as if High Command was very afraid of something. But why wouldn't they tell us? Why not just destroy the planet and be done with the Magi? Nothing made sense any more.

"Captain, you could override the order; that is your right as commander of the flagship," stated Dr. Rannor.

When I first learned of this provision, I thought it was odd that an officer was able to override the order, but it was explained to me that due to the large size of the Empire, sometimes local conditions would not be fully known by High Command, and the various captains would have to make a judgment call on any orders they received.

"Well, Doc, I thought of that. But in a mission of this apparent magnitude they would strip my command and find someone else to lead. They have made this clear to me. Whatever we are on the edge of here is big. My hands are tied on this matter."

The room erupted into various discussions after that. The captain sat quietly by, as if he were just letting them talk out everything he had already debated in his mind. I too kept quiet; I had nothing to add. All their talk centered on ways out of the orders. It seemed that no one thought the orders were a good idea. I had absolute faith in my Emperor, but this was trying that faith to the limit. There was no logic behind this that I could see. So many things did not make sense; it was as if the foundations of my beliefs were being chipped away.

Someone suggested I should merely refuse the order, which would have led to me being thrown into the brig, but would have made the mission impossible. I did not like that option at all. As Chief of Intelligence it was not normally my honor to lead a vanguard mission like this, but I wanted to meet the Magi in person. The more I studied them, the more I felt an attraction of some kind. I could not understand it, but I knew it was my destiny to meet them face to face. But why did the Emperor choose me for this? Since he chose me, I must have been the best choice, but I was one of the least experienced members of the crew.

I decided it was time to speak up for myself. "Good sirs, if I may speak on my own behalf? I do not need a way out of this. If these are the Emperor's wishes, then I will proudly serve."

The room fell silent at my remark; a look of surprise fell across everyone, except Larath and the captain. Larath was as stoic as ever, and the captain just smiled as if that was exactly what he had been waiting to hear.

"I would prefer not to take my team, though. None of them has any real combat experience and most are only trained in processing reports, not frontline data collection," I continued.

"So be it then," stated the captain. "Zalith, I would like you to hand-pick a team for Vydor. I want to be sure he has the best possible chance of success, and I know you are the best person to assure that."

"Absolutely," stated Zalith. Something about the way he said this told me that he already knew who to send.

"So what do we really know about the Magi? Other than that they appear powerful enough to scare the entire Empire. Do we have any unofficial leaks on them?" questioned Commander Jones.

"None of my normal contacts have told me anything. Heck, I cannot get half of them to talk to me. They are all running scared. I have one ... umm, unofficial is a good word ... source who says, 'The secret to the powers of old is hidden on that planet.' That is it, nothing more. I don't know what he means by it," answered the captain.

"The powers of old? What in the Emperor's name is that supposed to mean? Are we going to find old projectile handguns down there?" I asked.

"I don't know. That was his last message to me. He is dead now; apparently his space cruiser had a freak accident. Vydor, you have complete authority over this mission. You have excelled in all your tasks and have certainly proved able to carry your own weight, but I suggest you lean heavily on your more experienced crewmates. You will have two weeks to create a secure foothold. If you fail, our orders are to bombard the planet and ensure nothing survives."

Planetary bombardment was a very drastic move, and one that was expensive on resources. This was not something that the Empire would order lightly, and was only used when total genocide was determined to be the sole option. Once we reached the asteroid belt, the fleet would gather the largest space rocks it could find, and fit them with powerful engines. Once the deadline was reached, these massive rocks would be sent towards the planet at extreme speed.

The tremendous force generated by the impacts would liquefy the crust of the planet, ending in its complete destruction. Nothing had ever survived this, not even in computer simulations. There would be no safe haven, not even deep underground. In addition, the Dragon Claw and its fleet would be nearby to destroy any craft that attempted to escape. The destruction would be complete and there would be no chance of survival.

This prompted me to ask, "Sir, should I assume that we are at war with the Magi?"

"For now, assume this to be a diplomatic mission. I know they destroyed our probes and possibly our task force, but until we know their intentions, I will not send the Empire to war. But, I expect your squad will meet resistance, and it should be dealt with as needed," responded the captain.

"Sir, you're sending troops on to soil they presumably claim as their own at this stage, and establishing a base. That would definitely be seen as an act of war by most cultures," commented Commander Jones.

"I know, Commander Jones. That is why the instant Vydor succeeds you will be sent to take over communications with the Magi," said the captain.

It was customary that the first contact was the honor of the ship's Alien Relations Officer. He doubled as an emissary in times like these. We were lucky to have such a highly experienced officer. He had been in five first contacts and, of those five, three joined the Empire after their meeting with him.

"Sir, it would be better if I went with him ..." began Commander Jones.

"I know that, Commander Jones, but it is bad enough that I must send one of my top officers on this suicide mission; I will not make it worse by sending two.

"This mission is to be considered classified. Only the people in this room and the men who will be on the mission are considered to have a need to know. The operation will be codenamed Quiet Storm. People, we are making history here. Let's make sure it's a good one. Bring the fleet into position and engage level-one defense screens. Zalith, see what you can do with the plasma weapons research. If they can do it, so can we," said the captain.



## Chapter Five

It was time to call in some favors. There was just too much about this mission that could not be explained by using the standard channels. I went to my office where I could work in private.

“Computer, find me Karathlathornka.”

Suddenly a massive cat-like humanoid hologram appeared before me, one that would easily tower over any man. Karathlathornka was an old, but still quite vibrant-looking, Cathratinairian, an almost extinct species that lived on the edges of society. Most of them avoided all contact with other species, as they saw them as inferior and unworthy. This one though (I did not know if it was a he or she or genderless) seemed to know just about everything that was happening anywhere in the known galaxy. Karathlathornka was completely fearless, and was the only one I thought I could go to for this kind of information.

“I see the great and mighty Vydor has finally realized he needs help,” Karathlathornka said.

“Greetings, Karathlathornka. I take it then you already know what I plan to ask?”

“You have been assigned to a top position in the Navy and are being sent on a suicide mission. It is easy to extrapolate from this that you need answers fast.”

I always did my best to keep a totally expressionless face, but revelations like that never made it easy. “Good, then you have already done the work and have those answers?”

“Maybe. Why should I tell you?”

“Our normal agreement should hold here, unless you think that you no longer need it?” This caused him to recoil slightly, and I knew that was a bad sign. He really held all the cards in these negotiations; he could have easily just claimed ignorance or fed me bad information if I pushed too hard. Time to switch tactics. “Look, I have no intention of breaking that contract, but you are of course right about the suicide mission and, if I am to continue our agreement, I need to survive.”

He seemed to think that one over a bit, as if weighing the possibility of not having me around. I wondered if he had found another way to get what he needed. He sighed, then said, “As you already know, I still need our agreement to stand, so sit back and I will tell you the tale of how you got where you are today...”

He produced information from extremely classified reports on the colony that we were approaching, many of which I was not authorized to know the existence of, never mind to read. The wealth of information at Karathlathornka’s disposal was always nothing short of miraculous. I was thinking that one day I must discover his sources.

When he had finished his report I said, “On a more personal note, be careful. It seems that people who get involved with this end up having ‘accidents.’”

“Vydor, do you honestly think I got this information for you by being careful? I will be fine. You had best be concerned with your own hide.” And with that he ended the transmission.

I thought back to our first meeting, how timid and foolish I was, but darn lucky. I had been working in the field as an apprentice when my instructor was assigned to an emergency meeting. A call had come in for him ...

“This is Cadet Vydor, the lieutenant is out right now ...” Just then I lost the power of speech when a massive cat-like creature appeared before me. His bright orange fur, spiked head, and massive claws were far more impressive than anything I had to offer.

“Where is he?” the creature demanded.

“Well, um, he was called to a meeting ...”

He responded with a bone-chilling roar, and I struggled to remind myself that it was only a holographic display and he could not harm me. “Maybe I can help you?”

“YOU? Help me? HA!” he said.

“Well, why not? I have full access to his computer ...” That got his attention.

“Full? Hmmm ... perhaps you can help me, but then I would owe you and it’s bad enough being indebted to him.”

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